

## “Back to the Future”

Ecclesiastes 7:10

6/27/10

Why were the former days better than these?

About 11 or 12 years ago I asked Carl Carey, who is now in his late 90's, to share with me what it was like for him as a young man to work out in the field during the harvest. Harvesting—what I call the old fashioned way, which may not be appreciated by some people here, but compared to the technology we have today I think that terminology is appropriate. A person first had to go out into the field, tools in hand, and stand on ground level amidst the crops. The farmer became tired, hot, and dirty from cutting down the crops and gathering them up all day long out in the heat. Carl said that he spent all day out in the fields in his bare feet.

I'm sure there are plenty of folks here this morning that could add a lot more of what it was like to work like that years ago. You know, the “good old days.”

Do you ever think about the “good old days”? Is there such a thing?

Ah, the wonderful magic of nostalgia. I know I am not that old—only 40! But I certainly get caught up in thinking about events or days gone by and think how great they were. And there were some great things about them, that's why we remember former days fondly.

But my dad said it well recently. We were walking through Garst Museum, looking at all the old farming equipment and household tools. He looked at me and said, “You know, so many times people say those were the ‘good old days. Everything was simpler and all that.’” He said, “Yes, in some ways things were simpler, but they were not *all* good. We worked hard. We didn't have much. It wasn't so Normal Rockwell as we like to make it.”

Yes, I certainly hope you have had many good days in your past. There are many good days I can name that I enjoy recalling. It's just when we take that to a different level that we start to hurt ourselves today.

**When we think the former days were somehow better, we lose sight of where we are going now.**

That's why Ecclesiastes 7:10 says, “*Do not say, ‘Why were the former days better than these? For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.’*”

Because God is on the move, here, now, creating, leading us into tomorrow.

**How limited our vision can be, so much that we look backwards instead of forward.**

Why do we think the former days were better?

I mean, I know it's easy to do. Certainly as I look at the news with all that's happening in the world today, fast-paced, crime, anything-goes philosophy on life, I can begin to understand why you might want to go back in time. But it just takes a minute to see that with all the good, every generation also has its challenges to be sure.

We certainly do that within the church, too. “I remember the days when...” “Things aren't like they used to be...” No, they're not. Thank God for that! Because God is about transformation—making things new, leading us into tomorrow by building on what we have done yesterday and today. And often times, as we know in our own lives, that transformation can be difficult to embrace. Because then we have to let go of what we knew before, even when it may not have been all good.

One of my favorite stories of God's people is of their journey from freedom from slavery in Egypt to the promised land.

The Israelites are slaves to Egypt for over 400 years. Generations of God's people knew only the hardships of being subject to another's rule. Finally God calls Moses to go and lead them out to freedom.

Moses and Miriam sing their songs of praise to God that they are free, and how great God's power is for all time. Tambourines. Dancing.

Then, three days later, the complaining begins. They have no water, so God provides them with water. A month and a half later, as they traveled through the wilderness, as it says in Exodus 16:2, "*The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, 'If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.'*"

If only we would have died slaves! Rather than deal with some hardship for a little while, knowing that the Promised Land awaits. Never mind that, never mind that God has already done amazing things before our very eyes, never mind that God promised us a place of beauty, let's just go back.

Clearly, we as humans do not always do well with transition, even when we know it is to a better place. We want to go back to what we knew, even though it enslaved us. We doubt God's ability to lead us.

Why? Well, maybe today there are tough things going on. Maybe today you don't feel good. Today everything seems out of whack, out of order, or maybe just plain boring. We know that the church—the Church around the world—faces our challenge of who we are within this changing world. Certainly we are feeling that in the Church of the Brethren: We know from whence we came, but what's up ahead?

And sometimes, instead of completely letting go and letting God lead, our necks get sore from straining to look backward.

Interesting little thought I saw the other day: Even Stephen Hawking, genius theoretical physicist, said that if time travel were possible we could only travel into the future. In his brilliant knowledge and imagination, he says, even physically, going backwards is not possible.

**We are created to travel in only one direction: forward.**

When we try to hang onto the past, we chain ourselves to it and lose out on great things God is up to right now.

Because you see, God is in the transformation business.

**Transformation is looking expectantly at what God is up to now and where we are going.**

I mean, who did Jesus ever leave the same? How did Jesus transform?

Read Acts 10, when God reveals His vision to Peter on the rooftop. A vision that meant Peter was going to help lead the way in transforming the church, breaking down barriers of the old Law so that Jews and Gentiles alike could know the freedom we have in Christ.

Go back a chapter in Acts to chapter 9 and read about how Saul was transformed into Paul by an encounter with Jesus—from persecuting the believers to becoming one of the greatest leaders of the early church.

Read John 3, as Jesus talks with the Pharisee, Nicodemus, one night. Jesus said, "*For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son.*"—transforming what we think about who can be saved and how that happens. Love for this dirty, stinking world. Enough that He even transformed death into new and glorious life.

Transformation.

Is His church any different?

The 1708 Brethren—our original eight—experienced transformation as they stepped away from the institutional church in Germany and followed Christ into a whole new world of caring for one another, baptizing adults, striving for peace, reading and studying Scripture together. It makes me think: Did the early Brethren set up “traditions”? Or were they simply following Christ?

Today, technology has transformed how we communicate and think about community. Transformation. We have to ask ourselves honestly:

Are we committed to institutional survival, or committed to life with Christ? Do we want to manage committees, or deploy missions? Do we train people for membership, or equip persons for a lifelong quest for quality? Are we merely eager to know everyone in church, or truly eager for everyone to know God? Is our focus to perpetuate a heritage, or pursue a vision?

We talk about thinking “outside the box”. Let me tell you, our culture today has burned the box. They have long since moved beyond the usual ways of communicating, processing information, understanding our world. Jesus was always ahead of where the people were in their lives and in society. The crowds ran to Him because they saw something new and different. They saw that He had the power to lead them out of their mundane, ordinary, hurting lives and into something great. Jesus was and still is a Leader, The Leader.

What has happened with the church that we seem to always lag behind society these days? Our call is to lead people, not just offer what we have as another alternative or choice to the rest of the cultural mix. We must follow The Leader, see the signs He is doing here, and get excited about it.

Proverbs 29:18: *"Where there is no vision the people perish."*

Jesus Christ is whom we have chosen to follow and who transformed us as a small group of believers into “church” as Christ created.

Not based on authority of man, but God.

Not based on one leader, but the community of faith, the Body, all equal, together.

Ephesians 2:19-22 says, *“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”*

Joined together and grows.

Yes, we have a foundation we are built upon. Praise God for that! Jesus Christ as the cornerstone. But we are to grow. It’s the ebb and flow of life, where with each new generation transformation occurs. The fruit is harvested, the tree pruned, only to grow and produce new, fresh fruit for the world to taste and see that it is good.

Where are you in your life? Where are we as the church?

One day, years from now, these will be the good old days. What will future generations say? What will we have built for them to grow upon? Will we be free in Christ to say, “Now you must listen to God and be transformed”?

Get your shoes on. Get up and get involved. Let’s join God and take that first step back to the future. Amen.