

What Happened to My Bell-Bottoms?

How Things That Were Never Going to Change Have Sometimes Changed Anyway, and How Studying History Can Help Us Make Sense of It All

Craig Harline

A lot of years ago, I climbed into an airport van in St. Louis with eight or nine other historians who had been attending the famous Sixteenth Century Society Conference. We chatted merrily, telling hilarious inside jokes about our favorite century, until the driver of the van suddenly boomed out, “So whadda y’all been doing here?” Silence. We all knew exactly what we and six hundred other historians had been doing here: talking about the sixteenth century. But we weren’t sure how to explain that to a normal person. Finally somebody had the nerve to say, “We all study the sixteenth century.” Silence again. Mindful of his tips, the driver finally said politely, “Well, I guess somebody’s gotta do it,” and stepped on it.

That event and nine hundred others like it made a big impact on me. Historians do actually have good and even socially responsible reasons for doing what we do, but we don’t always stop to think about them, maybe partly because the reasons seem pretty self-evident to us, and maybe mostly because what we really want to do is get back to work. So maybe out of laziness, or a little desperation, we plaster the walls of history departments with tired old platitudes, like “Whoever doesn’t learn from the past is condemned to repeat it, blah blah blah,”¹ and hope that

1. Even this famous statement, by George Santayana (minus the blah blah blah), turns out not to be entirely helpful, because it suggests that if you *do* remember the past then you somehow won’t repeat it—a suggestion that has been disproven over and over again in history. Maybe this was what Stephen Colbert had in mind when he said, “There’s an old saying about those who forget history. I don’t remember it, but it’s good.” *The Colbert Report*, March 10, 2008.

2013 Hickman Lecture

This article was originally presented in somewhat different form (with a lot more visual aids) as the Martin B. Hickman Outstanding Scholar Lecture at BYU in March 2013. This annual lecture, sponsored by the College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences, is named in honor of a former dean of the college, who is considered the founder of BYU's American Heritage Program and who was also instrumental in creating the Women's Research Institute, the David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies, the Family Studies Center, and other significant research efforts. The lecture was established to recognize annually a distinguished member of the college faculty who emulates Hickman's example.



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these will satisfy potential critics. Or if you're lucky, you don't even have to explain why you study the particular bit of history that you study, because your particular bit happens to be something that normal people think is important, like something to do with their country, or their religion, or their family, or historical celebrities they have heard of, or of course war. But what if your particular bit of history, like mine, stars obscure people who lived in Europe a lot of obscure centuries ago? Or what if your motto for choosing a research subject might as well be "anything that sounds exciting or that you've heard of, I probably don't study"?

Well, then you've got some serious explaining to do, and that's where we, including me, don't always do a very good job of things, as the scene in the airport van demonstrated. The Hickman lecture is as good a moment as any to try doing some of that explaining, to try saying what your particular bit of research, and even your discipline in general, might be good for. Contrary to what assorted family members and friends think, studying history is not just good for becoming a whiz at Jeopardy or other parlor games that will make you the life of any

party. It's not even just good for those old reliables, "developing writing and analytical skills," because a lot of disciplines can do that. No, what studying history is most good for, even really old history, is the insight it can give you into life right now.

Maybe the most fundamental insight really old history has to offer is some perspective on change. All historians study change, of course. Sure, they study the past, but what they're really studying is change in the past, in every realm of life. The books I've written are mostly about changes in European religions during the Reformation, while one looks at changes in Sunday practice over dozens of centuries.² What my current bit of research is about, though,³ and what I want to address here, is not a particular sort of change in a particular place and time, but the fact of change itself. What's to be learned from the very fact that things change, especially really big things that people thought would never change? Especially really big things in my favorite realms of study, religion and culture?

You don't have to study really old history to notice really big religious and cultural change, of course. Just about anyone halfway paying attention in life will see change happen right before his or her eyes, from one generation to another. You all know how it goes: you grow up learning how your parents do and see things. You mostly go along until you get a little older, when you start doing and seeing things more like your friends. You even get the exciting feeling that you and your friends are helping to fix what's wrong with your parents' world, especially in the obvious ways of clothing and hairstyles and music and dancing and movies but also in their more abstract values: you're not just making the world different, but better! Your parents are of course alarmed at what your generation is doing and don't believe for one second that your changes are better at all: in fact they believe it's their job to save you from those changes. You yourself don't accept *all* the changes going on, but you're not threatened by them the way your parents are, so that even if

2. My books are *The Burdens of Sister Margaret: Private Lives in a Seventeenth-Century Convent* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000); *A Bishop's Tale* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000); *Miracles at the Jesus Oak* (New York: Doubleday, 2003); *Sunday: A History of the First Day from Babylonia to the Super Bowl* (New York: Doubleday, 2007; paperback, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2011); *Conversions: Two Family Stories from the Reformation and Modern America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2011).

3. Meaning that I am planning to write a book on this subject, featuring many of the case studies discussed later in this article.



FIGURE 1 (left). The author with long hair and short sleeves, ready for prom, 1973. FIGURE 2 (center). The author and his mom, appropriately dressed to visit the Oakland Temple, 1975. FIGURE 3 (right). The author in some other chic bell-bottoms, in France, 1979.

you're, say, a Mormon boy in the 1960s and '70s, you can pick and choose the changes you like and feel great about it, like maybe longer hair,⁴ or obscenely colorful clothes, or stunningly wide bell-bottoms and lapels that require way more than your rightful share of the earth's sustainable textiles to make (figs. 1, 2, 3). Or if you're a Mormon girl maybe you have epic battles over skirt lengths and nylons because your parents are sure they mean one thing and you're sure they mean something else. And all of this struggle is not because you're necessarily trying to get your parents mad or because you think *everything* about your new culture is great but because a lot of it just feels natural and right and *normal*. You're not *completely* different from your parents, but as you get into your late teens and early twenties you're different enough that when you hear them talking to their friends, you understand the words but think to yourself, "What in the world are they talking about?" In the

4. For an interesting example of how attitudes toward long hair changed over time, especially in one period in American history, see D. Hickey, "The United States Army versus Long Hair," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 101 (1977): 462–74, which shows that a traditionally minded soldier refused to cut his long hair, infuriating progressives who wanted it short (thanks to Neil York for the reference). At other times in European history too there is evidence of conservative-minded people favoring long hair—which might have come as a surprise to conservatives of the 1960s and '70s, for instance.

end, you revel in the changes that you and yours have made, proud of your absolutely necessary innovations in music and clothing and values.

Then you get married and have kids, and you're sure those kids will thank you for what your generation hath wrought by doing things pretty much the way you did. But then your very own flesh and blood somehow don't appreciate how hip and progressive you are, so unlike your own old-fashioned parents. And pretty soon you're sitting around with your friends, shaking your heads and saying, "Kids these days!" You complain about their music and language and dancing and wonder why they even bother to wear pants if they're not going to pull them up? And one of your friends will try to find a little hope by saying, "Well, our parents said the same things about us," but everybody will shout that down and say, "That's different! What we changed *needed* to be changed, but this new stuff is *really* bad," basically expressing no faith that maybe your kids can negotiate their emerging culture the same way you negotiated yours. At least you get a little relief at the grocery store, where your really innovative and edgy music is now playing all the time, if at subdued levels, maybe even some Santana or Fleetwood Mac, and you think as you roll through the fruits and vegetables bobbing your head off-beat, "Now *this* is good music," instead of thinking that "Gee, maybe my really edgy music is playing in the grocery store because it's safe and boring now, just like Perry Mason and the Lucy Show, instead of because it's good." But you're still so sure it's good that you and your friends keep running to concerts of Santana and Fleetwood Mac and the Rolling Stones, and you'll keep running until you, just like the bands, are wearing Depends Adult Diapers. Meanwhile, back home, you're still trying to influence your kids; they don't reject everything about you, but they're different enough that when they're in their late teens and early twenties and you hear them talking to their friends, you understand the words but think to yourself, "What in the world are they talking about?" Soon even your fashion-changing wife is turning on you, trying to get you to wear straight-legged pants like normal people; you feel the moral fiber leave your body when you try those pants on, which are not the true and natural shape of pants but merely the latest fashion. In not too many years you're concluding that the decline going on all around you is probably the biggest such decline in the history of the world and that the end is near. You grumble at the theatre, at the restaurant, and even in front of the TV, wishing things were as good as they once were. And in the end you might as well be saying with the Venerable Jorge, the blind old monk in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, "There is no progress . . . , merely a continuous and sublime recapitulation."

Two famous songs from the '70s say all this a little more pithily. One is by Mama Cass, joyously singing, "There's a new world coming, And it's just around the bend, There's a new world coming, This one's coming to an end," while the second was made famous by Archie and Edith Bunker, who melancholically sang, "Those were the days," lamenting the disappearance of all the familiar things they knew. Those are the twin theme songs of every generation: when you're young, a thrill about the new world you're helping to bring about, and then, later on in life, real sadness that it seems to be disappearing.

What studying really old history does is to help us see beyond the usual sorts of generational change we notice in our own lifetimes and also to make sense of it all—to understand how change happens and how we might respond to it. Most of us make our judgments about religious and cultural change around us and how those changes fit into the whole history of the world based on the really short, severely limited, and hugely egocentric perspective of our own tiny lifetime. But if we take a closer look at change over the long haul, maybe we can understand better how change happens in any time, including our own. And save ourselves a lot of money on Prozac too.

Among other things, a long look at change makes you a lot more reluctant to make declarations about which changes represent progress or decline, or about which generation is superior to another. You'd have to lay out all the deeds and values of every generation to draw reliable conclusions about these. And even if you managed to lay out all those deeds, which generation's standard of right and wrong would you use to judge them? Every generation is pretty sure of its superiority to others, and yet every generation has, usually without knowing it, accepted as right things which previous generations thought were wrong, and vice versa. For instance, in the mid-nineteenth century it was a good idea to put young boys in dresses for pictures (fig. 4); this is a boy, Heber J. Grant, in 1860. But many parents today might not think it a good idea to dress a boy like that.⁵ You could of course call in some objective judge of right and wrong to settle these disagreements, and

5. See A. Fletcher, *Gender, Sex, and Subordination in England, 1500–1800* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), for more on general attitudes toward gender and dress (thanks to Amy Harris for this reference), and also S. J. Pearson, "‘Infantile Specimens’: Showing Babies in Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of Social History* 42 (Winter 2008): 341–70, for more on dressing babies in the United States (thanks to Rebecca de Schweinitz for that reference).

in the West the favorite has been the Christian Bible—but that can be tricky because interpretations of the Bible have themselves changed over the centuries.

So if progress or decline doesn't necessarily explain change, what does? Scholars have tried some helpful but dreary-sounding theories like "cohort replacement" and "informational cascades."⁶ I'm in the early stages of developing my own ideas, but so far I'm leaning toward the idea that it might be helpful to understand change not as decline or progress but as a sort of reconfiguration, or as the book of Acts puts it, a time of refreshing.⁷ People start



FIGURE 4. Heber J. Grant, about age four, c. 1860. Courtesy Church History Library.

6. I'm not even close to being one of the first to think about how and why things change. A famous philosophical approach was Nietzsche's famous *On the Genealogy of Morality*, while a not-quite-as-ambitious historical example is W. Hartpole Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne* (New York: 1869). A popular example is Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point* (New York: Little, Brown, 2000). Academic and more empirically driven studies of change per se are vast and dominated by sociologists, anthropologists, and economic and political theorists: examples include S. Bikhchandani, D. Hirshleifer, and I. Welch, "A Theory of Fads, Fashion, Custom, and Cultural Change as Informational Cascades," *Journal of Political Economy* 100 (October 1992): 992–1026; R. Boudon, "Why Theories of Social Change Fail: Some Methodological Thoughts," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 47 (Summer 1983): 143–60; P. Garonna and U. Triacca, "Social Change: Measurement and Theory," *International Statistical Review/Revue Internationale de Statistique* 67 (April 1999): 49–62; R. Inglehart and W. E. Baker, "Modernization, Cultural Change, and the Persistence of Traditional Values," *American Sociological Review* 65 (February 2000): 19–51; M. D. Sahllins, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981) (thanks to Ed Stratford for that reference); G. Lenski, "History and Social Change," *American Journal of Sociology* 82 (November 1976): 548–64; W. E. Moore, "A Reconsideration of Theories of Social Change," *American Sociological Review* 25 (December 1960): 810–18; M. David-Fox, "What Is Cultural Revolution?" *Russian Review* 58 (April 1999): 181–201; D. Gartman, "Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Change: Explication, Application, Critique," *Sociological Theory* 20 (July 2002): 255–77.

7. Acts 3:19, "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord."

seeing old things differently and seeing new things because they ask new questions, often because of new conditions around them; then they work their new way of seeing into a new system of right and wrong. I searched for a way to illustrate this idea visually and came up with an elaborate chart showing a system of “dynamic reconfiguration,” but decided that a better image was one my grandchildren might understand: a snow globe. When it’s at rest, you see a blissfully peaceful scene inside, but when you shake it up the scene becomes chaotic, until the snow descends and a new configuration of the elements results in a new and arguably equally peaceful scene.

I won’t go through every possible configuration and reconfiguration that has occurred over time, but I will highlight a few changes in Western Christian culture alone.⁸ We can start with something as simple as language. My good-hearted mother sometimes washed our mouths out with soap when we used slang words she thought were bad, so imagine my surprise when I learned decades later that some of the slang words she used herself were originally obscene. (I won’t repeat them so I don’t torment her or anyone else who uses them, because heavy is the burden of historical knowledge.) At a recent BYU devotional, the fairly young speaker used a word that originally was even more obscene than my mother’s favorites, and no one batted an eye, because to the speaker and most of the audience it was just a fun noun. Or how about the phrase “Good grief,” so wholesome that even Charlie Brown says it? Turns out it’s just another minced swear word, with the “good” referring to God (as it does in any English minced swear word containing “good”). In fact, there are hundreds of such words, and most people reading this probably say some of them regularly without thinking them bad while

8. Some interesting studies of general change in Christianity (much of which later believers were unaware had changed at all) include C. Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); D. Irvin, *Christian Histories, Christian Traditioning: Rendering Accounts* (Maryknoll, Md.: Orbis, 1998); J. Thiel, *Sense of Tradition: Continuity and Development in Catholic Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); J. van Henten and A. Houtepen, eds., *Religious Identity and the Invention of Tradition* (Assen, Netherlands: Brill, 2001) (thanks to Miranda Wilcox for pointing me to these); J. T. Noonan Jr., *A Church That Can and Cannot Change: The Development of Catholic Moral Teaching* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005); C. E. Curran, *Change in Official Catholic Moral Teachings* (New York: Paulist, 2003).

thinking certain other words definitely bad, which I know because I and the rest of the historical police hear you.

Or how about left-handedness, which for centuries in the West was not seen as just another hand but as a problem, and even the evil hand.⁹ The Latin word for left is *sinister*, the French word for left is *gauche*, and so on. Any child who preferred the left hand was seen as unusually willful and deliberately perverse. Religious rituals favored the right hand, a toast of ill-will was a left-handed toast, a subtle insult was a left-handed compliment, ambidextrous didn't mean using both hands equally, it meant having two right hands. Right wasn't just directional, but moral, clear into the twentieth century, until people began to view left-handedness as just another form of handedness. Left-handedness itself didn't change, but how it was seen changed.

And who would've thought that polyphonic music was ever bad? The Church preferred plainchant, everyone singing the same note and same word at the same time. Polyphony, or singing different notes and different words at the same or different times, was worldly.¹⁰ But around AD 900 some church composers believed it was possible to bring polyphony into religious music. Many churchmen resisted, especially when third and sixth intervals were involved, because they were seen as sensuous and therefore conducive to unholy thoughts. Yet the single most famous piece of polyphony in the Christian West, Handel's *Messiah* (fig. 5), is now considered a religious piece, even though Handel himself considered it secular and had it performed in concert halls and theatres, not churches.

9. See the somewhat odd and playing-to-type but interesting book by M. Barsley, *The Other Hand: An Investigation into the Sinister History of Left-Handedness* (New York: Hawthorne, 1967).

10. This paragraph is based on J. R. Anthony, *French Baroque Music from Beaujoyeulx to Rameau* (New York: B. T. Batsford, 1978), 160–203; R. F. Hayburn, *Papal Legislation on Sacred Music, 95 AD to 1977 AD* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1979), 9–37, 78–90; G. J. Buelow, *A History of Baroque Music* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2004), 15, 42, 501; J. A. Owens and A. M. Cummings, eds., *Music in Renaissance Cities and Courts* (Warren, Mich.: Harmonie Park Press, 1997), 281–84; J. Riedel, ed., *Cantors at the Crossroads: Essays on Church Music in Honor of Walter E Buszin* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1967), 66–73; E. M. Grew, "Martin Luther and Music," *Music and Letters* 19 (January 1938): 70–78; J. S. Lawrence, "The Diatonic Scale: More Than Meets the Ear," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46 (Winter 1987): 281–91; K. G. Fellerer and M. Hadas, "Church Music and the Council of Trent," *Musical Quarterly* 39 (October 1953): 576–94; J. Dean, "Listening to Sacred Polyphony c. 1500," *Early Music* 25 (November 1997): 611–36.

The image shows a musical score excerpt from G. F. Handel's *Messiah*. It consists of seven staves. The top three staves are for a piano accompaniment: the first two are treble clef (right hand) and the third is bass clef (left hand). The fourth staff is a vocal line in treble clef with lyrics. The fifth staff is a vocal line in treble clef with lyrics. The sixth staff is a vocal line in bass clef with lyrics. The seventh staff is a bass line in bass clef. The lyrics are: "us a son is gi-ven, for un-to us a child is born." and "For un-to us a child is born, un-to us a son is".

FIGURE 5. Excerpt from G. F. Handel, *Messiah*.

Even though the piece is rampant with thirds and sixths, none of us upon hearing it probably feel like running out and renouncing religion, but instead hear a supremely religious work of music, because our tastes in good religious music are different from tastes in the Middle Ages.

Beyond these changes were bigger ones that did seem to turn the world upside down, shake the foundations, and tear up the roots, which is the root meaning of the word “radical.” We might go along with changes in music or language or fashion and even be glad about changes in science and technology, but changes in what we were sure had always been right and wrong? Those can make us start fainting and groaning and having heart attacks, like the delegates listening to Khrushchev’s secret speech in 1956. Changes like that are simply unimaginable, yet they’ve occurred anyway, even though they sometimes take several generations because they’re so big. Some of these big changes don’t seem so big to us; in fact, they seem so obviously true that we assume, well, of course *that* needed to change, and in fact why would things have ever been any other way? But we can think that only because some earlier generation made that change part of a new configuration of values that eventually became part of our own configuration, without our even realizing it. At the time, however, these changes were every bit as unimaginable as any unimaginable change that might threaten your own world.

Early big changes like this are plentiful in the New Testament, as in the book of Acts. There Peter, a devout Jew who believed he'd found the Messiah, had a famous dream in which a big sheet full of four-footed animals descended upon him.¹¹ A voice told him to eat those animals, but Peter insisted he couldn't, because God had said they were common and unclean, but the voice responded, "What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common." Peter must've felt completely schizophrenic: God was telling him to eat what Peter assumed God had said not to eat. He was so astonished he had to be told three times. Peter interpreted the dream to mean that the Gentiles weren't as unclean as he'd thought, in fact that God had "put no difference between us and them" (Acts 15:9) and that it was fine to let them hear the good news about Jesus the Messiah. When other Jesus-following Jews heard the news about Gentiles, they were astonished too, including James the brother of Jesus.

Paul of Tarsus also said he had a revelation from God about the Gentiles, but this dream went further than Peter's, and further than what James the brother of Jesus envisioned too. Most followers of Jesus still thought of themselves as Jews who had found their Messiah, which meant that they continued to follow Jewish law.¹² It was fine for Gentiles to convert, but it was also assumed that they too would have to follow Jewish law. Paul had other ideas: going to the Gentiles meant adapting certain things to them. And so he said that Gentile converts wouldn't have to divorce their Gentile spouses, and that it was okay to eat meat sacrificed to pagan idols because idols weren't real anyway, and that maybe circumcision was asking a little much of Gentile men. Many Jewish followers of Jesus were horrified, and debates broke out, as they always do when change threatens. Conferences were held, agreements were struck, Paul continued on, and his version of things gradually became the most popular among Christians.

But the story wasn't over. A recent and important book by Elaine Pagels on the book of Revelation shows that followers of Jesus were still arguing for generations, and that one of the loudest critics of Paul and his disciples was none other than John of Patmos, the Revelator. Like Peter and Paul, John had a vision too, a famous one of the end of the world. But that end he saw wasn't in some distant time: it was of John's

11. The dream is recounted in Acts 10.

12. This and the following paragraph are based largely on E. Pagels, *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Penguin, 2012), especially chs. 1 and 2.

own world. It was going to hell, and God was about to take out his wrath on it, and why? Not just because of the wickedness of pagan Rome, but also because some followers of Jesus had compromised with Rome and corrupted true religion—probably most especially Paul’s disciples. Pagels concludes that even though the book of Revelation and Paul’s epistles ended up happily under the same New Testament cover, they reflect two competing visions of what Jesus’s message meant. John linked adapters with pagans and the devil. To him the changes were as shocking as it would be for Mormons to hear that their health code was fine but not essential or that all that temple work was dandy but not really necessary. To Gentile converts, however, the adaptations made by Paul weren’t compromises at all but were necessary and inspired changes; the version of the gospel promoted by John was old-fashioned.

Gentile converts could, of course, play the moral superiority card too, and also condemn compromising with the world. They just had different ideas from John about what compromising entailed. Gentile converts insisted, for instance, that true Christians, as they were beginning to call themselves, should not use the word “Sunday” to refer to the first day of the week, when they got together to remember Jesus.¹³ Modern English-speaking Christians have no problem saying “Sunday,” or calling Sunday the Sabbath. But ancient Gentile Christians would’ve been horrified that we use either term. Sunday, the day of the sun, was a pagan day. To say it was to compromise with pagan Rome. Real Christians should call it the Lord’s Day (*dies domini*), which is still reflected in most Romance languages, descended from the Latin that ancient Christians spoke:

Latin: *dies domini*

Spanish: *domingo*

Portuguese: *domingo*

French: *dimanche*

Catalan: *diumenge*

Italian: *domenica*

And Sunday certainly wasn’t the Sabbath, which fell the day before, on the Roman Saturn Day, and was only for Jews, to whom Christians felt

13. This section on Sunday is based on my *Sunday: A History of the First Day from Babylonia to the Super Bowl* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), especially chs. 1 through 3.

increasingly superior. This usage is also reflected in modern Romance languages:

Latin: sabbatum

Spanish: sábado

Portuguese: sábado

French: samedi

Catalan: dissabte

Italian: sabato

But it wasn't just that the Sabbath fell on another day. More fundamentally, it was that Christians boasted that, unlike Jews, they didn't need a special day of the week to remind them to worship God: every day was holy to a Christian. Views of using the word "Sunday" started changing after 600, as Christianity moved into Germanic northern Europe. Speakers of Germanic languages, including English, just kept using "Sunday," because it didn't have the same un-Christian connotation to them that it had to southerners. Also by this time, Christians had decided that one way to show their superiority to Jews was to observe their own special Lord's Day even more rigorously than Jews observed their Sabbath; some even began calling the Lord's Day a sort of Christian Sabbath. By the time of my beloved sixteenth century, English Puritans insisted that the Sabbath had actually been transferred to Sunday by divine decree. And so for English speakers, "Sabbath" and "Sunday" came to be synonymous and religious and therefore good. But ancient Christians might regard us as complete slackers or heretics for saying either one.

Even more stunning to ancient and medieval Christians would have been the Christian acceptance after 1500 of lending money at interest, and that churches would someday be filled with bankers.¹⁴ For

14. The section on usury is based on D. W. Jones, *Reforming the Morality of Usury* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2004); J. T. Noonan Jr., "Usury: The Amendment of Papal Teaching by Theologians," in *Change in Official Catholic Moral Teachings*, ed. C. Curran (New York: Paulist, 2003), 80–108; J. T. Noonan Jr., "Development in Moral Doctrine," in Curran, *Change in Official Catholic Moral Teachings*, 287–305; J. T. Noonan Jr., *The Scholastic Analysis of Usury* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957); O. Langholm, *Economics in the Medieval Schools: Wealth, Exchange, Value, Money and Usury according to the Paris Theological Tradition, 1200–1350* (Leiden: Brill, 1992); B. Nelson, *The Idea of Usury: From Tribal Brotherhood to Universal Otherhood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

1,500 years, usury was prohibited in the Christian West on the basis of various Old Testament texts and could even result in automatic excommunication. The Christian ideal was to lend out of brotherly love. Charging extra was a form of economic oppression and not just another sin but one of the hugest sins: Dante put usurers in the lowest circle of his *Inferno*, and everyone understood why. Then a funny thing happened: as more and more cities emerged after 1000, so did more and more merchants, and so did the need for more credit. Even to Christian merchants it made sense that paying a little interest on a loan was a fair trade-off for the risk involved. And around 1500, Europe experienced its first period of inflation, causing some to argue that charging interest was necessary just to break even. In other words, new conditions caused people to question old apparently unchangeable assumptions and to develop a new system of values around it. Even that great lover of the Bible John Calvin saw reason to reinterpret things, and he did so by using a historical argument: conditions in sixteenth-century Europe were different from those in ancient Israel. This historical approach would become, maybe to Calvin's horror, one of the founding principles of biblical interpretation in later centuries: a text had to be read in its original context to draw out the lasting meaning. The implication was huge: something that had been assumed to be a lasting ideal might simply be a temporary rule. And if true of usury, maybe it was true of other biblical precepts too. The idea was articulated fully three hundred years later by Samuel Holdheim, the first Reform Jewish Rabbi of Berlin: "A law, even though divine, is potent only so long as the conditions and circumstances of life, to meet which it was enacted, continue; when these change, however, the law also must be abrogated, even though it have God for its author. For God himself has shown indubitably that with the change of the circumstances and conditions of life for which He once gave those laws, the laws themselves cease to be operative."¹⁵ And so the texts on usury were reinterpreted to mean that usury could now be good, if it promoted brotherly love, if it helped the borrower and not just the lender, and if the interest rate was not excessive. By 1650 all Protestants agreed, and by 1750 Catholics did too. Future generations would be mostly unaware usury had even been an issue in the past. But most Christians before 1500 would have been stunned by usury's

15. Quoted in R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (New York: HarperOne, 1977), 53.

respectability, or by the later idea that fair interest rates and prices should be determined by some invisible hand that said a fair price was what people were willing to pay, rather than something determined by Christian morals.

Another biblical precept people thought wouldn't change was the nature of the universe.¹⁶ For almost two thousand years, the Christian West didn't simply accept but assumed that the earth was at the center of all things and that heavenly bodies were perfectly smooth crystalline spheres. This was based partly on those classical giants Ptolemy and Aristotle and partly on Christian authority, especially six or seven texts of the Bible. But in 1540, Nicolas Copernicus concluded that putting the sun at the center of the universe explained heavenly motion better than putting the earth at the center did. It was Galileo who popularized the idea though, through witty dialogues he wrote after 1600. It was also Galileo who first thought of turning the newly invented microscope on the heavens. No one had done so before, because there was no need: everyone knew that the heavens were already understood. But what he saw was stunning: the sun had spots on it, the surface of the moon was irregular, and Jupiter had moons! Jupiter couldn't have moons, because everything orbited around earth alone. Galileo never lacked for confidence, but he wouldn't simply reject the Bible. So he first used the historical argument to reinterpret what it said about the universe, explaining that though the Bible could never err, it's not always obvious what the meaning of a verse is, even when it seems obvious. He also argued that the Bible was better on some subjects, like spirituality, than on others, like nature. In fact, if there was a contradiction between our *observations* of nature and what the Bible *said* about nature, we should

16. See for this section on notions of the universe A. Fantoli, *Galileo: For Copernicanism and for the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2003), which includes on 370–71 the praise of Galileo by John Paul II, quoted below; R. Feldhay, *Galileo and the Church: Political Inquisition or Critical Dialogue?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); J. M. Lattis, *Between Copernicus and Galileo: Christoph Clavius and the Collapse of Ptolemaic Cosmology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); E. McMullin, ed., *The Church and Galileo* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005); P. Redondi, *Galileo Heretic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); S. Shapin, *The Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); J. J. Langford, *Galileo, Science, and the Church* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992); M. A. Finocchiaro, *The Galileo Affair: A Documentary History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); T. F. Mayer, *The Trial of Galileo 1612–1633* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

prefer our observations. Finally, he also used the argument that the Bible must be interpreted in light of new knowledge that emerges, saying that “we do have in our age new events and observations such that if Aristotle were now alive, I have no doubt he would change his opinion.”¹⁷ And maybe the writers of the Bible would too.

Some churchmen, especially those favorable toward science, were interested in Galileo’s ideas but insisted he present them as merely a theory, rather than reality. Most churchmen, though, insisted that putting the sun at the center of the universe was “without any doubt against scripture,” and anyone who said otherwise were proud “men of the world” who thought they knew better than scripture or all the holy fathers. This wasn’t just a scientific matter, but a spiritual one. As Cardinal Bellarmine put it, “The problem was not to expand scripture but to defend it against error.”¹⁸ Another cardinal famously refused to look at the heavens through Galileo’s telescope, fearing it was a trick, but perhaps he also feared what he might see: it simply *could* not be true. For a host of reasons, the church condemned Galileo in 1633 and placed his writings on the Index of Prohibited Books. The church championed instead the ideas of the Jesuit astronomer Clavius, who elegantly defended the traditional earth-centered universe. Galileo’s ideas were too much change for most people. The English poet John Donne expressed that feeling most memorably:

The Sun is lost, and th’ earth, and no man’s wit
Can well direct him where to look for it . . .
’Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone.¹⁹

But the new universe won over most educated people by 1700, and others by 1900. In 1835, the Catholic Church took Galileo’s writings off of the Index and in 1992 formally admitted that he’d been right. Pope John Paul II even commended Galileo for “adjusting scriptural interpretation in light of new knowledge,” unlike the theologians of the time. It’s easy to think now that of course Galileo was right, but had we lived then we likely wouldn’t have thought so.

Even though Galileo’s ideas were long condemned, his approach to scripture, of interpreting it in light of new knowledge, had a big

17. Fantoli, *Galileo*, 259.

18. R. S. Westfall, *Essays on the Trial of Galileo* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 15–19.

19. John Donne, “An Anatomy of the World,” 1611, quoted in Shapin, *Scientific Revolution*, 28.

influence. An even more famous example of such interpretation was the abolition of slavery.²⁰ Maybe the best reason not to argue that an idea or practice should continue just because it's been around a long time is slavery. Slavery had been around seemingly forever when some Western Christians began to oppose it in the eighteenth century, setting off a debate in the United States that lasted into the Civil War. The most striking thing about the debate to us might be that those in favor of slavery had the best biblical arguments.

Both Old and New Testaments assume the existence of slavery and never condemn it. They condemn only masters who treat slaves badly. The Bible taught “clearly and conclusively that the holding of slaves is right,” said advocates of slavery, who could cite numerous passages specifically saying so. The Baptist minister Thornton Stringfellow wrote in 1860 that God approved slavery not only in the Bible, but in the “only National Constitution which ever emanated from God.”²¹ And since God was the same God yesterday, today, and forever, then it followed that slavery had to be the same too. In fact, anyone in favor of freedom and equality for all, as the Declaration of Independence declared, was essentially rejecting the Bible itself, said Stringfellow, because the Bible was full of sanctioned inequality.²²

Those against slavery weren't simply going to ignore the Bible, of course, any more than Galileo or Calvin would have. They knew they didn't have any passages on their side to specifically condemn slavery. Their strategy instead was to emphasize passages about human relationships in general, such as the Golden Rule, or Acts 17 (God has made of one blood all nations), or God created all in his own image,

20. For the section on slavery, see D. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); D. Whitford, *The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2009); C. L. Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); M. I. Lowance Jr., ed., *A House Divided: The Antebellum Slavery Debates in America 1776–1865* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); S. Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); J. B. Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976); P. Finkelman, *Defending Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Old South: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003) (thanks to Matt Mason for many of these references).

21. Thornton Stringfellow, *A Brief Examination of Scripture Testimony on the Institution of Slavery* (1841), Proposition 2.

22. Thornton Stringfellow, *Slavery, Its Origin, and History* (1860), 4.

and other “Family of Man” sorts of texts that might be derived from the Bible or from widely accepted principles of the Enlightenment.²³ They also might use the historical approach: biblical passages in favor of slavery reflected the understanding of past societies rather than of some enduring practice. Or they relied on “the general tenor of scripture.” That’s where lasting principles were to be found, not in specific rules for a specific place and time. Some Christians went even further and said slavery had never been right to begin with but was simply allowed by God because of human weakness.

After slavery ended, former slaves and their descendants were still treated as inferior people, even by many Northerners opposed to slavery. Such treatment, based again on various biblical passages, said that races should therefore not mix in any intimate way, such as in housing or schooling or eating or especially marriage. Mixed marriage was said to be contrary to nature and to God’s will. “The purity of public morals . . . require[s] that the two races should be kept distinct and separate,” said a Virginia court in 1875, and such attitudes lasted long.²⁴ My own grandmother, a generally good-hearted Christian, expressed surprisingly vicious views of racial mixing, but she wasn’t alone. When the Supreme Court finally struck down laws against interracial marriage in 1967, 81 percent of Americans were still against it (fig. 6). We can almost hear people saying, “Well, obviously slavery was bad, but racial mixing is another thing altogether!” Still, in a couple of generations momentum had turned: by 2011, 86 percent of Americans approved of interracial marriage, and within another generation or two many people will likely forget how unacceptable it used to be or imagine that only bad people opposed it.

If we list here all the changes mentioned so far that most Christians today would probably have no problem accepting, we would, again, not be terribly impressed.

- Some of the slang words you probably say
- Left-handedness
- Polyphony
- Taking the gospel to Gentiles and adapting it to them

23. Especially Lowance, *House Divided*, 88–90, on this strategy.

24. See on racial mixing especially P. Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), chs. 1 and 2 (thanks to Susan Rugh for this reference).

Do you approve or disapprove of marriage between blacks and whites?

■ % Approve



1958 wording: "...marriages between white and colored people."

1968-1978 wording: "...marriages between whites and non-whites."

GALLUP®

FIGURE 6. Jeffrey M. Jones, "Record-High 86% Approve of Black-White Marriages," *Gallup* (September 12, 2011), <http://www.gallup.com/poll/149390/record-high-approve-black-white-marriages.aspx>. Copyright © 2011 Gallup, Inc. All rights reserved. The content is used with permission; however, Gallup retains all rights of republication.

- Calling Sunday "Sunday" or the Sabbath
- Lending money at interest and letting the market determine rates and prices
- Putting the sun at the center of the universe
- Opposing slavery
- Racial equality and mixing

In fact, most Christians now accept these changes as obviously good. Of course there are always some holdouts, like the books that occasionally still appear insisting Galileo was wrong.²⁵ But if it's hard to imagine how earth-shattering these changes once were and how much debate they provoked, we can at least grasp this: by accepting these changes ourselves, we, like those before us, accept some things in the Bible as written and reject other things, even though we may not think about it.

25. R. Sungenis and R. Bennett, *Galileo Was Wrong: The Church Was Right* (Port Orange, Fla.: Catholic Apologetics International, 2007).

This is also true of big and often unimaginable possible changes discussed in more recent decades, though on these subjects there would be less agreement among Christians and a lot more sensitivity:

- Evolution
- Women and just about anything
- Birth control
- Vaccination
- Sexual mores
- Homosexuality
- Environmentalism

I'm not going to spend as much time on these, precisely because there is not consensus about them in the Christian West. But suffice it to say that some Christians have found ways to reconcile changes in these areas into their beliefs, while others contend it's not possible.

Many Christians in the late nineteenth century thought that the observations of nature which led to the idea of evolution were completely incompatible with the Bible, but other Christians came to think otherwise. It depended, they said, on how you read the Bible. The Creation account may have simply reflected understanding of the time, they contended. Or it wasn't even meant to be scientific but was a morality tale instead, with the moral being that God was above nature, unlike the polytheistic gods around Israel who were within nature. But many American Christians despised this sort of fancy Bible-reading; in fact, evolution seems to have been the last straw for them, because biblical literalism arose right when evolution did, in the later nineteenth century. Forty-six percent of Americans, most of them Christians, still don't believe in human evolution, though 32 percent, most of them Christian too, believe that evolution was God's way of doing things.²⁶

Maybe the biggest constant subject of debate over the centuries has been women and just about anything. Women shouldn't study too much,²⁷

26. See R. L. Numbers, *Darwinism Comes to America* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998); and Frank Newport, "In U.S. 46% Hold Creationist View of Human Origins," *Gallup* (June 1, 2012), <http://www.gallup.com/poll/155003/hold-creationist-view-human-origins.aspx>.

27. For women and education, see S. Delamont, *A Woman's Place in Education: Historical and Sociological Perspectives on Gender and Education* (Aldershot, UK: Avebury, 1996); C. Gold, *Educating Middle Class Daughters: Private Girls Schools in Copenhagen, 1790-1820* (Copenhagen: CNI, 1996); C. Johanson,

said educators and moralists from the Middle Ages on, for all sorts of now baffling reasons: it stunted their growth, warped their nature, made them mannish without grace or heart or charm, caused them to lose interest in home and social service, damaged their health and souls and naïveté, and of course ruined the family. Their nature, said the male experts at least, was for bearing and raising children. Women shouldn't lead or preach in churches either, said others,²⁸ because the priest represented God, and God was a man (even though he was formless), and you didn't see Jesus ordaining any women (not in the usual reading of the Bible anyway). Women couldn't run the 10,000 meters either, much less the marathon, or pole vault, or play full-court basketball, because their bodies weren't made for it. In a special version of basketball invented just for girls in the

Women's Struggle for Higher Education in Russia, 1855–1900 (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987); L. A. Orr MacDonald, *A Unique and Glorious Mission: Women and Presbyterianism in Scotland, 1830–1930* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2000); P. M. Mazon, *Gender and the Modern Research University: The Admission of Women to German Higher Education, 1865–1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); N. Orme, *Education and Society in Medieval and Renaissance England* (London: Hambledon, 1989); S. M. Parkes, *A Danger to the Men? A History of Women in Trinity College Dublin, 1904–2004* (Dublin: Lilliput, 2004); D. Spender, ed., *The Education Papers: Women's Quest for Equality in Britain, 1850–1912* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987); R. S. Montgomery, *The Politics of Education in the New South: Women and Reform in Georgia, 1890–1930* (Baton Rouge: University of Louisiana Press, 2006); J. Edwards, *Women in American Education 1820–1955: The Female Force and Educational Reform* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2002); K. Tolley, *The Science Education of American Girls: A Historical Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2002); M. Wertheim, *Pythagoras' Trousers: God, Physics, and the Gender Wars* (New York: Times, 1995) (my thanks to Jeff Hardy for many of these references).

28. On women's place in the church, see L. A. Boyd and R. D. Brackenridge, *Presbyterian Women in America: Two Centuries of a Quest for Status* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1996); L. Byrne, *Woman at the Altar: The Ordination of Women in the Roman Catholic Church* (London: Continuum, 1994); J. Chapman, *The Last Bastion: Women Priests—the Case For and Against* (London: Heinemann, 1989); M. Chaves, *Ordaining Women: Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); M. S. Donovan, *A Different Call: Women's Ministries in the Episcopal Church, 1850–1920* (Wilton, Conn.: Morehouse, 1986); J. Field-Bibb, *Women towards Priesthood: Ministerial Politics and Feminist Praxis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); B. Heeney, *The Women's Movement in the Church of England, 1850–1930* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988); B. B. Zikmund, A. T. Lummis, and P. Mei Yin Chang, *Clergy Women: An Uphill Calling* (Louisville: Westminster, 1998); and many, many more.

early twentieth century, which I watched my sister play in our church's gym in the 1960s, most girls weren't allowed to run the whole court: two stayed on the offensive side at all times, two on the defensive, and only the two most athletic girls were allowed to run on both sides, plus many other now-curious rules too lengthy to mention. But the rules mostly reflect the usual concern for women's reproductive abilities and the usual low expectations of what women could do physically.²⁹ On some women's issues there's still a lot of fuss, of course, but on those I've mentioned we wonder what the fuss was about and have even forgotten there was a fuss. I'm surprised, for instance, by how many of my female students feel the need to declare that they are not feminists, making me wonder what they mean by the term, since these students also regard some of the earliest feminist principles, such as equal opportunity at school and the workplace and sports, as obviously good things. They may well assume that of course *those* things had to change, or it's possible they don't even know a change occurred. I'm also surprised by the growing number of unisex bathrooms I encounter now in the U.S., or maybe I shouldn't be, since an increase in unisex bathrooms was one of the fears people once had about the effort to make women and men equal. But to stumble upon one at church, like I did last week, at my oddly configured ward building? There in front of me was a door with an image of both a man and a woman on it, indicated by standard Church signage. At first I thought it was a bathroom for the disabled, but it was located on the second floor and there was no elevator. Then I thought it must be a family bathroom, but again there were just the male and female figures on the door. I looked for people picketing, or parents covering children's eyes as they walked past, but nothing. It was just an ordinary unisex bathroom. At church. And no one cared. So I went in.

Vaccination was a hugely controversial issue when it emerged in the eighteenth century, prompting shootings and bombings at times.³⁰

29. See J. S. Hult and M. Trell, *A Century of Women's Basketball: From Frailty to Final Four* (Reston, Va.: National Association for Girls and Women in Sport, 1991); P. Grundy, *Shattering the Glass* (New York: New Press, 2005); and R. Melnick, *Senda Berenson: The Unlikely Founder of Women's Basketball* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007).

30. On vaccination, see for starters E. L. Bluth, "Pus, Pox, Propaganda and Progress: The Compulsory Smallpox Vaccination Controversy in Utah, 1899–1901" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1993); A. Booth, *A Beautiful Arm: A History of the Vaccination Delusion* (London, 1909); A. Chase, *Magic Shots: A Human and Scientific Account of the Long and Continuing Struggle to*

Those against it insisted that deliberately giving someone a disease had to be ungodly, while Christians in favor of vaccination insisted it was a gift from God. The argument over birth control that began in the nineteenth century went much the same way: it seemed to be against life, and to be playing God, said opponents, while a lot of Christian women showed at least by their actions that they considered it to be a gift from God.³¹ This of course was related to changes in sexual mores generally³² and changes in understanding of homosexual relations as well, which went from 40 percent approval in 2001 to 54 percent in 2012, with perhaps predictably a huge gap between the younger and

Eradicate Infectious Diseases by Vaccination (New York: Olympic, 1982); N. Durbach, *Bodily Matters* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); A. E. Klein, *The Polio Vaccine Controversy* (New York: Scribner's, 1972); G. Miller, *The Adoption of Inoculation for Smallpox in England and France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1957); L. Calhoun Deasy, "Socio-Economic Status and Participation in the Poliomyelitis Vaccine Trial," *American Sociological Review* 21 (April 1956): 185–91; J. B. Blake, "The Inoculation Controversy in Boston, 1721–1722," *New England Quarterly* 25 (December 1952): 489–506.

31. On birth control controversies, see J. F. Brodie, *Contraception and Abortion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994); A. Tone, *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001); C. R. McCann, *Birth Control Politics in the United States, 1916–1945* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994); J. Reed, *From Private Vice to Public Virtue: The Birth Control Movement and American Society since 1830* (New York: Basic, 1978); K. A. Tobin, *The American Religious Debate over Birth Control, 1907–1937* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2001); H. Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex, and Contraception, 1800–1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); R. A. Soloway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England, 1877–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982); A. B. Ramirez De Arellano and C. Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and Contraception: A History of Birth Control in Puerto Rico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983); V. De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); A. Grossmann, *Reforming Sex: The German Movement for Birth Control and Abortion Reform, 1920–1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); A. McLaren and A. Tigar McLaren, *The Bedroom and the State: The Changing Practices and Politics of Contraception and Abortion in Canada, 1880–1997* (Toronto: Oxford University Press Canada, 1997); J. T. Noonan Jr., *Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965); O. Ranum and P. Ranum, eds., *Popular Attitudes toward Birth Control in Pre-industrial France and England* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

32. J. D'Emilio, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), for instance.

older generations.³³ And there is arguing over the proper Christian approach to the environment. And more. For all of these subjects, the Bible is used by both or all sides, with those having specific passages on their side insisting they be read at face value and those without such passages emphasizing texts about human relationships and dignity or the “general tenor” of scripture.

These are a lot of subjects, and I apologize for mentioning so many, but there are far more than this, and there will doubtless be many more in the future. My point hasn't been to suggest that every change in history is necessarily good, or that every single thing threatening to change necessarily will, or what is the right way to think about this proposed change or that, but to offer some perspective on the debates over change. We don't have to feel like we are being uniquely and cosmically picked on because of changes we see happening in our own time that we may not like. We don't have to feel like change is the end of the world; it may indeed be the end of our generation, but not necessarily the world. We don't have to immediately conclude that the changes we see in our lifetime are the worst ever in history, but we can actually go study a little history and see pretty fast that “worst ever” has a lot of company. We can also find plenty of company in what we'd consider good changes, even in younger generations. And we can get out of the centuries-old habit of insisting that the old days were always better; even in the Old Testament, people were saying that, as in Ecclesiastes 7:10, “Say not thou, What is *the cause* that the former days were better than these? for thou dost not inquire wisely concerning this.” Just like Carly Simon said, *these* are the good old days. President Gordon B. Hinckley said it too: when asked whether the 1950s were better than today, he said, “I think the fifties were a good time and I think this is a great time. I don't think we've retrograded.”³⁴ The point isn't that there aren't awful things around us, but that we're not unusual that way, and the point is to make the best of our particular situation.

33. Lydia Saad, “U.S. Acceptance of Gay/Lesbian Relations Is the New Normal,” *Gallup* (May 14, 2012), <http://www.gallup.com/poll/154634/acceptance-gay-lesbian-relations-new-normal.aspx>. For more on the current generation gap on moral issues, see S. Saulny, “Young in G.O.P. Erase the Lines on Social Issues,” *New York Times*, August 8, 2012, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/09/us/politics/young-republicans-erase-lines-on-social-issues.html?_r=0.

34. Gordon B. Hinckley, interview by David Ransom, November 9, 1997, aired on *Compass* on ABC, transcript available at <http://www.abc.net.au/compass/intervs/hinckley.htm>.

Speaking as a historian, I'm pretty sure change is one constant we can count on. And speaking as a believer, I think maybe that's the way it should be. How dull it would be, and how little we would learn, if the point of life was only to jump through hoops already set up for us, rather than for us to help create life. There's nothing wrong with having a system of right and wrong, obviously, and old systems shouldn't be casually discarded just because they're old. There's nothing even wrong in liking our particular system or in disagreeing with others over what changes should occur in it. But seeing the huge picture of change over time should make us more inclined to disagree humbly, with an attitude that we might be wrong and others right, rather than with so much certainty, because all that past big change should make us reflect that maybe all the things we're so certain about might also end up someday floating away like white puffs of dandelion on summer breezes, just like so many other things people were sure would never change. In fact it's a good bet that future generations will shake their heads not only at what we were doing with our hair and pants, but also at what we were thinking about this or that really important subject. We don't have to feel too bad about that, or rejected: one interesting theory of generational change says that change doesn't occur so much because the younger generation rejects the older but because the younger extends the values it learns from the older into new and unfamiliar territory.³⁵ Thus, for instance, a Mormon child who learned from his parents in the 1950s that people deserved to be treated equally might in the 1970s take that further and urge that black people should receive the priesthood, though his or her parents might disagree with that particular extension.

Speaking of which, we Mormons are of course familiar with change too. We've argued over every one of these topics I've mentioned, starting with slavery, and have seen change occur in every one as well. Charles Harrell of the BYU faculty just published a book that shows changes in Mormon doctrine from beginning to present,³⁶ and in March 2013 dozens of changes were made in LDS scriptures to make historical context clearer. But this doesn't have to disturb us either: Mormons don't officially believe in inerrancy, and change doesn't necessarily mean

35. J. R. Demartini, "Change Agents and Generational Relationships: A Reevaluation of Mannheim's Problem of Generations," *Social Forces* 64 (September 1985): 1-16.

36. C. Harrell, "*This Is My Doctrine*": *The Development of Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Kofford, 2011).

errancy anyway; in fact, the belief in continuing revelation could make Mormons in theory more radical believers in change than most others.³⁷ But even to us change can feel threatening, as was evident in probably our two most dramatic changes, ending polygamy and the priesthood ban.

Growing up, I knew little about polygamy, just vague impressions that ending it hadn't been a big deal and was obviously necessary and that not many had been involved anyway, all of which impressions turned out to be completely wrong.³⁸ But I remember the change to the priesthood ban very well and that it was for me indeed a big deal, because I lived through it and experienced change within myself. The first black person I knew was a girl named Krystal, who joined my third-grade class part way through the year, and I remember wanting to say something nice about her to my family, and what I came up with was "She's pretty smart for a Negro." I didn't learn something like that from my parents, who never talked that way, but no doubt from the cultural context around me, both Mormon and more broadly societal, which suggested that black people were somehow inferior to white. In junior high and high school, I changed that view as I came to have several black friends, including Krystal, and even began to wonder about the priesthood ban. At the Mission Home in 1975, we were handed a thick packet containing various teachings by Church authorities that affirmed the priesthood ban, but I didn't really think much about those teachings while in Belgium since we ran into so few black people, and I therefore had no immediate reason to keep questioning. After I got home from my mission, though, I stood waiting in a line at a store in Fresno in the spring of 1978 with a lot of black people around me, and based partly on my experience with my friends, and partly on what my parents taught me about the value of all people, and partly on their inviting over to dinner the only black Mormon I ever knew as a boy, and partly on "the general tenor" of what I'd been preaching on my mission about love and respect for others,

37. See the talk by Elder Paul V. Johnson, "Embracing Change," reported in the *Church News*, February 8, 2013, available at <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/63231/Elder-Paul-V-Johnson-Embracing-change.html>.

38. On changes to polygamy, see R. S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1989); M. Bradley, "Changed Faces: The Official LDS Position on Polygamy, 1890-1990," *Sunstone* 14 (February 1990): 26-33; B. C. Hardy, "That 'Same Old Question of Polygamy and Polygamous Living': Some Recent Findings Regarding Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Mormon Polygamy," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 73 (Summer 2005): 212-24.

I suddenly realized how deeply I believed that black people weren't any different from me at all, and that I therefore couldn't understand the priesthood ban. And just like Peter, I felt like it was God who'd put no difference between us. Not just now, but ever. I wasn't alone in thinking this way, of course, or even particularly virtuous, because of course black people already knew this, and also because a lot of other people were thinking this too. Including a few really old Mormons like Spencer W. Kimball.

It wasn't all that hard for me to reconsider old assumptions about race because my whole generation was doing so. But not *his*. The process he went through is described in an article in *BYU Studies* from 2008, by his son, Edward Kimball.³⁹ President Kimball wasn't waiting passively for God, as we might imagine the process of big revelation working, but actively sought the revelation out. He'd thought about the ban since 1961 and had been against lifting it. But after he became prophet, he started considering again. He knew by now that Joseph Smith had ordained black people; he knew about the complications the policy was causing in Brazil, where the Church was growing fast; and perhaps most fundamentally of all, he began questioning his own assumptions. During the first months of 1978, he went almost daily to the temple to pray about it and was in great torment. And what was he praying for? Not for a revelation so much, but to get over his assumptions. "Day after day . . . I went there when I could be alone. I was very humble . . . I was searching. . . . I had a great deal to fight . . . myself, largely, because I had grown up with this thought that Negroes should not have the priesthood and I was prepared to go all the rest of my life until my death and fight for it and defend it as it was."⁴⁰ Defend, fight, the usual language and postures we think of when we think of the religious hero, standing up for truth. Yet President Kimball was the hero in this whole matter not because he stood up for his beliefs, which he, like Peter, assumed had come from God, but because even at his age he was willing to reconsider them. Unlike the cardinal who wouldn't look through Galileo's telescope because he might not like what he would see, President Kimball was willing. He later wrote about the incident, "Revelations will probably never come unless they are desired." Or as President Hinckley later put it, "He was not the first to worry about the priesthood question, but he

39. E. L. Kimball, "Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood," *BYU Studies* 47, no. 2 (2008): 4-78, which includes references to many studies on Mormonism and race.

40. Kimball, "Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood," 48.

had the compassion to pursue it and a boldness that allowed him to get the revelation.”⁴¹ And also just like Peter, he was astonished when it came.

Most everyone I knew was thrilled about the change, and pretty predictably within a generation or so young people didn’t understand what a big deal it had been and assumed it was obviously good. In a few more generations, I wouldn’t be surprised if they forget about the change altogether. When younger people hear older people occasionally express some of the unfortunate older attitudes, the younger people are stunned, because they can’t imagine that anyone holding those attitudes could possibly have ever been a good Mormon. And of course when you start thinking that those changes in the past were obviously good ones, you’re on the road to thinking that you’ve figured everything out. But as a historian and as a believer, I find President Kimball’s attitude a much better one, and an example for us as we too ponder and debate possible change in our own world.

And that’s what really old history is good for. And what I would’ve said to the van driver if I would’ve had a lot more time with him.

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This lecture was presented on March 14, 2013, and can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-023SurnGA>.

41. E. L. Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride: The Presidency of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 215.