

Increase In Number There; Do Not Decrease

Coming to Terms with the Future 1

Jeremiah 29:1-14

June 7, 2009

- I. The first and most significant task a congregation needs to address during a transitional pastorate is “coming to terms with history” because the feelings and uncompleted business of the past can have a major impact on the present and the future.
 - A. And so we’ve invested a large amount of time in “coming to terms with history.”
 1. I did extensive interviews with many of you.
 2. I sorted through the issues from the past that you reported to me.
 3. And then we addressed them in a series of Trans. Transparency Meetings.
 4. We’ve really worked hard on coming to terms with the past.
 - B. But I’ve come to realize in the last couple months that an equally important transitional task is “coming to terms with the future.”
 1. Now the reason I say this is that, with the increasing pace of change in our society, the future is going to be very different from the past and present.
 2. And what the faithful church of Jesus Christ is going to look like in the future is not clear, but it appears that it’s going to require the present church to make some pretty significant changes.
 3. Although I wish it had occurred to me to address this issue earlier in my ministry here, I decided that even at this late date, I need to report on my new insights about coming to terms with the future.
- II. Now the challenge NA Xns face in coming to terms with the future is not that different from the situation faced by the exiles to whom Jeremiah was writing.
 - A. These exiles were facing a very unwanted future—they had been ripped from Jerusalem and Judah and taken off to the very different world of Babylon.
 1. They were clinging to their memories of the way it used to be and hoping that things would somehow go back to being the way they had been.
 2. They were stubbornly resisting adjusting to this unwanted future.
 - B. But Jeremiah tells them, *This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6 Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. 7 Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."*
 1. When *the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel* says, *Increase in number there; do not decrease*, he’s saying, “Accept the future that is before you, unwanted as it may be, and adjust to it.”
 2. It doesn’t do any good to pine for the way things used to be.
 3. Instead step up into the new future. Live in it, adjust to it and prosper in it.
 - C. I believe the message is exactly the same for us as we face the future.
 1. We’re not going back to the Judah and Jerusalem of the of the 1950s or even the 1990s,

where we used to live, and which we prefer.

2. We're going to need to come to terms with the future in which we find ourselves and adjust to the changes which it brings upon us.

III. Now in order to put this in perspective, let's look at some of these changes the future is bringing upon us.

A. First of all, the future which is rushing upon us is a very different world.

1. For most of history people have lived with the assumption that the future was going to be pretty much like the past.
 - a. The rate of change was slow and it happened on a human scale.
 - b. But the rate of change began to pick up with industrial revolution and it has continued to accelerate at a faster and faster rate.
2. In 1970 Alvin Toffler wrote the book *Future Shock* which posited that the rate of change had increased to such a level that the future was coming at us faster than we could adjust, resulting in what he called future shock.
 - a. Now Toffler was making this observation in 1970—39 years ago, which seems almost laughable.
 - b. From the perspective of 2009, Toffler hadn't seen anything yet.
 - c. The computer and the internet have made change much faster than Toffler could have even begun to imagine.
3. As a result of all this change, people are different and culture is different.
 - a. What used to work doesn't work any more.
 - b. There are new realities to which we have to adjust.
 - c. And it's only going to be more so as the future hurtles upon us.
4. Businesses are doing everything they can to adjust to these differences. Schools and colleges are straining to adjust. Libraries are adjusting.
5. But unfortunately the church hasn't joined in the adjustment business with much vigor.
 - a. In fact the church is lagging way behind in adjusting.
 - b. The church has been dragging its feet in adjusting to this new reality of incredible change.

B. Which brings us to the second change we're facing which is that the church is going to have to become much more intentional about adjusting to the future if it is going to hold on to its members and draw any new people to the good news.

1. Fighting change and trying to stay the same will not work.
2. Unchanged and unchanging, the church will decline precipitously because of its failure to adjust to the unwanted future that is rushing upon it.
3. Just as other institutions are changing to serve the different people whom this vastly transformed future is creating, so too must the church change if it wishes to bring good news to these people.
 - a. Now when I say change I don't mean to do anything that compromises the gospel.
 - b. What I'm referring to is the way we present the good news and the form the church takes.
 - c. There is wide variability in how people best hear good news and how the church organizes and presents itself, and it is not unfaithful for the church to change itself or its presentation of the good news to appeal to a broader audience.

C. This point about how best to present good news to people brings us to our third change which is that Xns need to work much harder to understand the kind of people they hope to reach if they hope to reach them.

1. If we don't make the effort to understand people, we will either:

- a. Assume they are like us and will offer them what we want and like which is likely not going to be what they want and like.
 - b. Or be so turned off by the differences as to not try at all.
2. Now the first thing we need to understand about the people we hope to serve is that there are many people who are either angry at, hostile toward, or indifferent toward the church.
- a. Millions have concluded that institutional religion is meaningless.
 - (1) They are absolutely indifferent to the church.
 - (2) To them faith looks weary and threadbare with no answers to the questions they face and nothing to offer them.
 - (3) They value church about the same as they would value stock in a rotary dial telephone company. They consider both to be relics of the past which have no place in the world in which they live.
 - (4) These are people not easily drawn into the church.
 - b. Worse yet, there are many people who have rejected the church because they have been deeply hurt by it.
 - (1) The Catholic Church sex abuse scandals are worst example.
 - (2) But there are many other ways in which people feel they have been harmed by the church, and many are very angry.
 - c. And then many who take the message of the gospel seriously reject the church because they see no relationship between it and what Jesus had in mind.
 - d. There are millions of people for whom the church is nothing more than an irritant or an irrelevant joke, and this number is likely to continue to grow as we move further and further into the future.
3. The second thing we need to understand is that many people have been alienated by the church's attempts to maintain its cultural influence by becoming stridently political.
- a. The church is known for what it's against, not for what it's for.
 - b. And much of what political church is for stands in stark contrast to what people read about Jesus. Rabid nationalism, gun rights, a hawkish stand on issues of war, torture, judgmentalism.
 - c. The last 30 years of Christian/Evangelical involvement in politics have won the church nothing but contempt in the eyes of many.
 - d. And it has resulted in hostility and resentment against Christianity.
 - e. We face a future in which Christianity is known not for its love but for its hate, intolerance and judgmentalism.
 - (1) Now I know we can say, "Hey, that's not us! We haven't acted like that!"
 - (2) But we are being painted with the same brush.
4. The third thing we need to understand is that people find the church to be hypocritical for its preaching of transformation yet its failing to show much evidence of transformed lives.
- a. The church's statistics on divorce, sexual abuse, and moral lapses aren't that different from society's, and in some cases are worse.

- b. “If Christians are the recipients of the transforming touch of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, where is the evidence?” many ask.
 - c. And they look in vain to the church for people who facilitate a deeper more authentic vision of the Christian faith.
 - 5. In the future we are facing, people are either indifferent or hostile toward the church, and it is going to have to dig itself out of a deep hole of irrelevance and hostility before it can begin to minister effectively.
 - D. The fourth change I want to point out, and this is probably the most important of the changes I’m outlining today, is that the NA church is going to find itself on the front line of Christian missions in a way it hasn’t been for hundreds of years.
 - 1. And either it’s going to step forth to the fray and join the battle, or it’s going to shrink away and refuse to join the battle, in which case it will quickly waste away to a mere shadow of its former self.
 - 2. Until recently, Xns could count on it that most people around them were Xn or at least had exposure to Xn faith, and that the front lines of mission were way over there somewhere—across oceans and thousands of miles.
 - a. We dealt with our mission obligations by taking up offerings to send professional missionaries over there to evangelize people.
 - b. The bit of evangelism we did—again by paying professionals—in this case, traveling evangelists—was helping people, who already knew the truth, to finally submit to it.
 - c. So for hundreds of years the closest most Xns got to an actual mission task was inviting the partially persuaded to revival services, while we paid professionals to do the work of missions in far off settings.
 - 3. But that’s no longer the way it is because the front lines of missions have shifted over here.
 - a. We are surrounded by people indifferent to or hostile to Xn faith.
 - b. We are surrounded by hurting people with broken lives deeply in need of the healing touch of Jesus.
 - 4. And we are the ones Jesus expects to step up and do something about it.
 - E. My last point is that the change we are experiencing is more than just a generation gap, but it’s basic change in the way people view the world.
 - 1. The technical term for this is that we are in the midst of a paradigm shift.
 - a. Paradigm shifts, in which the way people understand the world makes a major change, come along periodically in human history.
 - b. Historians and philosophers think we are in one of those major shifts right now, which means that what used to work no longer works and what used to make sense no longer makes sense.
 - 2. The church made the shift to the most recent paradigm, often called Modernism, during the Reformation and the centuries which followed.
 - a. Although it hasn’t completely solved the problems of this paradigm, as evidenced by the ongoing struggle between science and faith, it has found a way to be moderately relevant.
 - b. But that way is unlikely to work in the new paradigm we’re facing.
 - 3. So the question we face is whether the church is going to be able to make

the shift to the new paradigm, which is often called post-modernism.

- a. The main issue is moral relativism—the idea that there is no moral authority and we make our own decisions about right or wrong.
 - b. And the question is whether Xns will be able to find an answer to moral relativism and to maintain their relevance in the entirely new world into which we are coming—a world in which the church faces significant hostility and huge indifference.
4. We are going to have to define a new role for the church and a new way of relating to the world around us whether we like it or not.
 5. The problem is that we cannot yet define what the new way of doing things is going to look like.
 6. The church is facing a large challenge to make adjustments to this new future we face.

- IV. Now it's easy to be dismissive about all these points I've just made—to say, “Oh, that has nothing to do with us. We're just a little rural area in Southeast Wayne County, and we can keep on being the way we are and have been. Shucks, we don't even know what a paradigm is, and if we just ignore that issue, it'll go away.”
- A. But I'm afraid that, tempting though those thoughts may be, they're just not going to wash.
 - B. I'm afraid that these issues do have something to do with Sonnenberg.
 1. They have a whole lot to do with Sonnenberg.
 2. And they are not going to be going away.
 3. These changes are impacting us just the same as everyone else and we are going to have to make adjustments, or we will be crushed by the future.
 - C. Now I know that there's a whole lot about this that we don't like.
 - D. But just as the exiles from Judah couldn't do a thing about the future facing them in Babylon, neither can we do anything about the future facing us.
 1. This future is sweeping over us whether we like it or not.
 2. So the question we are facing is whether we are going to try to keep on doing things the way we've always done them or whether we will adjust to the changes that are happening.
 - E. Now although it's certainly not a given that we will make the adjustments I'm talking about, next Sunday I plan to at least lay out what some of the adjustments the church is going to need to make look like.
 - F. So I urge you to make sure to be here for the second installment of my series on coming to terms with the future.