

In 1985, a company named Blockbuster began to rent new movie releases on a medium called VHS. By the year 2,000, the company had 9,000 stores and 84,000 employees. Along the way, they innovated by promoting the new video medium called DVD. But when the company was presented with the chance to buy a young video creation company named Netflix, the CEO said it was too much of an investment for too little potential return. Today Netflix has 100 million subscribers and is worth \$8 billion. Blockbuster no longer exists.

The list of similar failures abounds: Toys R Us, Pan Am, Kmart, Sears, Radio Shack, Circuit City. And those are just the big names. Think of all the local businesses you loved that closed well before the pandemic. At the same time other companies are not only still in business but thriving. The auto industry is a perfect example. General Motors, Plymouth, Pontiac, and Mercury all closed down. But others are now not only continuing to make new models but many of them run entirely on electricity!

The need for innovation is not just a necessity for businesses however. Infants need to grow according to certain measurements. Students need to move from one level of school to the next. And adults need to grow in wisdom if they want to be competent in a world that is moving on to new things every day. Even the Church is not immune to this reality, no matter how steadfast church people may declare in the face of needed change “*we’ve never done it that way before.*” But throughout history, all too many congregations have balked at making the changes necessary to carry out mission and ministry as the world changed. And as a result, too many congregations have dwindled down to the point that they were forced to make the decision to close their church.

As we turn to the last chapter of Thom Rainer’s book, The Post Quarantine Church, he invites us to look at how we might make sure we do not end up in that situation by inviting us to “Make Lasting Changes That Will Make a Difference.” But the kinds of changes he is talking about are not things like live streaming services or making activities available on Zoom. The changes he is talking about are mind-set changes, vision changes, and the willingness to do what needs to be done even when it means swallowing hard because “*we’ve never done it this way before.*” Not because HE says we have to do things that way, but because GOD says we have to do things that way if we want to continue to be the Body of Christ in a changing world. We see this in Acts.

In chapters 13 and 14 of the book of Acts, Luke tells how Paul left Antioch for Asia Minor on the first missionary journey, with the highlight being the planting of a church in Galatia - to whom he would later write a letter that is included in the Bible. As chapter 16 begins, Luke tells us how Paul had just set out on his second missionary journey. Like his first journey, Paul had an itinerary, with Luke telling us Paul said to Barnabas “*let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.*” As chapter 16 opens, Luke therefore tells us Paul visited the people he led to Christ in Derbe and Lystra. He tells us Paul went to “*the region of Phrygia and Galatia*” to meet with the people there that he had led into relationship with Jesus. But, then Luke writes two curious statements.

He tells us “*Paul and his companions*” were “*kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia.*” And he tells us that “*the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to*” go to Bithynia. What happened to cause them to conclude they were being “*kept from preaching the word in the province of Asia*” we don’t know. And what the Spirit did to “*not allow them to*” go to Bithynia is also vague. All we know is that something happened that caused “*Paul and his companions*” to see the leading of God to change their planned itinerary, and to “*coddiwomple*” their way through that second missionary journey - not knowing exactly what their destination might be. As a result, Luke tells us that after “*Paul and his companions*” had “*passed by Mysia and went down to Troas,*” Paul “*had a vision of a man . . . begging him, ‘Come over to Macedonia.’*” So they went to Macedonia, “*concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.*” How they did their concluding is what we need to look at today.

That is because the way “*Paul and his companions*” concluded that God wanted them to preach the gospel to the Macedonians is what this week’s chapter in Thom Rainer’s book is all about. For in that chapter, Rainer explains that to follow God’s leading in an ever changing world we need to not only be willing to swallow hard because “*we’ve never done it this way before,*” but also be willing to make the necessary changes to what we are currently doing to actually move into doing things in new ways. One way he says we do that is to keep our eyes focused on the fact that while the world around us may seem to be constantly changing “*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.*” For that is what gives us hope in the midst of the chaos of a changing world, as God will be the steady hand that guides us through the turmoil of change.

Another way Rainer says we must do this is by remembering that the PURPOSE of the Church is to focus on the people outside its walls and not those inside. For that is how we live out not only the Great Commission to “*make disciples,*” but also the Great Commandment to “*love God*” and “*love neighbor.*” And Rainer also says one more way we must do this is by looking to the future and not the past. For while churches often say young people are the future of the church, too many decisions still get made to cater the interests of those who have been there for decades. And then they wonder why ‘young people’ don’t respond to the bait they’re using to fish. To respond to the call to “*Make Lasting Changes That Will Make a Difference*” in a not quite post-quarantine world, I would suggest that today’s Acts passage invites us to respond in three ways.

First, I think the passage in Acts suggests that we have to be agile in handling issues. “*Paul and his companions*” didn’t stop their journey to schedule a committee meeting for the following Tuesday. They didn’t send word back to Antioch for instructions from the church leaders that had sent them out on this journey. And they didn’t just sit there because the thing they had done before was no longer working as a method to “*fish for men.*” Luke tells us that “*after Paul had seen the vision,*” they “*got ready AT ONCE to leave for Macedonia.*”

Last March, we had to do something similar. Between Sundays, the state health department advised us to cease in-person activities. We didn’t have time to arrange a Charge Conference. And we didn’t even have time to schedule a meeting for the following Tuesday. We had to make a decision right away. So we did something new: I sent out a text message to the Leadership Team and we

made a decision through that medium. Over the next few months, we also used email to make important decisions in an expeditious manner, and then met over Zoom. While the next year may not put us in the same dire need to make instant decisions, we can't go back to talking about things for several meetings before making decisions. We must become more agile.

Second, I think the Acts passage suggests that we learn to accept change. When "*Paul and his companions*" were "*kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia,*" and felt that "*the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to*" go to Bithynia, they did not moan. They did not whine. And they did not become disagreeable. They just changed where they were headed. Over the last year, we had to accept change because we had no choice. The state had power to order us to do things. The virus had power to make us respond certain ways. And the call to "*love one another*" had the power to push us to go along with it all because it was the Christian thing to do. After all, Jesus called us to lay down our lives and pick up our cross, and the changes we had to make were nowhere close to sacrificing in that way. In this next year, I think we must be willing to accept the changes that will need to be made if we want to continue to "*make disciples*" in a world that will not return to how it was in the glory days of ages past.

Finally, I think the Acts passage suggests that we do what needs to be done. When "*Paul had a vision*" he and "*his companions*" made the decision to head to Macedonia "*at once.*" They didn't first schedule a committee meeting for the following Tuesday. They didn't send word to Antioch for instructions from the leaders who had sent them out. And they didn't just sit there doing nothing because the thing they had done before was no longer working as a method to "*fish for men.*" They just changed course, and headed to Macedonia.

And it was a good thing they did go to Macedonia. Biblical scholars note that in this section of the book of Acts, the pronouns change from "*he*" and "*them*" to "*us*" and "*we.*" Biblical scholars say this because when "*Paul and his companions*" went to Macedonia, Luke (who was a Gentile) somehow joined them. And because he was able to join "*Paul and his companions,*" Luke either became a Christian from their witness or was so deepened in his faith that he was able to eventually write two books of the Bible (the gospel that bears his name and the book of Acts). For those are the kinds of miracles God not only brought about long ago when His followers were willing to be agile, accept change, and do what need to be done. They are also the kinds of miracles God will continue to bring about here at Christ Church if we are willing to be agile in handling issues, willing to accept change, and then work to do what needs to be done.

As we seek to do this however, there is a major pitfall that we will need to avoid. We see this pitfall in the saga of Oldsmobile. In the 1980's Oldsmobile realized that the desires of younger consumers was changing in terms of the kinds of cars they wanted. They also realized that the age of people buying their cars was growing older each year. So, in 1988, Oldsmobile ran an ad campaign that declared the cars they were now producing were "*Not Your Father's Oldsmobile,*" and promising that these cars were "*a new generation of Olds.*" Which on the surface sounded good. It sounded like Oldsmobile was willing to change. It sounded like Oldsmobile would now make cars for people who were not already retired. And it sounded like Oldsmobile was going to make cars that met the

desires of younger generations of automobile owners. But it wasn't true.

Oldsmobile engineers continued to design "new" car models for an older consumer base. Sure, the new cars had new bells and whistles. The "new" cars had new electronic gadgets. And the "new" cars got better mileage than their old gas guzzlers. But these "new" cars were not a "*new generation of Olds*" products. They were just the old generation gussied up to look young. And younger generations saw through the ruse. So they did not buy Oldsmobiles. A few years later, this caused Oldsmobile to cease making cars for any generation of consumers and shut down.

As we ready ourselves to move into the not quite "post-quarantine" world of 2022, I therefore invite you to ask God to help you with three things. I invite you to ask God to help you - and your church - BE AGILE IN HANDLING ISSUES. I invite you to ask God to help you - and your church - ACCEPT CHANGE. And I invite you to ask God to help you - and your church - to DO WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE.

For that is how we will "coddiwomple" our way not just through 2022, but through the next 22 years, and every year after that. That is because until Jesus comes back, the world around us will continue to change. And that change may not only increase in speed, it will require us to respond in these ways again and again. May we therefore be brave enough to commit to this way of life "*at once*" as "*Paul and his companions*" did so long ago so that new "Lukes" may enter into relationship with Jesus, grow as His disciples, and themselves then go on to "make disciples" through the new ways they develop to tell the gospel story to yet another generation.