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Paul W. Powell

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GEORGE W. TRUETT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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## THE TIMES ARE CHANGING

I'm not sure, but I think as they left the garden, Adam must have said to Eve, "My dear, the times are changing," and they've been changing ever since. But never more so than today, especially in the church. From the time I began pastoring in 1955 until I went to be president of Guidestone in 1989, there was very little change in the church. We all met at the same time, sang the same hymns from the same hymnbook, and had basically the same order of service. Now everything has changed.

However, history tells us change in the church is not all that new. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was perhaps the greatest Englishman of his day. The son of a Church of England clergyman, he was ordained as a clergyman in the Church of England in his early 20s. He was devout, disciplined, but not a Christian. After a failed attempt to convert the Indians in America, he himself was converted through the witness of the Moravians.

Thereafter, he had such a zeal for heart-felt religion and evangelism, that he and his followers were no longer welcome in the pulpits of the Anglican church.

One of his fellow workers, George Whitfield, went into the fields near Bristol and began preaching to the miners who had never seen the inside of a church. Soon they came by the thousands to hear this fiery preacher. Wesley was slow to accept field preaching. He wrote in his diary, "I could scarcely reconcile myself at first to the strange way of preaching in the fields that (Whitfield) set as an example on Sunday; I had been all of my life so tenaciously related to decency and order that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin, if it had not been done in the church." (*John Wesley* by Arnold Lunn, Lincoln Mac Veagh, New York, 1929, p. 118)

Change came slowly to Wesley just as it comes slowly to many people today.

John's brother, Charles, wrote more than 6,000 hymns including "O, For a Thousand Tongues to Sing" and "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing." There were no hymnbooks in the Church of England until John Wesley wrote the first one in 1737. Music became an important part of their movement. It gave the congregation a chance to express emotions aroused by the revival services and the expression intensified their emotions. Lunn said Wesley's hymns marched, danced, and flew. He took popular tunes and wed them to Christian words. He said, "Why should the devil have all the good tunes of the day?"

Sounds a bit like some of our modern church music, doesn't it? The times are changing and so are we. It takes the wisdom of Solomon and the grace of God to know how far we can stretch a rubber band before it breaks.

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## COLLECTED INFORMATION WORTH KNOWING

Surveys indicate that the basic beliefs of Americans have not changed in the last 50 years, i.e., they still believe in the Bible, prayer, heaven, etc., but what has happened to the church is something else:

- Per capita, there are half as many churches today as there were in 1900.
- Eighty-five percent of all denominations have plateaued or are declining.
- One-half of Americans are unchurched.
- Ted Koppel reported recently that there are more nuns over 90 than there are under 40, and the average age of a Catholic priest is 65.
- Frank Paige, president of the Southern Baptist Convention, recently said there are 44,000 Southern Baptist churches. In 22 years, there will be only 20,000 if we don't reach young couples.
- Southern Baptists reported the lowest number of baptisms in 2008 in 20 years.
- For the third straight year, membership in the Southern Baptist Convention has declined.
- Texas is the second most populous state in the nation with 2.6 million people. Forty-eight percent of them are unchurched. There are 2.3 million Baptists in Texas. If each one of us witnessed to 10 people by Easter Sunday 2010, we could share the gospel with every person in our state.

## FOR PASTORS

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Stephen Wilkes, editor of *The Journal of Evangelism and Missions*, said he believes that the bad economy is just what Christians need to evangelize America. He wrote, "People right now are more open to hearing about Jesus than anytime in recent years. They have lost something and they are scared." (*Christianity Today*, March 2009)

The day I read that, I received a phone call from a Dallas businessman. I asked him how things were going. He said, "My business is down but attendance at our men's prayer breakfast and in my Sunday School class is up."

Two things seem to make a nation more open to the gospel than anything else — war and recession. Both of them represent the loss of safety and security and in those times, we tend to turn to God.

## QUOTES

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- The late President Lyndon Johnson once described Senator Harry Byrd of Virginia as "a steadfast opponent of most of the twentieth century." (*Lyndon: An Oral Biography* by Merle Miller, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, p. 410)
- Lyndon Johnson, as is customary, visited a number of inaugural balls when he was elected President of the United States. As he left each ball, he would bid the people good night and say to them, "Don't stay up too late, we are on our way to the great society." (*ibid*, p. 546) He was a man on mission and he wanted everyone on board with him.

## A SERMON

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Title Don't Let the Fire Go Out

Text Timothy 1:6-7

Introduction The apostle Paul urged young Timothy, "stir up the gift of God that is in thee..." The word "stir" literally means "fan again to flames." Paul here compares Timothy's spiritual gift to a fire that has gone out. It is now only a pile of gray ashes. Underneath are hot coals, and if they are stirred, they will burst into flames again. That's what he is urging Timothy to do.

The fire can go out of our life, also. What causes that to happen?

- I Hardships. Persecution was commonplace in the New Testament. We don't face physical persecution, but there are hardships that can quench the fires of enthusiasm in our life.
- II Discouragement. People can throw cold water on your ideas. A frown, a yawn, a negative comment can do the trick.
- III Weariness. Burnout is no new thing. The apostle Paul said, "Be not weary in well-doing..." However, you can't burn out if you weren't ever on fire. There are more Christians who need to be fired up than need to be hosed down.
- IV Preoccupation. We can become so busy about other things that we let the fire go out. Proverbs says, "Where there is no wood, the fire goes out." The fires of devotion must be tended.
- V Sin. It quenches the spirit quicker than anything else.

Conclusion God has given us all we need to be faithful to the end — power, love, and a sound mind. Let's use them and keep the fires burning.

## REMEMBER

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George W. Truett Theological Seminary  
Baylor University  
One Bear Place #97126  
Waco, TX 76798-7126

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