

"The Church In the 21st Century"

Bill Easum is an ordained United Methodist minister. He is an author, a church consultant, and an astute observer of culture and its relationship to the church. I was first introduced to Bill Easum when I went to one of his seminars some years ago. I was just being appointed to a congregation that was venturing into some new areas and redefining how they do ministry. The pastor who was leaving told me that a few of the leaders in the church were going to attend a Bill Easum seminar, and he thought it was a good idea if I go so I could get on board with the new directions that church was hoping to take. So I went.

It was one of those "aha" moments that changed the way I looked at the church, and how it should function, and what my role as pastor should be. At the time I was searching – I was discovering that doing what we had always done in the churches I had served no longer seemed to be working. I believe God led me to that seminar, and over the years I've learned much from Bill Easum's leadership.

Easum maintains that we are living in a time of history when we are caught in the middle of a gigantic shift. What he calls a "crack" in history. He says the world as we know it (the Industrial World) is coming to a close, and it's giving way to a *quantum age*.

He says, "During the second half of the 20th century a Crack in history has opened up. This crack is changing the way everyone in the world will live for the next millenium. This is the first crack in history to be experienced by Protestants." He remarks that it is as significant as the discovery of fire, writing, Columbus, Copernicus, and the printing press.

He continues, "In this Crack in history *change* itself has changed. Change is no longer slow and deliberate. Change folds in on itself in random, episodic fashion." (Like a spray of bullets bursting all around us). There is a law called Moore's Law, which maintains that the body of technological knowledge *doubles* every 18th months! While some say this is slowing down, it is generally thought that the body of technological knowledge doubles every year and a half to two years. (Compare that to the year 1900, when it took 100 years for human knowledge to double!). Just as the internal combustion engine shaped the old world, the *microprocessor* is driving the world of the 21st century.

Because we're caught in the middle of this huge shift in history, trying to understand reality and solve problems the *old ways* is less and less effective. We need to look at life and reality through different *lenses*, different *assumptions* – the word often used today is "We need new *paradigms*." For those of us who are over 50 or 60, don't you ever get the feeling that the world we're living in today is *totally different* from the world we grew up in!

Here's the thing: *the church too* is in the middle of this major shift in how we understand and live life. To quote Bill Easum, "In this Crack in history, North Americans face an unchurched culture, indifference, and hostility for the first time. There is little if any Christian memory in people born after 1970. This makes North America the new mission field of the 21st century. We are already the fourth largest recipient of missionaries in the world."

Much of what is done in many churches is based on *old* ways of looking at things, *old* assumptions. As a result, it's estimated that 85% of congregations in the U.S. are either plateaued (leveled off), or declining. Eighty-five percent! This is most prominent in mainline Protestant churches (like Presbyterians, Lutherans, United Methodists), where we are more prone to be doing things the way they were being done 300 years ago). Truth is, much of what we do in the church has little to do with the *Bible* and a lot to do with *human traditions and historic practices*.

With all of this in mind, I want to use just one little verse of Scripture for our text today. But these words are a bombshell – they are words of Jesus: "No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins" (Mark 2:22).

In Jesus' time people put wine into animal skins – wineskins. When the skin was new, it was soft and pliable. But when it got old, it would become dry and brittle. New wine gives off gases. If you put new wine into old skins, the pressure from the expanding gases would shatter the old, dried skins. Jesus seemed to be saying that the Jewish religion of His time was like old skins – hardened, inflexible – not able to contain the new wine of Himself and His message. *Bottom line: The church needs to be soft and pliable, willing to change, if the new wine of the gospel is to be communicated to our generation and our world that is changing at breakneck speed.*

Please note: I am not saying we change the gospel. If you're going to be a *Christian* church you hold on to the core beliefs that make you Christian. The Apostles' Creed, for instance, is an ancient creed that summarizes these core beliefs. We find a good summary of these in 1 Corinthians 15:3-6: "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures and that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died." We don't change the *wine*, the essential gospel message. But we do at times need to change the *skins* that hold and pour out the message of Christ to the world.

Maybe what I've been saying is making us feel uneasy. That's ok. Hopefully it will spur us to think about how we and churches need to change. But let's look at a few changes that we are already seeing take place today.

Church structure will be different. In the world of the 21st century *bureaucracy* is out. (Unless, of course, you're talking about our government!). Corporations have been downsizing for years. Many businesses need to streamline in order to survive. If you want an example of bureaucracy in the church you need look no further than the United Methodist denomination! Whether the larger denomination or the local church, all of the committees, boards, agencies! (It's getting better – but we still has a long way to go). The vast array of rules and regulations and organizational structures *designed for coordination and control* – rather than *giving people permission to do ministry*.

In many churches, for instance, where if someone wanted to start a ministry you have to go through this committee, that board, to get permission to do it. Easum has quipped, "In the average church it takes 90 hours and 45 people to say no!" Bill Easum himself was appointed to a church in Texas that averaged 35 people when he went there – they couldn't afford to pay him. When he left they were averaging 1,000 in worship, with 5 services. He said in his 24 years there they only took something like 4 votes. Three were when they built new buildings. One vote was that they voted on the *core values* of that congregation. Once they had them, they didn't need to vote. If something fit the core values, do it! If not, don't!

Instead of a lot of standing committees, this kind of church encourages people to go ahead with what God lays on their heart. If someone comes to the pastor or staff person with an idea, and it fits the core values, the response is: Get 1 or 2 other people with that same passion, and just do it! *Church structures will be different in the churches that are successful in our time.*

In the church of the 21st century the role of the lay people will be different. One of the common assumptions still in many churches is that the clergy and staff do the ministry, and the lay people support them. You pay us clergy to do the ministry! But this is not biblical. Around the time I was discovering these new ways to do church I came across 2 verses of Scripture that blew my mind and changed my way of functioning as a pastor. The verses are Ephesians 4:11-12: "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some *pastors* and teachers, *to equip the saints* (believers, all Christians) *for the work of ministry.* In this Biblical view, *you* do the ministry, and our job as pastors or staff leaders is to *recruit and equip you* to do the ministry to get the gospel into the world.

Once I began to function as a pastor according to that Biblical model, it made a difference! At the time I was serving a church of about 1100 members, but there were less committees and boards there than in some of the tiny churches I had previously served, where we maybe had 90 members. Ministry was happening all over the place! People were turned loose to follow their passion and what God laid on their hearts. And I constantly had to remind myself and the staff members that our job was *not to do all of the ministry*, but to *train and equip* God's people in that church to exercise their natural talents and spiritual gifts in ministry!

Another mark of vital churches in the 21st century is this: ***they will offer choices.*** I heard a story about a man named Ed. Ed was a faithful church member. In fact, he had a 50-year perfect attendance pin in church attendance. Yet, for the last 10-15 years, he would sleep during the sermon. The pastor one day worked up the courage to ask Ed why he came to church. Ed's reply was this, "It's my duty. I owe it to my children and grandchildren." I think if we could get those in the older generation to tell the truth, the reason they come to church or came to church was out of a sense of duty. Maybe this describes some of you!

The present generation doesn't have that sense of obligation! People want to come to a church that offers a number of *choices*. I remember when there was 1 TV station. Now there are hundreds to choose from. When I was a kid, when you bought sneakers, you had these choices: black or white, high or low. Today there are scads of options for sneaker buying! Most people

today look for a church that offers different options to meet their felt needs or varied interests. Few are just loyal to one congregation/one denomination.

This carries over into the moral and spiritual too. Most younger people no longer feel there is only *one* correct view or *one* correct way to do something - they've grown up in a culture where many no longer believe there are any moral absolutes. So the task of churches today is to *proclaim Jesus as Lord without apology, and to hold to the core values of the faith*, but hold that in tension with the realization that alternative choices and diversity is the *norm* in our American culture.

Let me mention one more way the church of the 21st century must change if it is to reach our generation with the gospel. ***Churches that survive in the 21st century will worship differently.*** Here's a reality: Traditional worship services tend not to attract younger people. Once the Baby Boomers came on the scene, the appeal of traditional worship services declined. (And the oldest Baby Boomers are now 76 years old!) So, traditional worship services tend not to attract people under 75 years old! Why? Because traditional worship services are based on 3 things: (1) The printed page. (2) 16th century music. (3) The institutional church. But people under 75 are (1) Visually oriented (2) Suspicious of all institutions (including the church), and (3) Live with music that's different from most church music.

So, it's become common today, as I said last week, for churches that still have a traditional service to offer an *alternative* type service that is more casual and upbeat. And done right, this will probably be the largest of the services and have younger people in the seats.

Much of the debate (sometimes fights) regarding worship has to do with music. Classic hymns written in the 1600's and 1700's, and gospel hymns written in the 1850's and first half of the 20th century no longer convey the gospel to people who have not grown up in the church. I know, some of us may think the newer church music is disrespectful, just entertainment, and not fit for the church! But I'm convinced there is no such thing as "church music" verses "secular music" as far as the melody and style of music. It's the lyrics – the words – that determine what's fit for use in Christian worship. Bach is no more fitting for a worship service than rock or rap. (If you disagree, find something in the Bible to prove me wrong!). There is so much more that could be said about worship – but let me just reiterate that churches that will not only survive, but thrive, in the 21st century will worship differently than we did in the 1950's and even 1980's.

Jesus said, "No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins" (Mark 2:22).

In one church I served a family joined the church who had just moved from California. The husband and wife were bright, gifted, committed Christians. They had been part of a growing church in California, and came with all kinds of new ideas. They lasted about 2 years, then left the church, because they couldn't stand what they called the "inertia" – how our congregation was set in its ways and not open to fresh ideas. It broke my heart! And what hurt even more

was, back then, I didn't give them the permission and encouragement they needed to implement their ideas.

Change, or die! It's as simple as that! No, we don't change the essential message of the gospel. We don't tamper with Truth. But in a world that's so different from the world most of us grew up in, churches in the 21st century have to change, or we will die.

