

BOOK REVIEW

PREPARING FOR CHANGE REACTION: HOW TO INTRODUCE CHANGE IN YOUR CHURCH

By BOB WHITESEL

Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House (2007)

Paperback, 222 pages

Reviewed by Stan Patterson

Preparing for Change Reaction is designed as a primer to equip church leaders with the tools needed to deal with common reactions to the prospect of change. Each chapter concludes with a collection of group study questions to be used as a means of proactively preparing a congregation or its leaders for the challenges of change. These questions address the necessary role of change, the mechanics of change, a biblical understanding of change, and the theology that undergirds it.

Whitesel introduces his core change concept as follows: “The success of church change depends upon addressing change reactions (Strategy A) by producing a mutually acceptable statement of change boundaries (Strategy B) (Whitesel, 2007, p. 18).” The ten change reactions listed by the author represent the common resistant responses of congregants to the prospect of change. The statement of change boundaries (SCB) is a summary document produced by the church to reflect the boundaries unique to the core values of the congregation beyond which change will not be considered.

The book addresses the change reactions by building a theology of change with which each specific reaction is addressed. Whitesel’s theology of change concludes that God is immutable in four distinct ways: (1) in His permanence and life; (2) in the essential nature of who He is; (3) in His will; and (4) in His character (p. 86). He is, however, open to change in two significant ways—His relational connection to a person

and His chosen course of action can be different than a course of action previously announced. Both of these change types are, however, consistent with the four immutable aspects mentioned above. This willingness to change on God's part is presented by Whitesel as essential to the process of grace and human salvation. These two ways in which God does change comprise the last two of eight types of biblical change (p. 97) that the church may need to address:

1. Change due to decline or deterioration
2. Change in location
3. Changes in quality
4. Change due to growth or improvement
5. Change of knowledge
6. Change in beliefs
7. Relational change
8. Change by taking different action than previously

Each of these change types is supported in the theology of change and is presented along with biblical illustrations for each.

The transition from Whitesel's presentation of a theology of change to the methods of application seems a bit disconnected and confusing. The author uses his experience as a parent to discuss the tensions and challenges of change in the family context as a microcosm of the change challenges faced by the church. The need for parents to demonstrate the steadfastness of character, being, and will left too many gaps to be filled where parents tend to poorly reflect the character and nature of God. What did come across well was a detailed description of the process by which the statement of change boundaries becomes a reality. This proactive approach to preparing a congregation for change by anticipating change before it happens adds a proactive element to pastoral leadership that could make a significant difference when faced with leading change. Establishing the unique boundaries that limit change apart from the emotionally charged context that can accompany change comes across as wise and prudent.

A valuable methodological offering in this book, tucked away in the first part of the book rather than in the method section, is the discussion of the three levels of leadership in the church—strategic, tactical, operational—and how each contributes to the success of the change process. Whitesel's assessment is that the church has an abundance of strategic (visionary) leaders and operational leaders (workers) but is

sorely lacking in the area of competent tactical leaders with the organizational skills to serve the implementation process between strategic (usually the pastor/staff) and operational leaders. “[Tactical leaders] then become our crucial—and missing—link in effective change,” he says. “If they are missing, change strategies are not applied to the local context, and the process is unorganized” (p. 45). Whitesel recommends that before a change initiative is introduced, the issue of identifying and orienting the tactical leaders who can map out the change process for the operational leaders should be thoroughly addressed. The pastor should generally not fill the tactical role.

The final two chapters are both helpful additions. One deals with the burgeoning need for pastoral education to include a stronger element of management and administrative training to meet the increasingly sophisticated context of congregational leadership. The other explores the need for pastors to implement intentional plans to stay connected with church and community as a means of being in touch with attitudes and perceptions related to the church and the need for change.

This book has value for the pastor leader who will struggle with the challenges of change—which means all of us who are called to that ministry role. Of all that this volume has to offer, I found the theology of change most helpful. What reduced the value for me was unrelated to content but rather to the perceived lack of careful editorial oversight. As mentioned earlier, the transition from Part 2 (theology) to Part 3 (methods) was awkward and a bit confusing. In several cases elements of the content were referenced before they were presented, leaving an immediate gap in understanding and a page-flipping reaction to find the referred to item only to discover that it had not yet been discussed. In addition, there were numerous typographical errors that were overlooked by the editors of the publication. Curiously, the table of contents had no page numbers listed.

Even with those perceived limitations, I would recommend this book by Bob Whitesel as a valuable tool in strengthening the pastor as a proactive leader of change and as a contribution to the overall spiritual leadership of God’s church.