

WHO SHOULD DO THE CHANGING?

By Marvin Rickett

Should man adapt God's religion to man, or must man adapt his religion to God's ways? In the interest of establishing new congregations, some religious leaders have come up with the idea of taking a survey in a community and finding out just what its people want in the way of a church. Then they get busy crafting a community church that satisfies the desires of the community's people.

Their claim is that they are adapting the church to fit the needs of the "baby-boomer generation" or "generation X." Their product is a church which is "user-friendly." If it is discovered that the contemporary generation wants more entertainment, more casual wear, shorter services, feel-good sermons without a lot of Bible quoting and full of good stories, women leaders, contemporary gospel music with occasional instrumental accompaniment, emotional displays such as handclapping or throwing up of the hands, then they will change the order of the church to accommodate it. Better to attract many people with these novel ideas than to attract the few, they say.

There is some validity to the idea that evangelism must adapt somewhat in beginning "where the people are" to bring them to Christ. Paul became "*all things to all men*" that he might gain some (I Corinthians 9:20-22). Foreign missionaries have learned that they can more effectively communicate the gospel if they put it in terms of the customs of the native peoples. However, there are some serious objections to the theory the adapting, to come back to God. In the Bible, God made demands on people that required them to do the changing and adapting to "come into line" with God's way. When the apostles and evangelists confronted men who were estranged from God, they did not adapt the gospel to fit their wants. They commanded them to repent—adapt their ways to fit God's righteousness: "*Repent, and be baptized*" (Acts 2:38); "*Repent ye therefore, and be converted*" (Acts 3:19); "*Repent therefore of this they wickedness, and pray God*" (Acts 8:22); He "*...commandeth all men everywhere to repent*" (Acts 17:30).

Jesus required that all men be converted. Convert means change. "*Except ye be converted*" (Matthew 18:3); "*Repent ye therefore and be converted*" (Acts 3:19). What advantage is it for preachers to make people feel good about themselves where they are if they are not in God's way? Why not rather call on them to change to God's way first? The prophet and the apostle alike called on men to first "come out from among them and be ye separate" (Isaiah 52:11; II Corinthians 6:17). Rather than accommodate the people where they were, which invariably was in sin, they called on them to move ("come out") and change ("touch not"). They were to forsake their way and return to the Lord (Isaiah 55:7).

The gospel carries its own appeal. It will draw some, some will refuse. The community church idea may draw in more numbers, but to what? Those drawn in by the preaching of the gospel will be walking in God's way.

The age-old question that the pioneer preachers dealt with extensively, "Is the gospel as it is, adapted to man as he is?", needs to be preached again and the answer learned anew. Their unanimous reply was a resounding "yes." However, many contemporary preachers would probably answer "no" and conclude that we have to further adapt the gospel to the needs of each succeeding generation.

The contemporary generation is being deluded by the same problem that afflicted Jeremiah's generation, and many generations since: That man is able to direct his own steps. Jeremiah said, "*O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his own steps*" (Jeremiah 10:23). Man's wants and man's needs are not the same thing, though they are often confused. Man may know what he wants, but that may not be what he needs. With a sin-darkened mind, he may not be aware of what he really needs. He may not even want what he needs. God knows what man needs. He has told him what he needs and has provided for those needs in the gospel.

Those surveyors for the community church are merely finding out men's wants. They should consult God's word to find out men's needs. God's way is absolute and right. Man has left God. God is still where He ever was. Man is the one who has changed and moved away. Thus man is the one who must do the changing,

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"... Christ is the head of the church: and He is the Savior of the body." - Ephesians 5:23