

By Pastor Merv Thompson

---

"Grace and peace to you from the God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

"The Times They Are-A-Changin'" wrote musical poet laureate Bob Dylan back in the 1960's. Every presidential aspirant seems to have adopted his refrain by running on the platform of change. Something new seems to be afoot in the nation, with the catchword "change" embodying the new (although no-one is quite sure what "change" means, knowing that it means something quite different with each candidate).

Obviously, significant change will come merely by the unique makeup of this new cast of characters. For instance, if the president turns out to be a southern Baptist preacher, that will bring about huge change (he talks about taking an offering at each rally). Or if the president is an African American, or the first woman, these would inculcate almost revolutionary change. Even if the next president would turn out to be a Mormon, that also would lead us into unprecedented change.

The times are a-changing. Certainly this is true in the broader culture. A friend of mine relayed how his grandson recently came to spend the night with his grandparents. As he walked in the door his first words were, "Hi Grandpa, I brought my laptop with me, do you have wireless internet?" Dylan's poetry says it well, "the present now will be the past, the order is rapidly fading, the first one now will later be last, for the times they are a-changing."

Of course we have only to look at scripture to see some of the same emphasis. "Behold I make all things new. If anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation, the old has passed away, behold the new has come."

Nowhere are the times a-changing more than in the evangelical Christian circles today. For a definition of an evangelical, please refer back to Pastor Mike's sermon of November 10-11. Some of this change is generational, of course, as the aging leaders of the evangelical movement are dying or retiring.

Jerry Falwell and James Kennedy both died recently. Pat Robertson, Billy Graham, James Dobson, Charles Swindoll, Robert Schuller are all in their 70's or 80's. Thus a new generation is appearing on the scenes, including Rick Warren of Saddleback Church (Purpose Driven Life); Bill Hybels, Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago; Leith Anderson, Wooddale in Twin Cities and President of the National Association of Evangelicals; Joel Osteen, TV evangelist and pastor of America's largest church in Houston; Jim Wallis of Sojourners Magazine; and rather

surprisingly, to upstart presidential candidate, Mike Huckabee.

But a recent article by David Kirkpatrick crystallized many of these changes for me as he tries to make the case about "The Evangelical Crackup." Antidotal evidence is often dangerous to use as a way to prove a point, but his description of what has happened in one specific city, Wichita, Kansas, was a very telling argument. I had never heard much of this before, so it was very enlightening. I paraphrase a part of his description:

"For many years Pastor Terry Fox was the Jerry Falwell of Kansas, the public face of evangelical (fundamentalist) Christianity combined with political activism. He thundered Sunday after Sunday about the wickedness of abortion, evolution teaching and homosexuality. He mobilized hundreds of Kansas pastors to push through a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage. His Sunday services were broadcast widely, and he bragged about his allegiance to the Republican Party.

He called those who disagreed with him "sissies." His oft-quoted mantra had appeal, "we are the religious right." One, we are religious, two we are right." His angry, confrontational style helped establish the city of Wichita as the informal capital of the anti-abortion movement.

But just a year ago he announced his final appearance in the pulpit of his prominent congregation. Within days word leaked out that he had departed under pressure. The board of deacons told him that his political activism was getting in the way of advancing the Gospel. He is quoted as saying, "I paid a real price for the political stands which I took. The pendulum in the Christian world has now swung back to a moderate point of view."

What makes this even more poignant was the fact that within three months of his resignation, two other influential, politically active pastors also resigned their positions. And in the silence created by their departures, a new generation of pastors suspicious of political activism is now beginning to speak up.

Much of the change over the past couple of years has come about by surprise, without warning. Just three years ago, many people were suggesting, that evangelical Christians would take over the Republican Party, and that James Dobson would become the kingmaker for 2008. But today the whole movement seems to be unraveling.

The new generation of evangelical leaders is moving in a completely different direction. One way that Kirkpatrick characterizes this is with the quote, "The new evangelicalism has a push to better this world as well as to save eternal souls; a focus on the spiritual growth which follows conversion rather than the yes or no moment of salvation; a renewed emphasis on Jesus' teachings about social justice as well as about personal or sexual morality; a new interest in public policies that address problems of peace, health and poverty." This has led Bill Hybels from Willow Creek to write, "People who might be called progressive evangelicals or centrist evangelicals are one stirring away from a real awakening."

Someone once said that a "fundamentalist is an evangelical who is angry about something." Certainly the harsher elements of fundamentalism in every religion have been angry, tending to demonize certain groups of people or individuals. That is why I was especially struck by the words of candidate Huckabee when he said, "I am an evangelical Christian, but I am not angry at anyone."

Recently Pastor Frank Page from Taylor, South Carolina was elected to be the president of the sixteen million member Southern Baptist Convention, upsetting the chosen candidate of the fundamentalist, politically activist leadership. He was quoted as saying, "I believe in a world of God, but I am just not mad about it." He also has said, "I have cautioned our denomination to be very careful not to be seen in lock step with either political party."

Now I must editorialize here, that while evangelicals seem to be moving away from political litmus tests, much of mainline Christianity also needs to reexamine its own such proclivity. For too long many mainline denominations and organizations have functioned as the ecclesiastical arm of the Democratic Party. I have seen little repentance or reexamination of such distortions of the Gospel. I think Pastor Page's comments are equally as relevant for mainline "We want to be very careful not to be seen in lock step with either political party."

Pastor Mike made this abundantly clear in his sermon on evangelical Christians. He pointed out that Lutheran Church of Hope has no political litmus test. In fact our congregation includes many very prominent and effective leaders in both major political parties. Some of them, he pointed out at one worship service, are sitting right next to each other. That is the way it should be.

Probably there is no clearer indication of the upheaval going on in evangelicalism than the outspoken leadership given by Rick Warren and Bill Hybels, arguably pastors of the two most influential evangelical churches in the country. Both of them have been increasingly active in responding to issues of poverty, race, AIDS, global warming, and war and peace;

subjects hardly even debated by evangelicals a few years ago.

Hybels recently wrote, "We have pounded the drum again and again that for churches to reach their full potential, they have to do more than hold worship services. They have to try and transform their communities. If there is racial injustice, you have to speak to that. If there is educational injustice, you have to do something. If the poor are being neglected, you have to stand up for the poor. We are not just interested in the two or three issues that evangelicals have focused on in the past, we are interested in the poor, in racial reconciliation, in global poverty and AIDS, in the plight of women in the developing world."

I find it kind of ironic in this political season that it seems as if evangelicals are sounding a lot like Roman Catholics. I remember in 1960 when evangelicals led a huge barrage of anti-catholic sentiment trying to derail the Kennedy campaign. Now it seems like they have joined the same cause. Evangelicals will never accept the hierarchical structures of Catholicism, nor much of the doctrine, but the social and moral teaching has become similar.

Roman Catholicism strongly emphasizes personal morality, sexual morality, pro-life issues, as well as God's preference for the poor. They are very intentionally "pro-life, pro-poor". Also, they have been among the most vocal critics of war, including the war in Iraq.

Evangelicals seem increasingly to also have become pro-life and pro-poor (listen to Mike Huckabee). Strangely enough this social teaching does not fit either political party, as now constituted, which has created huge ambiguity among so many Christians.

A final comment from one of the evangelical pastors who was forced out in Wichita should be telling for anyone who seeks to closely align church with politics, "When you mix politics and religion, you get politics."

One of the yet unwritten stories will be how this changing evangelical culture will play itself out in the 2008 election, and beyond. Stay tuned. It may be a wild, unpredictable, sometimes uncomfortable, and unnerving time. God is up to something new, and we need to just hold on and be along for the ride.