

“Sometimes Something More Than Renewal Is Required”

Exodus 20:1–17; John 2:13–22

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There is a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted, says the wisdom writer, there is a time to break down and a time to build up (Ecclesiastes 3). This is true of many things in life, including our covenant relationship with God.

The reading from Exodus is all about planting and building — God establishes a covenant with the Israelites. The reading from John is all about plucking up and breaking down — Jesus burns the established way of being to the ground so that he can launch an entirely new way.

We might argue that Jesus is simply renewing the ancient covenant, calling the people to clean up their act and restore the old way of relating to God. They just need to buy their animals for sacrifice somewhere else and make sure their hearts are in the right place.

But Jesus chases the animals out and turns over the money-changing tables. He speaks of destroying the temple, not putting on a new coat of paint, and he says that he will raise it up in three days. John tells us he is talking about himself, not the physical temple, but this is an even more radical change. Jesus is not recommending a facilities assessment process or an approach to spiritual renewal. He is launching a whole new way of being wherein God’s presence will be experienced most fully not in a sacred building but in and through him.

There is a time to plant, but there is also a time to pluck up, not in an effort to destroy or abandon, but out of a desire to bring new life. Sometimes something more than a little pruning is needed, sometimes something more than renewal is required.

This seems to be such a time for the Church in our culture, and this has implications for our church. Church involvement, as a percentage of the population, has been declining in our culture for several decades. It will soon be down to 10%. The rise of the nones, people who identify with no religious tradition at all, has been well documented. And

analysts predict a significant percentage of church members, perhaps up to 30%, may not return after COVID-19.

Evangelicals in particular, which includes us, at least by tradition, may be in for some real challenges due to public alignment with one party no matter what it does and how far it strays from its roots. Evangelicals' tacit and sometimes even explicit support of racism, antisemitism, and Islamophobia, because of this alignment, has proven to be the last straw for many younger people.

The Church in this time faces daunting challenges. The world is changing dramatically and thus our way of relating to it must change. It's not simply a matter of a little renewal or strategic adjustment. It's not just doing what we do a little better. It's about a set of much larger paradigm shifts that more closely resemble Jesus' actions in the temple.

Like the covenant described in Exodus, our relationship to God in Christ and basic calling to follow Jesus endure. And in this church we have many traditions that still have value — worship that engages the heart and mind, a witness of compassion to this community and the world, a warm and inclusive way of relating to each other. But how we live out our calling in this day requires a major re-start.

The good news is we have done this before. We celebrate our 209th anniversary today — technically, tomorrow is the day as we were founded on March 8, 1812 — and when we look back at our history, it is a tale of many shifts, pivots and adaptations. While we have many traditions, we have also made many changes over the years, decades and centuries. We moved location several times before settling here in the 1850's. We changed names — from Raleigh Baptist Church to First Baptist Church. We nearly died in the 1830s and came back to life, opened up space to be used as a hospital during the Civil War, went from being integrated to being segregated all the way back — after much prayer, patience and perseverance — to be integrated again.

We have altered and renovated this worship space, built the Lewis Education Building, added new ministries and outreach efforts — like the Clothing Ministry, Toy Joy, And Also with 'Cue, and the Weekday Preschool — and provided space for the Infant Toddler Center, AA groups, job training programs, the Stone Soup Supper, the Holiday

Service of Hope and Remembrance with other downtown churches and the State Government MLK Service with the other half of FBC Raleigh.

We have added and subtracted things, we have adapted and changed, as we have sensed the Spirit leading us, in an effort to respond to an everchanging world. So, if we are called to respond to change now, we are well prepared for the journey, though it will not be easy, and we must seek the Spirit's counsel every step of the way.

So, what changes do we view to be most significant in this time? One major paradigm shift is that the church is no longer at the center of community life nor do most people go to the church of their denomination in their neighborhood. This shift has been in process for at least a couple decades, we know about it and have adapted to it to a degree, but there is much more work that still needs to be done.

In this new age, when we cannot count on people just showing up, it is essential for a local church to have a clear sense of identity and focus in ministry. Some may have to have a specific niche, something they do well like social ministry, relating to the arts community, welcoming internationals. But all churches need to be clear about who they are, act out of their identity and be able to tell others who they are.

There was a time when consultants thought only certain kinds of churches could grow — conservative churches, homogenous churches, churches that practice contemporary worship. What we now know is that the key is having a clear identity, no matter how we come down on these issues. We have made progress in this realm. The visioning process several years ago, though painful, was necessary and clarifying, but there is still work to do. We are like a polaroid snapshot coming into focus. The new dreaming group will help us take the next steps.

Another major paradigm shift lies in the shrinking number of people who attend church at all. How most churches have tried to respond is by changing what we are doing so that more people will be interested in coming — worshiping in a different way, having different kinds of programs — and doing a better job of inviting people to join us.

The problem is all of these efforts are improvisations on an old theme. They all fall into the category of what church consultants call the

“attractional church.” The goal is to attract people to come here and join us in what we are doing. It is a model built on noble purposes and good history, even if it can end up being self-serving. And every church has certain existential needs. We have to have people and resources to exist. But the changing landscape around us renders this approach ineffective and requires that we develop a new model — not to replace the old one but to supplement it — as well as new metrics for assessment.

The *new* model is actually very old. It involves going out to where people are, getting to know them and caring about them genuinely as human beings, and finding a way to join them in what God is already doing in their lives, whether they realize it or not. It may involve joining them in service to the poor, an arts initiative, an environmental endeavor like a recycling day or tree planting, a public protest or prayer vigil, a social gathering like Theology on Tap. Why do I say this *new* model is very old? I think of something a colleague in Richmond said. When she was asked why she had started a church in the roughest housing project in the city among recovering addicts, AIDS patients, and gun violence victims, she said, “Because these people need a church and because Jesus said, ‘Go ye!’ not ‘Y’all come!’” Indeed.

We need to become a Go Ye church in an updated sense, and I realize we may think we already are, but only to an extent. When consultant Bill Wilson talked to us a decade ago about the future of the Church, he used the image of people doing something on a platform over water. They are willing to adapt what they are doing, change with the times. The problem is the platform underneath them is on fire. It is burning down. They don’t need a more creative way to work on that that platform. They need a new platform. So does the Church today.

One other shift I would name today may also seem like something we already do. The need is for churches to quit separating people into groups — based on age or socioeconomic standing or even church membership status — and then targeting people for outreach as if they are customers for a product; and to start simply caring about people, forming authentic relationships without any agenda. We want to talk about Jesus and our church, and that is fine, but people today, especially younger people, do not want to be targeted, they can smell an agenda

from a mile away, and our efforts to sort out who is in and who is out in God's realm are pure folly and in fact counterproductive.

In the book *Same Kind of Different as Me*, one of the authors, Ron Hall, describes an experience he and his wife had as newlyweds. They were visiting a church that was very zealous about evangelism which, in their minds, had to include a discernment of the spiritual status of any new people — saved or unsaved. Ron's wife had grown up Methodist, but apparently these folks weren't convinced of her status and thus persisted in their questions in a way that wounded her and pushed her away. Hall says he mourns the wounds inflicted in this approach and has removed the word "unsaved" from his vocabulary. "I have learned that even with my \$500 European-designer bifocals," he says, "I cannot see into a person's heart to know his (her) spiritual condition (p. 61)."

In an article in the journal *Image* Catherine Ricketts pushes our thinking a bit further on this matter (no. 104, pp. 48-49). While she was reflecting on her brother's life after he died, a seminary professor asked if he was a Christian. He was not a church person, she knew, but after consideration, she penned these thoughts. "Since Joe died, the binary of saved and unsaved, believer and nonbeliever, feels like child's talk. When we teach toddlers about color, every apricot, rust, nectarine, and terra cotta is simply *orange*. Every navy, cerulean, jasmine, and steel is simply *blue*. As we grow, we come to see the difference between the hues. What language do we have for spiritual shades between saved and unsaved? What words illumine the gradient between the poles?"

I realize that this kind of thinking requires another kind of paradigm shift for us, one similar to viewing other world traditions like Judaism and Islam in a different way. But the metaphor this writer uses applies there too. As we grow in our faith and understanding, we need to be able to see the difference between the hues. It is long past time for the church to allow its perspective on many issues — ranging from world religions to human sexuality — to be informed by new knowledge. We don't need to feel threatened. God is still God. But our understanding does need to be informed. As long as we maintain an anti-science, anti-knowledge perspective, or are afraid to embrace new

information fully, lest someone be offended, the number of nones will continue to grow.

Of course, the question that attends all deconstruction is as to whether we have an adequate plan for new construction. Once we have torn down an inadequate way of thinking and being, can we build up a new and better way? Jesus knew he could, and if we are trying to follow him and seeking the Spirit's guidance, we can have a good measure of confidence that we can too. But the reality is we have very little to lose. Without something more than renewal, without a more dramatic transformation of God's design, we won't connect with the majority of people in our community. That wouldn't bode well for our church, but far more importantly, it wouldn't bode well for the realm of God.

"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up," Jesus says. New life is coming, you can count on it! His promise is still good today, for those who have a little courage and a little faith.