



Changes In Society: *Mission of the Church*¹

Ted Ward

I am strongly impressed that Jesus said, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” Never forget this premise which we begin on, that Christ is building his church, not you and I, and the assurances he has made about the strength, the perseverance, and the stability of the church are promises you and I can claim. The theological premises I would lay out here are these:

First, that the church has a mission which has never changed. The mission of the church includes a clear mandate to be involved in the discipling process, and by definition and by specification in the Great Commission. This discipling involves teaching and providing experiences for people to grow and develop.

The second premise is that within the church Jesus Christ is building, there are roles for people. It is Jesus Christ making the declaration, but he is making the declaration in the presence of those who proclaim his deity, acknowledging him as Lord. This premise suggests that our roles must not only be that of responsible disciples but of co-laborers with one another and with Christ in the building of the church.

The third premise is that of change. Change #1 is a function of attunement. Change #1 is a constant problem for the church whether in theological studies or local church applications. The attunement of the church to society is a persistent problem. I maintain from an anthropological point of view, that in order to hold constant a message across time and across culture both methods and emphases have to change. In other words, if your message is an unchanging message it necessarily follows that your emphasis and methods will change in terms of attunement to the given culture in which you are operating. The church of Jesus Christ was never meant to be an irrelevant entity within society. It was never meant to be an out-of-tune function within society. Jesus Christ demonstrated a fantastic flexibility in relating to a people whether they were Samaritans, Pharisees, or Sadducees. His message was specific and unchanging, but His methods were attuned carefully to the person. The church today has come through a period of virtual rigidity during a period when society has been changing drastically, and we wonder why we have accumulated so many problems. We have gotten rather out-of-tune simply because methods and emphases haven't shifted.

The fourth premise is what I call Change #2. Change #2 is particularly concerned with improvement. I believe we are coming out of an era when the church has been characterized by cultural narrowness. This cultural narrowness within individual local churches has become a barrier to outreach and evangelism.

I'd like to raise some questions about education within the church. Available communication and media resources are being rather badly used within the church. We are trying to run a huge educational establishment with volunteer labor without much training. Young people are more

¹ Ted Ward. Changes in Society: Mission of the Church. From a plenary address at the Baptist General Conference, Christian Education Congress, 1972.

sensitive than ever to outdated methodologies, because in a few schools they are discovering what learning can be and finding it can be exciting.

One characteristic of the Sunday school in North America is a quantitative orientation. We love to count things. So why don't we count the people who don't come back.

I strongly suspect that a tendency within evangelicalism in general, tends to confuse democracy and Christianity. Christianity is the business of following Jesus Christ, following a Person, a Person who says, "I am your Lord." There is a great deal of difference in following a Person who says, "I am your Lord," and having a democratic process. True Christianity is a response to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

I am trying to throw light on some of the issues I believe are fundamental concerns about Christian education today—methodological slippage, quantitative orientation, and the throwing on of a lot of secondary messages, primarily political messages, instead of staying with the central focus on the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Lordship of Christ as the basic issue for the Christian community. If you haven't read Alvin Tofler's *Future Shock* I encourage you to do so. His major premise is that changes in society and the changes and trends within the environment are so fast no one can keep pace and that the only way to keep pace is to be trained to adapt and change.

What are some of the characteristics of the social environment? The first is what I would call an increase in sour cynicism. Today we are dealing with an era in which the changes in society here are mirrored and reflected in changes in society elsewhere. Another of these I would call impersonal authority. Bigness, yet impotence. How many programs really succeed at the federal level, how many programs really succeed at the state level?

The same Jesus who said, "I will build My church," also said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always . . ." Always. *Always*.