

CAN ONE PERSON MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Flexing with a Future in Flux

Isaiah 43:18–19; 48:6–8; Acts 11:1–5, 9–13, 15–18



LET'S BEGIN HERE

The church has always been known for its resolute spirit. Built upon the solid bedrock of Jesus Christ and reinforced by the granite pillars of the prophets and apostles, the church stands on the plain of history as a fortress of truth.

Problems occur, though, when we think that because the church's *message* is changeless, the church's *methods* must be changeless too. *How* we worship becomes as important as *Whom* we worship. Eventually, we end up guarding our fifty-year-old approaches to ministry with the same tenacity we use in defending Scripture. Viewing new ideas with a suspicious eye, we entrench ourselves in traditional routines and hunker down behind the concrete walls of our closed minds.

While the church stands still, however, the world moves on. How can we expect to make a difference in a rapidly changing world if we're living in the past? Are we ready for the changes the future will bring?



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Questions That Deserve an Answer

So much rapid change can cause us to wonder, where is God in all this, and how does the church react in the face of change?

- *Where in heaven is God in all this?*
With each new universe of knowledge we unlock, God is there, waiting for us to come in and explore His creation. He's not worried about the future. In fact, God looks forward to it and the changes He's going to bring about. Isaiah 43:18–19 and 48:6–7 highlight the fact that God is creating all the time. He's a God of new ideas, of innovation, of change.
- *Who in the church is ready for the challenge?*
Church analyst Lawrence Richards says that when faced with the possibility of change, most people reflect one of three personality types:
 1. *Innovators*: these people enthusiastically embrace change and are willing to try new ideas that offer progress.



Quotable

*Be willing
to be an agent
of change
for God's
unchanging
truth.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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2. *Maintainers*: also called “conservatives,” these people are cautious about change and want all the facts firmly in place before launching a new plan.
3. *Inhibitors*: these people resist change, regardless of the facts and no matter how feasible a plan may be.

Ten percent of the people in an organization are innovators, eighty percent are maintainers, and ten percent are inhibitors, based on Richards’ research.¹

2. Issues Then and Now (Acts 11:1–18)

The main character in the tenth and eleventh chapters of Acts is a man named Peter, who was, by nature, a maintainer. Peter had Jewish roots. He was also a married man, settled down, relaxed, thinking he would spend the rest of his days on the sea, when all of a sudden along came this revolutionary—Jesus—who won his heart and swept him into a movement. Peter became one of Jesus’ early disciples. But Peter hadn’t lost his roots. He’d been trained as a Jew.

Peter was staying in the coastal region in Joppa, a sheet came down out of heaven, and on the sheet were all sorts of foods which up to that moment had been anathema (Acts 10:9–15). And the Lord had to say to him three times, “Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean” (10:15 NLT). So Peter ate.

He was escorted by three Gentiles into the congregation of a Gentile gathering. And Peter shared the truth of God to them. And they believed it (10:44–46).

The issues:

- *Institutionalism* (11:3)
The Jewish leaders were incensed that Peter had the audacity to fraternize with uncircumcised Gentiles.
- *Transformation* (11:4–16)
Peter knew that the Jerusalem believers needed to be transformed just as he had been. So, “in orderly sequence,” he calmly led them across the same bridge of change on which he had journeyed, from the vision to the visit with Cornelius.
- *Fixation* (11:17)
Peter asked, “Who was I to stand in God’s way?” (11:17 NLT). Peter had walked the people across the bridge to something completely new. Now they had to decide whether to keep walking with him or turn their backs on God’s way. If they refused the truth, they would have had what we might call a “fixation” on the past—what *Merriam-Webster’s* defines as “an obsessive or unhealthy . . . attachment.”² Would the Jewish believers loosen their grip on the past and accept God’s new plan for the Gentiles?
- *Alteration* (11:18)
To their credit, the Jerusalem believers got quiet, they got in touch with God, and they were willing to change. Each one of them stepped off the bridge and followed Peter into the future. Once there, they gloried in God’s marvelous grace—the grace that was bigger than any one of them could have imagined.



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LET'S LIVE IT

Answers That Are Right but Uncomfortable

When faced with change, how should we respond? Five answers emerge from Peter's story:

It is essential that we remain calm.

As we consider the new ways God might lead us, let's do so with a quiet, patient spirit.

It's essential that we glorify God as they did.

Any vision for the future must be for God's glory. We're not in the business of building empires for ourselves but of building God's kingdom.

It is essential that we walk through doors God opens.

Many exciting opportunities await us in the future. And when they open up, we need to push aside our instinct to hang back. Instead, we must step forward with confidence and faith.

It is essential that we willingly flex and adapt.

Don't let no always be the first word out of your mouth. If you tend to be an inhibitor, willingly try to be open to new ideas.

It is essential that we continually evaluate.

What's happening in the world? Is our ministry still meeting people's needs? Should we toss out a certain program that isn't working anymore? What new doors is God cracking open? These kinds of questions keep us flexible and ready to face whatever future God has in store for us.

How is each role — innovator, maintainer, inhibitor — important in the body of Christ? How would you characterize yourself, according to these categories?

ENDNOTES

1. Lawrence O. Richards, *A New Face for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 43.
2. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2007), see "fixation."



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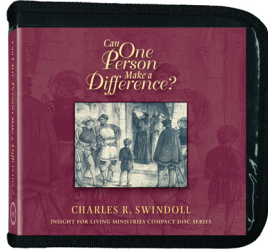
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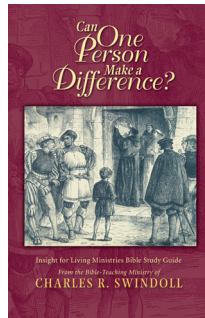
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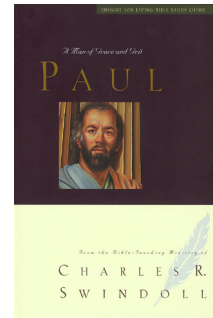
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