

The Difficulty of Systems Change

by [Clark Cowden](#)

A news article by the Associated Press recently reported on remarks made by the United States Defense Secretary, Robert Gates. Gates challenged some of the military's leaders to promote new thinking. He singled out the use of pilotless surveillance planes, in growing demand by commanders in Iraq and Afghanistan, as an example of how the Air Force and other services must act more aggressively.

Gates has been trying for months to get the Air Force to send more unmanned surveillance and reconnaissance aircraft, like the Predator drone that provides real-time surveillance video, to the battlefield. "Because people are stuck in old ways of doing business, it's been like pulling teeth," Gates said of his prodding. "While we've doubled this capability in recent months, it is still not good enough." His remarks were directed at a large group of officers at Air University at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama. Noting that they represent the future of Air Force leadership, he urged them to think innovatively and worry less about their careers than about adapting to a changing world. He encouraged young soldiers to "take on the mantle of fearless, thoughtful, but loyal dissent", and to "defend your integrity as you would your life".

Wow. If I didn't know better, I would have thought he was talking about the organized church. I always thought that bringing about change in the military would be so much easier than trying to lead change in the church. In the military, you have a hierarchical, top-down, command and control, "you better do this or you will get busted" system. In the church, most leaders don't have this kind of authority. Most church leaders have to lead by influence and persuasion. In a church where most of the leaders are volunteers, leading change does not come easily. But, if it is this hard to bring about change in the military, how much harder will it be in the church?

This also got me to thinking that even in these kind of top-down authority systems, you still can't force people into new ways of thinking. Even there, they are stuck in old ways of thinking. This doesn't sound like innovation and adapting to a changing world come any easier in the military than they do in the church. Maybe this is just a human nature thing. Maybe this is just the way people are. Maybe this isn't just a church issue, maybe this is a people issue. As a district leader in the Presbyterian Church (USA), and as one who has virtually no official organizational power and authority, there are times when I think my job would be a whole lot easier if I were a bishop and had the power a bishop does. But you know, that's really not true.

Jesus did not lord his authority over his disciples. He didn't force new ways of thinking on his followers. He didn't coerce people to adapt to a changing world. He told stories. He reminded them of what the scriptures say. He gave them a new perspective. He gave them a new experience. He answered their questions with his own questions, pushing them to make new discoveries on their own. He led them through a process of awareness, understanding, evaluating, experimenting, and committing. He was not the military leader that many had hoped for. Some thought nobody could have more power than a military leader. Jesus proved that idea

wrong. And in the process, he introduced them to a lot of new ideas. Even today, Jesus helps us see how we can cooperate with God's Holy Spirit in breathing new life and health and growth and change into the beautiful bride of Christ – the Church.