

## **Change Agents**

Jay Lockhart  
Benton Church of Christ  
P.O. Box 228  
Benton, KY 42025  
270-527-3585

[jaylockhart@bentonchurchofchrist.com](mailto:jaylockhart@bentonchurchofchrist.com)

For the past several years the church has been troubled by “Change Agents” (a title they have given to themselves) who are out to change the church into what they think is ought to be. They believe the church has failed to be what it should be and are determined to remake it into their own image.

### **A Look at History**

For 200 years in America, and even earlier in Western Europe, there have been people who have pleaded for a restoration of New Testament Christianity. They believed the Bible had been covered up with the doctrines and creeds of men, which lead to division, and wanted to return to the New Testament as their only rule of faith and practice and promote the unity of believers for which Christ prayed. They wanted to “speak where the Bible speaks, and remain silent where the Bible is silent.” They wanted to be Christians only and members of the church Jesus said he would build. This concept was preached across Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Ohio and other places, and grew like wild fire. This informal movement called men out of denominationalism and back to the Bible. The result was undenominational Christianity--a restoration that gave rise to the churches of Christ in America. The leaders of the movement never intended to start a new church--they simply wanted to restore the church of the New Testament. By the end of the first 100 years of the movement, around 1900, division reared its ugly head. There were those

within the movement who no longer believed the Bible was to be the only source of authority in beliefs and practices. The most liberal thinkers in the division rejected the authenticity of Scripture while the more moderate minds took the position that the silence of Scripture was permission to practice what the Bible did not specifically condemn. There were two distinct things that brought about division in the movement: the addition of mechanical instruments of music into worship and the establishment of a Missionary Society to carry out the evangelism of the church, a task that Jesus had given to the church, universally and congregationally,--a task that the local church, in cooperation with other local churches, was commissioned and equipped by Christ to do. When the dust had settled, most of the large city churches had gone with the digression and most of the colleges affiliated with the movement were gone as well. So the restorers, having only a few Bible schools and colleges left and having mostly small town and rural congregations, began again. Their plea always remained the same: the unity of believers based upon the Bible only. They continued to believe that the New Testament alone, without the encumbrances of human opinion, would produce Christians only and the church of the New Testament only. And the movement grew. By the 1950's the churches of Christ were the fastest growing religious group in America. While by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there had been a leveling off in growth, there was still much about which to be encouraged. Flavil Yeakley, a well recognized and highly respected student of church growth among churches of Christ, has recently noted that the churches of Christ are the 12<sup>th</sup> largest religious group in America; the 6<sup>th</sup> fastest growing; the 4<sup>th</sup> in total number of congregations; the 5<sup>th</sup> in the number of counties in which there is a congregation; the 1<sup>st</sup> in distribution of congregations; and the 1<sup>st</sup> in weekly attendance among its membership. The prophets of

doom and gloom (the Change Agents) who suggest that the churches of Christ are in decline, that we cannot grow without undergoing drastic change in the way we “do church,” and that we are losing our young people are not supported by the facts.

### **Who are the Change Agents?**

The generations that make up the population of America in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries include the **Builders**, those born before 1925, who were the builders of the nation and the church, who were heroes of the war years, who were uncompromising and self-reliant (which explains why they were more comfortable with human accomplishment than divine grace), and who were the backbone of the church during the greatest growth years of the 1950’s and 1960’s; the **Silent Generation**, those born between 1926-1945, who are more tolerant than Builders were, who live in the shadow of the previous generation and were soon outnumbered by the next generation, who should be the heart and soul of today’s church, but in many instances have failed to live up to their privileges; the **Boomers**, born between 1946 and 1964, who are visionary and idealistic, but also are self-centered and arrogant, who dropped out of religion (at least 60% did), who are success oriented and believe they can change the world; the **Busters** (also called Generation X and the 13<sup>th</sup> generation because they are the 13<sup>th</sup> generation to grow up under the American flag), who were born between 1965 and 1981, who have grown up in a Post-Christian America, who are worse off economically than their Boomer parents, who do not believe in the American Dream, who distrust politicians, and who are cynical about religion; and the **Millennials**, who were born after 1981, who belong to the electronic age, and, therefore, who must be entertained, who are spoiled by their guilt-ridden Boomer parents, and who hold the key to the future.

The Change Agents find their roots in the Boomers, who planted the seeds of change in their minds, but are basically from the Buster generation. They are younger people who were “brought up in the church,” who benefited greatly from what former generations had accomplished, and who are angry with the church. Many of them hold members of the church who do not agree with them in contempt and affirm that unless the church undergoes radical change (which means the church must become what they want it to be) it will die. The change that the Change Agents want is not change that all of us need in becoming more like Christ or change in the methods we have used so that we can do a better job in carrying out the mission Christ has given the church. The Change Agents are calling for change in things that we have considered “matters of faith” and things that have made us a distinct group of people: leadership authority; worship; women’s roles; biblical authority; the undenominational nature of the church; and the basis of fellowship. They tell us that these changes are necessary if we are to retain our young people and reach the “unchurched.” However, Flavil Yeakley’s study showed that there is a higher retention rate of our younger people among churches that are “middle of the road,” avoiding extremes, and that churches leaning more to the left (churches most influenced by Change Agents) have the worst retention rates. Additionally, churches leaning to the left, that I am familiar with, are not reaching the unchurched in any significant numbers.

### **How Change Agents Work**

Change Agents move into or arise in congregations that are at peace and their goal is to disrupt these churches. First, they seek to persuade the elders to agree with them. If this doesn’t work they begin to work behind the scenes with members of the congregation in undermining the elders. Their goal is to replace the elders and getting men who agree with

them appointed to the eldership. If this fails they try to get a majority of the church on their side in order that they may “take over” the congregation. They hope that those who disagree with them will leave so that they can take over the property that others have provided. Failing at this they will split the congregation and start a new church that will be free from “dictatorial elders” who refused to let them have their way. They are unconcerned about the aftermath of pain and sorrow left in their wake and the Savior, who prayed for unity, must weep.

### **Terms Used by Change Agents**

1. **Authority.** They speak of authority, but deny the authority of Scripture and proclaim that elders have no authority except being examples. They overlook passages like I Peter 4:11: “If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God;” and I Peter 5:2: “Shepherd the flock of God..., serving as oversees.” Of course elders are not to be “lords over” the flock, but shepherding and oversight involve leading, feeding, disciplining, and correcting and God gives them the authority to do what is necessary in carrying out this command.
2. **Patterns.** Change Agents claim there are no patterns for the New Testament Church, yet Paul told Timothy to “hold fast the patterns of sound words” (II Timothy 1:13).
3. **Freedom.** Change Agents speak of freedom yet enslave their followers to human reason.
4. **Grace.** Change Agents think that they discovered the grace of God and that former generations in the church knew little about the subject. This charge is baseless, of course, and ignores the facts of the matter. When Change Agents use grace they do not mean the grace of God that teaches us (Titus 2:11), but they believe in a cheap

grace that demands nothing, especially obedience to divine commands. Of course we are saved by grace (Ephesians 2:8; II Timothy 1:9) and can never earn salvation, but the fact remains that the grace of God is to be accepted (II Corinthians 6:1) and demands obedience (Titus 2:11-15)

5. **The Cross.** The charge has been made by Change Agents that we do not preach the cross of Christ. How absurd! The cross is the means by which we are saved (I Corinthians 15:1-4), but here again the cross calls for a commitment to the Lordship of Christ that Change Agents are often prone to forget.
6. **Jesus.** Change Agents tell us we should preach Jesus. Who would deny this? However, preaching Jesus is to preach his life and words found in the gospel records, but it includes preaching “the commandments of the Lord” found in the epistles. (I Corinthians 14:27).
7. **Church.** The Change Agents speak of the church but they do not present the New Testament concept of the “one body” for which Jesus died and which can be identified in the New Testament. By “church” they mean a universal fellowship of denominations including the churches of Christ. They speak of “reaching the unchurched” because they believe that anyone who professes faith in Christ is a Christian and their brother. Consequently, one does not hear sermons from the Change Agents on The Conversions of Acts, or The Identity of the New Testament Church or Baptism Into Christ or Singing As Authorized Worship. Change Agents want the church to be a Community church where belief in Jesus is about the only thing required for membership.
8. **Silence.** The Change Agents speak of the silence of Scripture and insist that it is

acceptable to God for them to practice what the Bible does not specifically prohibit. This reasoning, of course, would lead to every kind of innovation not specifically prohibited in Scripture, e.g., instrumental music in worship, changing the elements of the Lord Supper, taking the Supper on any day of the week, the burning of incense, baptizing babies, women in leadership roles, etc. This kind of thinking ignores the fact that Nadab and Abihu were struck dead for doing what the Lord “had not commanded” (Leviticus 10:1,2) and that Jesus could not be a priest on earth because he was from the tribe of Judah, “of which tribe Moses said nothing concerning priesthood” (Hebrews 7:14). The silence of Scripture does matter.

### **Conclusion**

If the Change Agents no longer wish to be identified with the churches of Christ, let them peacefully go their way without dividing churches, harming the Cause of Christ, and breaking hearts. Let them leave the property of churches to those who paid the price, made the sacrifices, and stayed the course through the years. Let them go out from us because they are not of us; “for if thy had been of us, they would have continued with us” (I John 2:19). However, we would prefer that they change their agenda, change their minds, and return to speaking only as “the oracles of God” (I Peter 4:11). Then, we can work together in reaching a lost world with the gospel of Christ. In the meantime, let us be aware of what is happening in the brotherhood of the churches of Christ and let us be forewarned so that we may be forearmed.