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Burn the Ships: A Radical Strategy to Reach Your Neighbor for Christ

The church board convened the meeting properly at 7:30 p.m. Dave, the Board chairman, asked pastor Tony to lead in prayer.

After the prayer, Dave gave clarity about the purpose of this special meeting. “The Board has received several complaints from long-term members about the changes in worship made lately. We’ve asked the pastor to explain these changes so we can address problems.”

Dave continued, “Fred, you know a lot of these folks. You have been around here for a long time. Do you want to share some of the complaints you’ve been hearing?”

Fred was eager to speak and well prepared. “Well, pastor, you know, we all know, our church has been slowly declining for over a decade. If we lose some of these long-term members, I’m afraid we might never recover. You know, many of them volunteer...and they are some of our strongest financial givers.”

Dave interjected, “Fred, what are you hearing from these folks?”

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“Well, some of the changes you are making in worship, pastor, you know, some of those songs we are supposed to sing...well...they are modern and our people don't know them. But what I think put most of the folks over the edge is the change in some of the words, like in the Lord's Prayer. Words like 'thee' and 'thy.' It just doesn't sounds right to say 'you' and 'your,'" Fred responded.

Dave looked at the pastor for a response, “Tony, why are you making these changes?”

Tony paused to organize his response. “As pastor, what I pray about most is something you already mentioned, Fred. Our congregation has been declining in numbers for a long time. It's not that 'big is always better,' but when it comes to reaching lost people in our community—those who don't know the Lord—our mission effectiveness is...well...the results are...we are not reaching very many.

“I read a Gallup poll of the state of faith in our country from last year—about a year go right now. They asked people, 'What church do you go to?' They included all religions: Jewish synagogues, Muslim mosques, everything. You know what shocked me? Just over 50 percent of the people in our country checked the answer, 'none.'

“Some of our practices of faith are foreign to these people. I was reading about effective churches—throughout history and around the world. What caught my attention? The best way to reach people for Christ is to speak the 'heart language' of those you are trying to reach. Heart language is the language people dream in. Missionaries learn this and practice it.”

“Yeah,” responded Mary, “but we are not missionaries. We are not in Africa or South America.”

Pastor Tony then replied, “No, but aren't we supposed to share our faith effectively? Isn't our neighborhood, country, and city a mission field?”

Contextualization

When God showed up in Jesus, He looked like the people of the place where he landed—Israel. He spoke their language, ate their food, and dressed like them.

It's called the “incarnation:” from the word “carne,” like in “chili con carne.” Chili con carne is chili with meat. God came as “meat”—as a human being—yet, as God, God's only son. Jesus didn't look like, dress like, or talk like Winston Churchill or Taylor Swift for a reason. Faith travels best without barriers. It is most effective when it is communicated in the *context* of the people you are trying to reach.

In Elizabethan England, people used “thee” and “thou.” The King James Bible, in the original version, was contextualized. Why? Most people didn't know Latin, the most popular previous language of Scripture. Contextualization is an effective tool for mission outreach. In the Middle Ages, most people were illiterate, they couldn't read. Church leaders committed to reach others with the Good News about Jesus were inventive. They created stained glass windows. They were pictures, telling the most important stories of the Christian faith. Brilliant!

So, what is the “stained glass window” medium of our present world? Electronic screens with PowerPoint! Yet, as screens were introduced in North American churches during the last several decades, many Christians objected. Why? Like most who go through this type of

change, many confuse the *medium* with the *message*. The medium is the container for the message.

Two important points are clear: (1) The message should never change. (2) The medium must continuously change. Why? The medium also sends a message. Either Jesus is relevant today, tomorrow, and forever, or Jesus is old, out of date, and foreign. This is a huge issue!

Religion vs. Faith: Why Is Change Difficult?

Mark Twain once said, “The only person who really likes change is a baby with a wet diaper.” Why? Because the baby is uncomfortable. Yet, this is the challenge: If believers are uncomfortable, *yet remain faithful*, there is no eternal harm. However, if believers make comfort the priority, unbelievers end up seeing faith—and Jesus—as foreign, old, and out of date. The harm? They reject Jesus. They miss forgiveness. They lose out on eternal life. That’s a big deal!

This is not a new issue with Christ followers. When Jesus walked this earth, some long-time religious people got caught up in the religion and failed to focus on faith. *Religion* is the practice of faith, the styles—which must change if Christianity is to remain relevant. *Faith* is the content: beliefs, doctrines, Jesus, the Trinity, Scripture.

In Matthew 9:14-17, some people came to Jesus and asked a *religious* question: “The Pharisees fast, but your disciples don’t.” Contextualized, that would be, a question like, “What’s up with that? How could you be the real deal, Jesus?”

Jesus used an illustration: “You don’t pour new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise you lose the wine (the content) and the wineskin (the vehicle).” You don’t want your unchurched people neighbor to live without new life in Jesus Christ (the content) and you don’t want your church to go out of the Lord’s business (the vehicle).

KEY RESOURCES

Addison, Steve. *The Rise and Fall of Movements: a Roadmap for Leaders*. 100Movements Publishing, 2019.

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New Wineskins

In Hebrews 12:26-29, the writer is targeting Jews who are now followers of Jesus. In these verses, the focus is on “unshakeable kingdom,” “vibrant worship,” and believers who are “reverent” yet on fire for God, because God Himself is fire.

The writer says that God is always speaking to His followers. He says that God is always conducting a “...thorough house cleaning, getting rid of all the historical and religious junk so that the *unshakeable essentials* stand clear and uncluttered” (*The Message*, emphasis mine). So, what about the clutter that hinders you and your church?

Packaging and Content

Think of your faith as a gift in a package. To be clear, Jesus is the gift, not the package. A certain translation of the Bible? The content is the gift. The translation is the package. So what is your favorite version of the Bible? If you understand that language is alive, and constantly changing, and the translation is the package, what is your favorite package? Which version of the Bible? It should be the *next version*—as long as it is true to the *meaning*, which is the content.

[Now, go back to that last quote from Hebrews 12:26-29, above. Did it make you uncomfortable to read the terminology, “...getting rid of all the historical and religious junk so that the unshakeable essentials stand clear and uncluttered”? If you have a mission heart for your neighbors who are unbelievers, would they clearly get the point?

Seating in church is the “package” where you park yourself in worship. In the cathedrals of Europe, during the Middle Ages, people stood for the entire worship service. The Puritans in early America built benches. Someone along the way thought it would be more comfortable to put backs on them. They became “pews.” In some churches, the pews became padded, perhaps so you could sleep during the sermon. There is nothing sacred, more holy, or biblical about padded pews. In this era, however, you won’t find theaters or football stadiums today with pews. To do so would send a message, “old and out of date.”

In the early European Catholic church, priests dressed in black up to their neck. Illiterate people who could not read had a great visual aid. As the priests explained it, the black reminded people that every priest is also a sinner. The white collar at the top symbolized forgiveness: sins removed by the blood of Jesus became “white as snow.” An outer garment reflected seasons of the church year as a method of communication, a teaching method of the different dimensions of the faith. Today, to unchurched people, it means, “some Christian leaders wear dresses.” The extent to which that offends you is an indication as to how well you are grounded in spiritual content and mission packaging.

Since the 1950s, a renewal movement of Christianity began providing Christian contemporary worship songs (not called hymns). The Jesus Movement spread to many parts of the globe. Contemporary worship (packaging) reached many people who were previously far from God. Contemporary Christian radio stations became popular. Christian artists began packaging worship and Scriptural truth in image and style that spoke the heart language of billions of young—and very new—believers.

Burn the Ships

When I'm traveling in my car, the only radio station I use is the Sirius XM station called *The Message*. In 2018, a Christian group called for King & Country released a song called "Burn the Ships."

This song has deep meaning, both historically and spiritually. When the conqueror Hernán Cortés landed in Mexico, he wanted it to be a transformative change, a radical departure from the past. It was to be a whole new life. However, some of his men were planning a mutiny: "Let's go back to our old life!"

Cortés ordered the ships to be burned. There was no going back, no hanging on to the past "containers." In the song, "Burn the Ships" by for King & Country, there is a great spiritual truth for those of us who claim Christ as our Savior and the mission to make disciples as our top priority. The song includes the words that separate religion from faith:

Burn the ships, cut the ties
Send a flare into the night
Say a prayer, turn the tide
Dry your tears and wave goodbye

Step into a new day
We can rise up from the dust and walk away
We can dance upon our heartache, yeah
So light a match, leave the past, burn the ships
And don't you look back

Every revival of Christian faith throughout history begins with a renewal movement among unbelievers. Renewal begins by clarifying faith from religion and moving from maintenance to mission. What "ships" will you burn? What new, incarnate, containers of relevant faith will you bring to a world that desperately needs the unchanging Jesus Christ?

10 STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE MISSION

1. Like Jesus, connect with unbelievers at their level, without sinning.
2. Match appropriate dress codes with the people you are trying to reach.
3. When sharing faith with unbelievers, tell them how God has changed your life.
4. Examine your church building. Does it fit the cultural look of your community?
5. Consider this with some personal reflection: What is most important for you, the content of faith or the packaging? Are you faithful or merely religious?
6. Most pastors have never been trained in mission principles. Consider: How can you help your church staff become mission effective?
7. Since America is the third largest mission field in the world (behind China and India), consider the SEND Movement training for those in your church who are "ready" (www.thesendmovement.com).
8. For your daily reading of the Bible, try a contemporary version of the Bible like *The Message*. Read the introduction, which explains that this version is a "meaning to meaning" translation.
9. Lifelong unbelievers often find worship to be culture shock. Start by inviting them to coffee, instead. Share more about what God has done in your life.
10. If a person demonstrates receptivity, your next step may be to invite them to a small group of Christians in a home. Bring them to worship when *they* are ready—and sit with them. Interpret for them. Take them out for a meal after worship, and help them debrief.

