The Bible and Change

By James Coffin

Note: This article was written as an editorial for the Global Mission Center for Secular/Postmodern Mission’s website (www.secularpostmodern.org).

Change. We love it. We hate it. We laud it. We demonize it. But, as the saying goes, change is life’s only constant. So it looks like it’s here to stay.

Actually, people faced change back in Bible times, too. This is good, because it means we have biblical models for how to deal with it. Let’s note just a few examples and what necessitated each change.

Sheer Numbers

When Moses’ father-in-law, Jethro, stopped by the Israelite encampment to see how the exodus was going, he discovered that his son-in-law’s leadership style wasn’t appropriate to the situation: Moses was assuming too much responsibility.

“Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?” Jethro asked. Then he shared an observation: “What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone” (Exod 18:14, 17).

As a result of Jethro’s insights, Moses implemented a totally different administrative structure, with appointed officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. Only the difficult cases came to him. The new structure made his work load–and his life in general–viable.

For him, change was a matter of survival.

Diversified Ministries

As long as the apostles limited their ministry to preaching, their
organizational structure served the early church well. But when they established the “adventist development and relief agency” to meet the needs of the church’s widows, they discovered that their old structure no longer sufficed. They had to decide whether to run the community services program or preach. They could do one or the other well. But not both. The problem, as they described it: “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God to wait on tables” (Acts 6:2). Yet the tables needed to be waited on.

It was a conundrum. But not an insurmountable one. They solved the problem by saying, “Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn our responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:3, 4).

The appointment of deacons proved to be a wise organizational change.

Globalization of Mission

Before his ascension, Jesus commissioned his disciples to be his witnesses “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Being Jews, his followers no doubt thought his command entailed taking the gospel only to the Jews in all those places. But Peter, in an unusual vision (see Acts 10), discovered that the gospel was for the Gentiles as well.

In an environment where every devout Jewish male began each day with a prayer thanking God that he hadn’t been born a slave, a Gentile or a woman, what happened next was dramatic indeed. Long-cherished taboos began falling like dominoes.

First, Peter responded to a Gentile’s invitation to preach the gospel. Second, Peter interacted socially with a group of Gentiles. Third, he saw the Holy Spirit poured out on the Gentiles just as he had been poured out on Jews on the day of Pentecost. Fourth, Gentiles were baptized. Fifth, Peter reported to the church leaders in Jerusalem concerning what had happened, and—wonder of all wonders!—they “praised God, saying, ‘So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life’” (Acts 11:18).

By the time Paul wrote his epistle to the Galatians, Chris-
Christianity had turned the devout Jew’s morning prayer so totally on its head that Paul could declare of the Christian church: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ” (Gal 3:28).

Including the Gentiles as recipients of gospel outreach demonstrated an almost unbelievable willingness to change. Yet that change brought in its wake even more dramatic changes.

**Behavioral Expectations**

Expanding the target audience for the gospel brought a crisis of a different sort: Just how much of what was being expected of Christian converts was actually Christian? And how much was actually Jewish (the religion from which Christianity had sprung)?

This raised a question: How much should non-Jews have to become Jewish en route to becoming Christian? It was a tricky issue, granted that the church’s established base was overwhelmingly of Jewish background and could be alienated if their Jewish heritage was too much ignored. Politically, it would seem, opting for strong ties to Judaism would make sense.

At a council in Jerusalem, convened specifically to consider the problem, James (the brother of Jesus, we believe) spoke up, taking a surprising stance: “It is my judgment . . . that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (Acts 15:19). His concern was for new believers and about not putting unnecessary hurdles in their way.

So when the letter summarizing the council’s decision was finally composed, it stated to the new believers that “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things” (Acts 15:28, 29).

When one considers the vast array of rules and regulations contained in the writings of Moses, the Christians of Jewish background must have been staggered by the council’s decision. But, to their immense credit, they didn’t focus solely on the impact on themselves. Instead, they focused on not making it unduly difficult for others to become Christians. And it seems that the entire church—whether of Jewish or Gentile background—accepted the council’s conclusions as God-approved.

The decision of the Jerusalem Council and the change it brought are probably the most radical the Christian church has ever seen.

**Imminence of Christ’s Return**

Clearly, Christ’s disciples expected to be alive when Jesus came a second time. And it’s equally clear that they had to revise their understanding of the imminence of his return as year after year, decade after decade, passed without his appearing.

The concern of the early believers was for those who were dying. Would they be left out when Christ returned? Would
they be excluded from the joys of that grand reunion? Thus the Apostle Paul wrote: “Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep” (1 Thess 4:13). While allaying the fears of those who were wondering about the delay, he himself still expected to be alive to see his Lord return. He says: “We [emphasis mine] who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them [those who have died believing in Christ] in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thess 4:17).

Again encouraging the Thessalonians, Paul writes: “Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed” (2 Thess 2:1-3).

The apostle Peter, writing to bolster the faith of those whose hope in Christ’s return is waning, says emphatically: “We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2 Pet 1:16). Peter speaks here of Christ’s second coming, which he, along with all the other disciples had preached with such enthusiasm. And he uses his experience on the mount of transfiguration— which was a miniature of what will happen at Christ’s return—as proof that the end-time event will, indeed, come.

In the latter part of his epistle, Peter acknowledges that many are becoming skeptical concerning whether Christ will ever return. And he puts up arguments to show that the delay actually is a sign of God’s patience, and that it works to our advantage, because God is “not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9).

John records in his gospel that Jesus gave insight into the manner of death Peter would die. In response, Peter asked about John. Jesus replied, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? Because of this, the rumor spread among the brothers that this disciple [John] would not die” (John 21:22, 23).

John’s subsequent comments suggest that by the time he wrote his gospel John himself expected that he might well die before Jesus
returned, for he says: “Jesus did not say that he [John] would not die; he only said, ‘If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?’” (John 21:23).

Summary

In the Bible we encounter an array of examples of change—certainly more than the five I’ve cited here. However, the ones listed here are particularly instructive, I believe, because we still face each of these issues today. They aren’t something that happened once and have never happened again.

Growth necessitates change. So does diversification of ministries. So does greater globalization of mission. And greater globalization of mission, in turn, forces a re-examination of what’s essential Christianity and what’s mere cultural trapping. And, certainly, the failure of Christ to return as quickly as we as Seventh-day Adventists first expected means that we, like the apostles of old, need to ensure that the church not abandon its hope just because his return hasn’t met our particular timetable.

As a church we face a changing world. As a church we have to make changes to minister to our changing world. Fortunately, we have Bible-based models offering helpful insight into how to go about it.

* All scriptural quotations are from the New International Version.

A Search for Relevancy

By Marcel Pichot

In the foreword to George Knight’s book A search for identity, Neal C. Wilson states that the book “clearly reveals that from the beginning Seventh-day Adventists have been prepared to modify, change, or revise their beliefs and practices if they could see a good reason to do so from the Scriptures.” Such a beautiful expression of surrender to God really highlights his wisdom and supremacy!

Many times throughout the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church values, beliefs, doctrines, and practices have