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## Frozen Christianity: How Resistance to Change is Killing Your Church

Is there anyone on the planet under the age of 12 who hasn't seen the Disney film *Frozen*? Is there any parent or grandparent who hasn't seen the film? It is a fairy tale about a woman who freezes everything she touches. Through genuine love, she changes. The film is a great parable to start Christians talking about the resistance to change, the necessity to change, and which is appropriate. Change is a powerful habit and discipline, both for good and for evil, helpful and hurtful. Discovering when change is beneficial is an art. It is a spiritual discipline at the heart of healthy Christianity.

Pastor Matt couldn't help but be alarmed as the cardiologist asked him to sit down. The physician pulled a chair closer than usual and took a deep breath.

"Matt, your heart is not good. You will have to make some major changes in your life or you will die at a relatively young age."

The room was silent. You could tell, looking at Matt: a million thoughts were racing through his mind. Dr. Jones was quiet, too. Matt is not only his patient. He is his pastor. Through fifteen years together on Mt. Calvary's leadership team they have become close. They are close friends, and frequent golfing partners.

As a seasoned physician, Bill knows the odds. Among all patients who get the message to change lifestyles, only one in seven do it. The other six die before their time. Change is difficult, even when necessary.

Kent Hunter is an Author, Teacher, and Church Consultant. Kent says, "I was born to help Christians and churches become more effective to make disciples for Jesus Christ." He is the author and teacher of



*The Damascus Road: Where Christians Become Missionaries*, a video teaching for Christians to reach those in their social networks. Kent is the Founder of Church Doctor Ministries.

[www.churchdoctor.org](http://www.churchdoctor.org)

Email Kent: [kenthunter@churchdoctor.org](mailto:kenthunter@churchdoctor.org)

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- ▶ Forward it to staff and leaders in your church, denomination, network, or fellowship.

## Freezing Christianity

It's a joke...but no joke: "How many Christians does it take to change a light bulb?" The answer: "Who said anything about change?" We laugh, but ought to cry. Unwillingness to change is a significant roadblock to a healthy church. Well-meaning Christians resist change...and literally kill their church.

It was an early Sunday morning when I turned on the television in our hotel room. My wife said, "You're not going to find any news today, it's Sunday morning." "I know," I said, "I'm looking for a worship service."

We were traveling in a relatively remote area of the south island of New Zealand. I didn't notice any churches when we drove around town the day before. As a church analyst and consultant, I'm traveling often, but usually without my wife. On a Sunday, even before I preach, I'm often up early, turn on the hotel TV and look for a worship service to watch as I get dressed.

In this hotel, in New Zealand, I tuned into a worship service from Australia. I immediately recognized the congregation: it was Hillsong, a world-class ministry and producer of cutting-edge contemporary Christian music. The sermon was great. Following the message, the congregation began to worship in song. I marveled at the stadium-sized crowd. As the camera panned the audience, my analytical mind went to work. I noticed a full range of ages. So many young people! This is a rare sight in most churches in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the U.S. and Europe. The music, the worship leader, the contemporary sound, the electronic visuals, were communicating, engaging, and inspiring. "How amazing," I thought, "to see so many people on fire for God."

As Hillsong worship ended, the next show came on TV. It was another worship service. This one was from a traditional church. The choir, dressed in robes, was excellent. The sound of the pipe organ was beautiful, the organist exceptional. As the camera panned across these worshipers, the picture was impactful. "Gray hairs" everywhere. Almost everyone was in their late 60's or older. I saw no one in their 20's or younger. None! I turned to my wife, "Why don't people realize: unwillingness to change is killing the church? You don't have to be a church consultant to see the future. Twenty years from now, the last person dies...someone turns out the lights. This church has no future. What is wrong with Christians? Why is this so hard?"

My wife replied, "Calm down. You're going to wake the people in the next room."

## Wake-Up Call

When Church Doctor Ministries works with a church, we use an anonymous survey, taken by everyone in worship. One of the questions asks: "From your perception, what do you think was or will be the greatest era in the history of this church?"

### TEN WAYS TO CHANGE FOR GOOD

1. Focus on Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees—a biblical clinic in religious reluctance to change.
2. Contrast religious styles, (which must change), and spiritual substance, (which cannot).
3. Build strong relationships, the best context for leading change.
4. Approach change as process, not an event.
5. Change incrementally: eating in small bites satisfies. Gulping chokes.
6. Persist in a commitment to minimize casualties.
7. Build a mission culture before radical change; it will add biblical purpose to everything.
8. Love is always the most effective lever for change.
9. Change bottom up. Encourage early adopters to influence their friends.
10. Before changing, invest whatever it takes to build a healthy atmosphere.

These are the choices:

- 40-60 years ago
- 20-40 years ago
- 10-20 years ago
- The last ten years
- The next ten years
- Ten years from now

How would the numbers look in your church?

Our purpose is to determine how many are stuck in the “good ole days.” At the other extreme, we want to see how many say “The next ten years.” Why? Those excited about the immediate future are open to innovation and change. Who wouldn’t want to know this?

The research results below come from 6,033 worshippers in the last thirty churches we consulted. These are churches of all different types and sizes from throughout the U.S.

What do we learn? Over one-third, 39.13% feel, “The best days are behind us.” That is the average. However, in a congregation in Michigan, the number was 53%. In a congregation in Hastings, Minnesota, it was 43%. In San Jose, Illinois, it was 81%! A church in Saxonburg, Pennsylvania reflects 35%. In Corvallis, Oregon, 69% are looking to the past. When you see resistance to change, it is a major wake-up call for your church. However, a wake-up call is only the beginning.

## Style and Substance

The age-old challenge is confusion between what *must* and what *cannot* change. When Jesus broke into history, He showed up in the flesh. He didn’t look like an angel or a Martian. He looked like an ordinary human being. This is called the Incarnation. The Son of God became flesh and moved into our neighborhood (as Eugene Peterson translates). God considers it important to be represented in a contemporary form. Jesus looked just like those He reached. He didn’t look like Moses or Abraham, nor did He look like Harry Potter or Taylor Swift. He looked like, dressed like, talked like, danced like one of them: the people of that time. This concept, in missionary language, is called *indigenous*: reaching people in the forms of their culture, at their time in history.

Of course, the Son of God was not ordinary. He was the Son of God. He is the Son of God. However, He communicated ordinarily. Why? So people could relate and respond. This is a non-negotiable mission strategy. This communication style reflects the style—the medium of communication.

Jesus brought the message. The message is the content. Jesus is the content. Not what He wore, but who He was. This content never changes. The content of the faith is the Scripture, the teaching of Jesus. It is the same in any culture, in any language. It is translated (translation is the style), but the content (meaning) can never change. If it does change, it waters down the message, distorts the truth, robs the power. It ruins the effectiveness of reaching lost people equally as much as being insensitive to the style of the target audience.

When someone bends the content to make it fit a cultural trend, when the content is compromised for the sake of the target audience, this is called *syncretism*. It occurs when you try to “sync up” the content with the contemporary culture. This guts the faith from its meaning.

## Confusion

The confusion can be described as tradition vs. traditionalism. Someone might say, “We like the tradition of organ music.” However, music must be changed, if organ isn’t the audiences choice, their vehicle of communication. It is foreign. It makes God foreign. It is out of date. It makes God out of date. That is not tradition. It is *traditionalism*.

Hebrews 11 focuses on the heroes of the faith: Abraham, Noah, etc. These heroes believed God for the impossible. Hebrews 11 describes the *living faith of the dead*. Even though they have been dead for centuries, their faith lives on: as an example and inspiration for us. That’s why the chapter begins: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” We are inspired to believe in the God of Abraham, the God of Noah, etc. We are encouraged to believe God for the impossible through the living faith of dead people who are described in Hebrews 11. Many of us have family members, parents or grandparents who were believers, who demonstrated faith to us in ways that will stick with us all of our lives. They are a living memory of the power of God in life. They support and encourage our trust and faith in God. That is *tradition*.

However, when Christians resist change, hanging onto worn-out seating arrangements, like pews, old style architecture, spires and stained glass windows, songs with words no one uses anymore, like “thy” and “thou”, (“*Thy* will be done”), it hinders the potential of new Christians hearing the Good News of Jesus Christ. This is not tradition, even though many Christians call it that. Resistance to change is not *the living faith of the dead*. It is *the dead faith of the living*. It is not tradition. It is traditionalism. It is faith in things: forms, seats, words, windows, styles, which are not part of contemporary life. They are relics from a day gone by. This is faith in styles, not faith in substance. This kills churches.

## Frozen: Amish Christianity

Many churches today are aging, declining, dying. This is due to many factors. Most significant is resistance to change. When we hang on to “feel good” styles, it is the epitome of *selfishness*. In contrast, Jesus was the symbol of unselfishness. The Apostle Paul, speaking to the Philippians, encouraged them to be good missionaries, He focused on the issue behind the issue: “Jesus emptied Himself and gave up His life on a cross so people could be restored to God” (paraphrase) (Philippians 2:7-11).

There’s a group of people in the U.S. called the Amish. Many, including myself admire their work ethic and their

## KEY RESOURCES

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strong sense of family. Yet they seem odd to those who are not part of their world. They seem foreign when you pass their buggy in your heated car on a cold day. It seems strange they would arbitrarily pick a certain period of history, which they define as “better” or “preferable.” In a sense, they have “frozen time.” Many of us outside of the community look at their lifestyle as “interesting, but strange.” It is curious and perhaps even interesting to visit. However, very few people are attracted to embrace their lifestyle, frozen in time. Do you see the parallel to traditional style churches? Are you really surprised they are losing the next generation?

Amish Christianity—this is how unbelievers see the Amish elements of your church: 17th Century hymns, 18th Century pews, 16th Century architecture that comes from another continent and another century, the use of words that have no meaning in the present world. The message, whether you like it or not, is “God is irrelevant to my life.” Much more than an evangelistic roadblock, Amish Christianity is theological heresy. It departs from all that Scripture teaches about the incarnate Savior. It is a travesty of the passion of God to reach lost people. It is contrary to the mission for which Jesus gave His life.

It is not the substance that roadblocks people from Christianity. The Bible itself says that deep within every person there is a spiritual element, a longing for their Creator. The Scripture describes itself as the power of God for salvation. The content is never the difficulty. People say, “People aren’t interested in Christianity.” That is a smokescreen. Those identified as “uninterested” are uninterested in the style, which roadblocks them from ever connecting with the substance. There is no biblical defense to this issue. Of course, there *are* those who are unreceptive. Yet, why would you add a roadblock to anyone?

When it comes to style, change is required. When it comes to substance, change is not an option. This is radical Christianity. This is what being in mission is all about. It is not always comfortable. Accept it, or kill your church.

What do you think?

To schedule a phone appointment to discuss this topic further with Kent, call Terry Atz at 1-800-626-8515.



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Church Doctor® Ministries  
1230 U.S. Highway Six Corunna, IN 46730 USA (800) 626-8515  
[www.churchdoctor.org](http://www.churchdoctor.org) [info@churchdoctor.org](mailto:info@churchdoctor.org) [www.twitter.com/churchdoctor](https://www.twitter.com/churchdoctor)