

Changes in Churches

R. Stanley, 8 June 2020

The Indian Government has ordered the reopening of worship places from today the 8th June 2020. The closure of Churches from the third week of March, the Lenten Season, when Christians were preparing for Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday, was distressingly painful. Since then the Christian community has lost over 10 Sunday Services besides several midweek and weekend meetings. Though these programmes were conducted online, it was not a satisfactory substitute.

As Christians, what are we to understand from what God has permitted for our Church life during this Corona outbreak? Whenever there was persecution, political turmoil, outbreak of plagues or natural disasters, there was always a change for the better both in the individual and the corporate life of Christians. This is consistently observed in world history and Church history. God never allows anything in the lives of His children without an educative purpose (Psa 119:71; Rom 8:28). The enduring guide-rule of transformative change is that things must get worse to get better. This is what's observed globally down through the ages. Crisis is a feel-good factor, for it compels change!

The first pulpit God gave me was in May 1963 when I was a 6-month old spiritual baby. It was in a Sunday Service of St. John's CSI Church, Virudhunagar, Tamilnadu. The variety of pulpits I climbed on during the last 55+ years in India and overseas has been amply wide though I am a non-Seminarian. I am a sinner by birth, a Christian by rebirth, Anglican by background, Pentecostal by experience, and Biblical by doctrine. My interdenominational and transdenominational stand opened doors for me in mainline as well as free Churches, evangelical and liberal, Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal, and even among Roman Catholics. This gave me splendid opportunity to interact with numerous leaders of denominations, Churches and Missions, among Whites, Blacks, Browns and Yellows. Honestly, I have never adulterated the Word of God on the pulpit expecting a second invitation.

During the past 75 days of national lockdown due to the pandemic, I was closely watching how various Churches responded to it and what course they took. As usual I analysed the happenings objectively. I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I predict that the once-in-a-century crisis like this is only a prelude. The worst is yet to be (Mt 24:8). The lockdown has made apparent the failures of the Churches. If we don't learn from failures, we only learn to fail. This article, titled, "**Changes in Churches,**" tells us where we must change so we may face the future in the Bible way. I request all Christians, especially the leaders, to read through this write-up with an open mind and an open Bible.

1. Biblical Illiteracy

Our Churches must be centres of learning God's Word. The 12-year old Boy Jesus spent three days in the temple with Bible teachers to learn the Scriptures (Lk 2:46). Towards the end of His life, He testified, "I sat daily with you, teaching in the temple"

(Mt 26:55b; Lk 19:47a). Preaching and teaching of the Word of God must take precedence over all other activities of the Church. To speak more practically, at least 50% of time in the weekly main Service must be allotted to Bible teaching (Neh 9:3). The 20-minute sermon, which includes a story also, will only leave the members starving throughout the week. Too much of time now goes to announcements. Stop the dirty habit of reading the accounts and the names of the contributors. This can be presented in the Church committee for accountability and transparency. Apostle Paul did not want even collections be made during his visit to the congregations with messages from God (1 Cor 16:1,2). Fill the hearts and minds of the Church members with as much Biblical knowledge as possible. The seven years of plenty in Joseph's time were a preparation for the seven years of famine (Gen 41:29,30).

Occasionally I turned on the TV on Sunday forenoons during the lockdown to watch the Church Services of various denominations online. I'm pained that not a single Pastor taught the viewers how to study and interpret the Bible themselves, individually or as a family. This is the time when various Study Bibles and Bible Study Aids could have been introduced. Most of them are available on google. Unless we teach our congregations the self-study techniques of the Scriptures, we are not effectually preparing them for possibly another total and longer lockdown. Most of the Christians don't do any home Bible study because they simply don't know how. Dear Pastors, make all your believers like Bereans! (Acts 17:10,11). Promote them from schools to colleges.

I hear someone telling me that congregational members don't turn up in large numbers for the midweek Bible Study. What's the solution then? Catch them when the gathering is the largest, that is the Sunday Service, and give them solid food. This I think is simple logic.

I thank God for the custom of Bible reading, as two or three lessons, one from the Old Testament and the other from the New, in the mainline Churches. Unfortunately and sadly the free Churches and Pentecostal assemblies have totally abandoned this time-honoured practice (Neh 8:1-3). You have thrown away the baby with the bathwater! I urge you to restore this practice in the Sunday Service. Let our young people learn how to read the Bible aloud (Lk 4:16,20; 1 Tim 4:13). Faith comes by hearing and hearing the Word of God (Rom 10:17). Responsive reading of one or two Psalms enhances worship.

2. Congregational Infightings

What Christ and the Cross could not do, the Coronavirus has done! It has shut out all of us together from the Church buildings. It has brought all of us under the same fear and caution. Praise God for closing the battleground of the committee members! Stirring with anger at the fellow-members of the congregation is thankfully absent for over two months! No place for proud looks! The rich-poor divide is gone at least for now (Js 2:1-4). No fashion parading! Even if you go to Church next Sunday, the social distancing gives no room for gossipy whispers! Foul mouths muzzled by facemasks! (Psa 39:1). No hypocritical handshake or superficial smile (Jer 9:8). There's nothing that brings people together like a calamity or a crisis.

Friends, nothing saddens the heart of God like disunity among His people, and nothing gladdens Him like their oneness. Jesus unloaded this burden before His Father

in His High Priestly prayer (Jn 17:20,21). We are yet to properly understand that the “One God” we worship is also the “Father” of us all (1 Cor 8:6; Eph 4:6). By our unloving attitude towards the fellow-Christians, we treat them as step brothers and step sisters. There are simply too many passages connecting the words “God” and “Father” (Jn 6:27; 8:41; Rom 15:6; Gal 1:1,4; Eph 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Tim 1:2; etc.). Abraham settled a strife between him and Lot by the simple and sublime words: “We are brothers!” (Gen 13:8). America is burning with racism. Let South Indian Churches bury casteism to bring back the smile of God.

Hoping that we would have our first Sunday Service after lockdown on 14 June, I advise the Pastors to call for a Reconciliation Meet on Saturday with the members of the ruling party and the opposition party in the presence of God. It is not for discussion or sorting out of issues. Rather, it must be a time of prayer when each member would confess before God, silently or openly, the bitterness and hatred he or she has with others. Differences of opinion can be there, but they need not lead to disunity. “Agree-to-Disagree” is the noble formula for unity in Church leadership. Pastors must repent of taking sides with warring groups. The Government has ordered handwash and footwashing before entering the Church. Let’s wash our hands blood-stained by hatred (Isa 1:15; 1 Jn 3:15). And our feet which went house to house belittling others before Church election (Prov 6:18; Isa 59:7).

A word to the womenfolk in the congregation: You are sage enough to build a Church, and at the same time you are strong enough to break it (Prov 14:1). Apostle Peter calls you as “weak vessels” (1 Pet 3:7). But you are shrewd enough to badly influence men (Gen 3:6,12). The strife between Euodia and Syntyche cannot be settled at times without a third party intervention (Phil 4:2,3). Wanted mature and godly women like Priscilla, Tryphena and Persis to function as peacemakers in our Churches (Rom 16:3,12). Several nations that have women at the helm have done better at controlling the virus and have lifted lockdowns sooner, thereby hastening economic recovery. Among them are Sanna Marin (34) of Finland, Angela Merkel of Germany, Katrin Jakobsdottir of Iceland, Mette Frederiksen of Denmark, Jacinda Andern of New Zealand and Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan.

3. Leadership Challenges

I’m sure the lockdown period has given Pastors ample time for self-examination, unhurried Bible meditation, holy intercession and relaxed family fellowship. God has given us sufficient rest for physical, mental and spiritual renewal. We are now revitalised to minister to our congregations with fresh energy and enthusiasm (Isa 40:31). Most of us were at the verge of burn-out but God mercifully saved us through this lockdown. It was a blessing in disguise. The future would be more challenging than ever for Pastors. Here are a few things I would urge you to do —

(a) Stay in the presence of God in your prayer closet UNTIL you hear from Him (Mt 10:27). Climbing on the pulpit without a definite Word from the Lord is a crime. Casualness in sermon preparation is nothing but disrespecting the congregation. Do not show administrative responsibilities as an excuse. The care of widows is a fundamental Christian obligation. When there was partiality reported in food distribution between Hebrew and Greek widows, the apostles did not at once jump into the arena.

They prudently appointed seven honest men for this job so they might “give themselves to *prayer* and to the ministry of the *Word*” (Acts 6:1-4). Are we wiser than the Apostles? Elders and senior members of the congregation have the responsibility to alert you if your sermons become anaemic and repetitive.

(b) Pray regularly for your congregational members by mentioning the name of each family. If that will be too much for you, share the list with your associate Pastors. A shepherd who does not know the sheep is not a “good shepherd” (Jn 10:14). He is only a “hireling” (vv12,13). Memorize the prayers Apostle Paul offered for the Churches and use them regularly on your knees with tears (Eph 1:15-23; Col 1:9-12). Praying Pastors beget praying people. Have fixed times for prayer when no family member or Church member can contact you. Do not carry your mobilephone into the prayer room (Mt 6:6). You must be known for your spiritual glow. Do not give time for all functions. Be selective. Do not come down from your calling to go house to house with fund-raising teams.

(c) Relate to the other Pastors in your town through friendly chats. We need each other very badly in the coming days. The present Government is watching us closely. Let’s learn from one another and pray for one another. Our enemy is not other denominations. Satan is our common enemy. Each Church or denomination has its strengths and weaknesses. Joab’s mutual understanding with Abishai his brother is one of the best examples to follow in these days of warfare in all fronts (1 Chr 19:12). The warmth of fellowship with other Pastors will help you maintain spiritual fitness lest you grow weary. Be regular in joining the monthly Pastors’ Fellowship meetings in your city. Quality time with your family is a must.

(d) The post-lockdown restrictions include the non-entry of those above 65 and below 10 into the worship places. In Parishes where resident Pastors or Vicars are unable to lead Services due to age limitation, alternative arrangements must be made. I wonder whether these regulations are Heaven-sent! It’s the time that aged Pastors bring the nextliners and youngsters to the front. If you are a Pastor of a free or an independent Assembly, don’t immediately think of your son bypassing other mature and experienced men with longstanding involvement in the Church affairs. Dynasty is not the New Testament model. Timothy and Titus were not Paul’s blood-relatives. Paul was a pure-blooded Jew. Timothy was only a half-Jew, with Jewish mother but Greek father (Acts 16:1). Titus was totally a non-Jew (Gal 2:3). Both these youngsters were only sons “in faith” for Paul the “aged” (1 Tim 1:2; Tit 1:4; Phile 9). We have simply too much of dead material in our Churches. Wanted youngsters to clear them (Acts 5:6,9,10). They act fast! Moses gracefully accepted God’s verdict that he would not enter Canaan. He immediately “prayed” for the next leader (Num 27:15-17). The instant answer from God was Joshua the “young man” (v18; Ex 33:11). Moses was of the tribe of Levi, but Joshua of Ephraim (Ex 2:1,2; 6:19,20; Num 13:8).

There are still several other leadership reforms to be initiated, but that would go beyond the scope of this article.

4. Empty Ritualism

Following the closure of the Churches, the TV Pastors, besides conducting online services, encouraged their parishioners to have extended family worship, family prayer

and family Bible meditation. Wonderful! Why didn't they recommend "family breadbreaking" also? What were they afraid of? Losing grip on people? Was not breadbreaking done "house to house" in the early Church? (Acts 2:46). Would it have been possible for just 12 apostles to conduct Communion Service for 3000 converts? (v41). Which house would have had halls for 250 Christians to congregate? When did we forsake this New Testament simplicity? If you did not encourage family breadbreaking during the lockdown, you are guilty of depriving God's children in your congregation of this blessed tangible act of "remembering" their Lord "as often as" they wanted "to proclaim His death till He returns" (1 Cor 11:24-26). "Breadbreaking" is as important as "Bible meditation, fellowship and prayers." We must "continue steadfastly" in all these four exercises (Acts 2:42).

"Giving" and "receiving" is not the New Testament pattern for Breadbreaking. Jesus "gave" the bread and the cup because those were emblems of His "own" body and His "own" blood (Mt 26:26-28; 1 Cor 11:23-25). No Pastor can take this place unless he is crucified for his congregation (1 Cor 1:13). It is the bread which "we" break, and the cup which "we" bless (10:16,17). Even when Jesus gave the cup to His disciples, He told them, "Take this and divide it among yourselves" (Lk 22:17). I remember a Tamil proverb: "Even if the Deity bestows a gift, the Priest would not pass it on!" Also, we are not to have any "altar," but only a "table" (Lk 22:21,30; 1 Cor 10:21). Jesus observed Passover in an unnamed man's "house" and instituted the "Lord's Supper" (Mt 26:18-20; Mk 14:13-17). He deliberately resorted to this ordinariness just in order that there should be no ritualistic flavour in this observance. By writing these lines, I'm taking the risk of poking the hornet's nest! I will lose friends and earn enemies (Gal 4:16).

There may be hundred and one questions relating to the Lord's Supper. Bread first or cup first? (Lk 22:17-19; 1 Cor 10:16). Wheat bread or rice cake? Grape juice or mango juice? Observance daily or weekly or monthly? (Acts 2:46; 20:7). The Lord's "Supper" in the morning or at lunchtime or dinnertime? And so on. I would discuss these issues in an exclusive article, "*Biblical Breadbreaking*." But for now, some simple procedures. The Government has advised Christians refrain from Holy Communion. Until the lockdown is totally lifted, Christians can break bread at home as a family or a group of families like a "House Church." Make sure that the participants are born again. (Read my article, "*House Churches*," sent as an attachment to the Online Letter 119, March 23, on the website: StanleyOnBible.com) After blessing the bread and the cup, just share them among yourselves. When the celebration of the Lord's Supper is restarted in the Churches, the Pastor may bless these emblems and pass them on to the pews through elders. After each member takes a bit and receives the tiny wine cup, the Pastor may say, "Let's all now eat and drink together in remembrance of the Lord!" The entire exercise would be over in just about ten minutes, even if it's a 1000-member congregation. Including the Pastor, all believers are fellow-priests (1 Pet 2:5,9; Ex 19:6; Rev 1:6; 5:10). Read my 56-page booklet, "*Here I stand!*", released in March 2017 at the 500th Anniversary of Protestant Reformation.

There are so many burdensome rituals the Church of Jesus Christ has to get rid of. Rituals do not make us more reverential before God, or bring us to a closer relationship with Him. Rather, they simply make us religious. Christianity is *not* a religion. The weakness of the Church is that it has become more ceremonial than spiritual. Even after salt loses its saltiness, it would still remain white and retain its crystalline structure. That's our deceptive condition.

5. Deadened Charity

The worst affected in the economic collapse due to the pandemic is the poorer sections of the society. This is always the case in any calamity. The Government and NGOs are appealing for contributions for uplifting the severely hit. Millionaires, Industrialists, Landlords, Businessmen, Actors and such affluent people are making fat donations. Thank God for this gesture. The Church must take the lead in charity, because “ours” is the God of the poor. Each Church has some charitable activity or the other. But we are far below God’s expectation as taught in the Bible.

Charity must be the first item in the Church budget. John the Baptist spoke of giving away 50% to the poor (Lk 3:10,11). Jesus Christ was happy when Zacchaeus promised to give away 50% of all his wealth to the poor (19:8,9). Jesus commanded the rich young ruler to distribute 100% of his wealth to the poor (18:22). The first generation Christians sold their possessions and goods, and brought 100% of the sale proceeds to be divided among the needy. This was the evidence of the Holy Spirit baptism (Acts 2:4,45). Apostle Paul commended the Macedonian Churches who “abounded in liberality” though in “deep poverty,” and gave “beyond their ability” (2 Cor 8:1-3). On the face of these Scriptural exhortations and examples, we are doing only a minimum if each Church allocates 50% of its total funds to bless the poor. Christ will weep over a congregation which does not incorporate this change in its spending pattern even after He has chastened us with COVID-19 outbreak.

America or Germany need not support our orphanages. If each Indian Christian family sponsors an orphan, we will not have enough orphans for sponsorship! The same principle can be applied to the Homes of the Destitute, Retarded, Differently Abled, etc., etc. We from India can even send help to nations much poorer than ours. “It is more blessed to give than to receive!” (Acts 20:35b). Give a wholesome lunch to the beggars at your Church gate after every Sunday Service. Give them the Gospel and send them happy. Let the beggars and platform-dwellers eat first in our special Church dinners. The congregational members can share the remaining food among themselves. Our cholesterol and sugar levels will come down! If I sound too radical, read what Jesus told a host who invited Him for a feast (Lk 14:12-14).

It’s sickening to watch Pastors in the online Church Services talking about tithes and offerings even before turning to the first Bible reference of their sermon! When did Christianity backslide so much and become commercial? Tithing is *not* taught in the New Testament as an obligation, though it’s a healthy practice (2 Cor 9:5,7). As such, there’s no instruction as to “where” the tithe should go. The oft-quoted text for tithing is Malachi 3:10, “Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house.” The “food” is for the “foodless” like the “landless Levites, strangers, orphans and widows,” who do not have regular source of income (Dt 14:28,29). What’s given to the poor is lent to the Lord (Prov 19:17). If an OT Jew gave a tenth of his income to God, the NT Christian must excel him because he is under a “better” covenant (Heb 7:22; 8:6). After supporting your local Church, you may distribute the money to the poor and various ministries of your choice. “*God loves a cheerful giver!*” — The context of this statement by Apostle Paul is charity (2 Cor 9:1,7,9). But we use this text primarily for raising funds for curtaining our altars, carpeting our floors, cushioning our pews, colouring our walls and conditioning our halls instead of covering the roofless or clothing

the clotheless! I urge Pastors to preach on charity atleast in one of the four Sunday Services of the month. Call for a Consultation Meet with your fellow-elders and senior brothers and sisters to plan positive actions. Christians need not route all their charity through the Church. The Lazarus at your doorstep is your personal and primary responsibility (Lk 16:20). Involve yourself directly as the good Samaritan to help the wounded, the weak and the wretched (10:30-35). Be a Dorcas who stitched and gifted dresses to poor widows in her personal capacity; it was not a Church project (Acts 9:36,39).

6. Wasteful Investments

Overinvestment in immovable properties sidetracks us from God-given vision. Buildings are necessary, but they can become stumbling blocks for missionary “movement.” It’s a worrisome observation that the Babel spirit is returning to Christendom. But the early Christians guarded themselves against this trend. If 3000 or 5000 believers contributed just “one-tenth,” the collection would have been enormous. So many thousands gave “ten-tenths!” The early Church had so much, but they didn’t think of erecting a mega-Church building to house the swelling crowd of believers (Acts 2:41; 4:4; 2:45; 4:32). Didn’t they have land space? Didn’t they have builders? The secret of their non-stop growth was “mobile” pulpits! A Church historian rightly said, “It was bricks which killed us!”

I have been saying all along, “In a country like India, it is safer to have five Church buildings to hold 1000 members each rather than a single building with a capacity of 5000! Destroying five buildings is more difficult than bombing just one. Four more new leaders would emerge.” Having come to the end of the age, more and more of our resources must be invested on people rather than on properties. Let’s be content with simple structures. (I’m a Building Engineer!) I beg Pastors and Preachers of Tamilnadu, Kerala and Andhra to invest their monies in mission fields in Northern States to build Churches, Schools, Clinics and the like. I will be happy to put you in touch with reliable Mission leaders.

7. Doctrinal Deviations

No other generation witnessed the surging of so many novel doctrines. This is of course in accordance with the prediction of the apostles (1 Tim 4:1; 2 Tim 4:2-4; 2 Pet 2:1-3; 3:1-4; Jude 17,18). The prosperity doctrine has caused greater damage than any other to the pure Gospel. It’s appealing even to idol-worshippers who have various gods and goddesses for wealth, wisdom and physical wellbeing. When we named the organisation I founded in 1971 as “Blessing” Youth Mission, we had God’s promise to Abraham in mind, how God would bless him in order to make him a “blessing” to all the “families, peoples and nations” (Gen 12:1-3). And the promise of Ezekiel 34:26 was to make “the places all around” God’s people a “blessing.” But every other Christian programme today has the word “blessing” attached to its name, forgetting the missionary purpose in these two passages. The sugar-coated pills don’t heal people’s spiritual ills. Deplorably several Pastors have set aside the solid edification messages and preach this Gospel according to Lucifer even in the Sunday Services. Exhilarating music and exciting worship cover up this malady. Dear Pastor friend, never adopt any crowd-pulling technique. “Preach the Word!” (2 Tim 4:2a). This means strong teaching which “convinces, rebukes and exhorts” (v2b).

Satan usually pours out false doctrines from his lying mouth as a “flood” (Isa 59:19). Our people are sheepish; they can be easily swayed along. Raise a flag against any questionable teaching, with the help of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth. Check the doctrine at the initial stage itself by organizing a Consultation Meet with fellow-Pastors and Bible Teachers similar to the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:6). The outcome as a Declaration should be widely circulated in all denominations (v23). The apparent absence of such an exercise gives the enemy a free hand who causes irreparable damage to “the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

I urge you Pastors to have sufficient doctrinal content in each of your sermons (2 Tim 3:15; Tit 2:1). Take the believers from milk-stage to meat-stage (Heb 5:13,14). Away with extempore preaching! Do not climb the pulpit without well-outlined sermon notes prepared in your prayer closet and study. Teach the congregation, “How to Meditate the Bible” as well as “How not to Meditate.” The ministry of every minister is to make every believer a minister (Eph 4:11-13). You are a Pastor-Teacher; get also Apostolic vision, Prophetic insight and Evangelistic zeal into your congregation by inviting these ministers to your Church or connecting your believers to them in whatever way possible. Only then you can provide pasture to your sheep “in and out” (Jn 10:3,9). The Church must not become a clutch! Your labour to present every man perfect in Christ Jesus would be richly rewarded when the Chief Shepherd appears (Col 1:28,29; 1 Pet 5:2-4). Both in Greek and Latin, “Corona” means “Crown!” It’s a crown of thorns! But what the Chief Shepherd would give you is a “Crown of Glory!” (1 Pet 5:4).

Closing Lines

The Church that is, is not the Church that was. And the Church that is, is not the Church that should be. Our Churches need many more changes than which are pointed out in this article. But these seven call for immediate action. The city of Chennai is the Jerusalem of India with maximum number of Churches, Denominations, Missions, Ministries, Programmes and Preachers. The uncontrollable rise of COVID-19 cases here makes us ask, “Is God angry with this city or weeping over it?” (Lk 19:41,42). In my opinion, Chennai Christianity has drifted more than Indian Christianity from Biblical pattern. I beseech Pastors and Church leaders to have self-testing with this write-up for themselves and their flocks. Don’t be a status-quoist. Let’s arise and move forward! I request my dear readers to pray much for me as I am working on a treatise, “*Bible Church*,” since April 2018. The progress is slow but steady. You know it’s a difficult and delicate subject. Arrows of discouragement keep piercing me. But under God I am at it. We have God’s promise: “The glory of the latter temple shall be greater than the former!” (Hagg 2:9a).

(This Article is available in Tamil also.)

Kindly see the attachments to Online Letters 127 to 131 for the earlier 17 Articles.)

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