

Not For A Shirt And Ten Shekels

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Lessons For A Dead Guy

This has been an interesting week for me. I died twice this past week. And that alone deserves a story. The first "death" came in the form of being way-laid by an unexpected illness that came on me quickly. You know, one of those "go-to-bed-well-and-wake-up-sick" deals. By early Saturday morning I was sick with something resembling the flu. By day three I was at the point where you realize you aren't really going to die, but part of you wishes you would and just get it over with! You're miserable, dead on the couch, thinking about all of the things you should be doing but can't and quickly growing weary of old Perry Mason reruns. Then came the second "death."

It appears to be a truism in the lives of God's people that this kind of "death" is most often preceded by what St. John of the Cross called "the dark night of the soul". Our friends at Wikipedia (the on-line encyclopedia and "starfish" that is causing heartburn at Britannica) define the dark night of the soul as follows: "The 'dark night' could generally be described as a letting go of our ego's hold on the psyche, making room for change that can bring about a complete transformation of a person's way of defining his/her self and their relationship to God." Yep, it was something like that . . . only different. As Rose Dawson told the crew after their description of the Titanic's sinking, "A very good clinical description. But for those of us who were there the experience was somewhat different."

As my week of illness wore on I found myself sinking into a pit. Personal challenges and ministry struggles seemed to overwhelm me. I began to see dysfunctionalities in the house church movement in sharper relief and openly wondered if they could ever be overcome. I ached over the seemingly endless delay in the promises for an outpouring of God's Spirit in revival that I have personally heard and trusted. I despaired over seemingly well intentioned people who intimate or promise much in the way of support for HC ministry, but deliver very little. Ministries I am working with being attacked and nearly destroyed by the spirit of religion and control. By the time I "hit bottom" I was ready to drop by the local WalMart and fill out an application, chalking up the whole "HC thing" to a late flowering of youthful idealism that had finally run aground on the shoals of "church reality" (and you thought you had a tough week!?).

Then it started. Like the still small voice in Elijah's cave on Mt. Horeb. First, my prophetic friend and counselor, Randy, called with a word for an internationally prominent house church leader. Randy had been praying for this person when the Lord gave him a vision and a word. In my friend's vision this person was standing before the Lord, and the Lord was speaking to him, saying, "How dare you not trust my provision for you. Have I failed to provide for you? Have I not given you a place to live and met your needs. Why do you not trust me?" Randy & I talked about why God would give such a strong word to this person, and he asked if I would forward the word to him, since Randy didn't have e-mail. I agreed (I have subsequently heard from this person and God has miraculously met his needs! Wahoo!). Then the next shoe fell. A couple of nights after this phone call the Lord woke my wife up in the early morning hours with a verse and a word for me.

"Listen to Me, O house of Jacob, and all the remnant of the house of Israel, you who have been borne by Me from birth, and have been carried from the womb; even to your old age, I shall be the same, and even to your graying years I shall bear you! I have done it, and I shall carry you; and I shall bear you, and I shall deliver you." Isaiah 46:3-4

The Lord's word for me was, in essence, the same as the word for this international HC leader: "Why do you not trust me?" That hurt. I thought I had trusted Him. "I've written and shared my experiences of trusting you. I've got the newsletters to prove it!" I protested. But the reality was that I was very much still alive to all the wrong things, including unbelief. Still alive to bills and rent that need to be paid. Still alive to men's broken promises and failures, and how their personal failures are reflected in the HC movement. I thought I had died to many of these things, but that's the problem with living sacrifices. They keep crawling off of the altar and

must be continually re-offered for sacrifice and death.

"Have You Heard The One About the Two Moravians & The Slave Owner?"

Death to self is never easy, but it is made even more difficult in a Christian sub-culture which reinforces self centeredness (what Francis Schaeffer called "personal peace and affluence") with such theological nonsense as "God wants you to have your best life now." As I was wrestling with this renewed call to die to self, God put another "nail in the coffin" by bringing the following story across my path.

In the 1700s two young Moravians heard of an island in the West Indies where an atheist British owner had 2,000 to 3,000 slaves. The owner had said, "No preacher, no clergyman will ever stay on this island. If he's shipwrecked we'll keep him in a separate house until he has to leave, but he's never going to talk to any of us about God. I'm through with all that nonsense." Three thousand slaves from the jungles of Africa brought to an island in the Atlantic, and there to live and die without ever hearing of Christ. Two young Moravians heard about it and decided to do something about it. They sold themselves to the British planter and then used the money they received from the sale to pay their passage out to his island, because he refused even to transport them. The Moravians came from Herrnhutt to see these two lads off. They were in their early twenties and would never return again, for they had sold themselves into lifetime slavery, simply that as slaves they could be as Christians among these others. The families were there weeping for they knew they would never see them again. And they wondered why they were going and questioned the wisdom of it. The ship slowly left its pier on the river at Hamburg, heading out to the North Sea, carried with the tide. As the gap widened and the hawsers had been cast off and were being curled up there on the pier, the two young men looked shoreward. Finally one lad with his arm linked through the arm of his fellow raised his hand and shouted across the gap the last words that were ever heard from them: "May the Lamb that was slain receive the reward of His suffering."

No Longer For A Shirt And Ten Shekels

When I heard this story, something inside me broke and died, and suddenly I saw what I had failed to see before. Some wise preacher once observed that many people never enter into the fullness of Christ because they want to become a Levite for ten shekels and a shirt (The allusion is from a sordid episode in the book of Judges - see Chapters 17-18). Such people haven't died to self. They are still trying to negotiate the terms of their service. They're willing to serve, but only upon a promise of "a shirt and ten shekels," and then only until some one comes along and makes a better offer.

O.K., let me summarize the lessons I emerged with from my "dark night of the soul."

First, it isn't about house church. You hear this phrase bantered about at house church conferences from time to time with enthusiastic agreement from the hearers. "Yeah, it isn't about house church." The problem is that I seldom hear anyone say what "it" is all about. So, let me be clear. "It" isn't about house church, simple church, organic church, market place church, emerging church, campus church or any other form of church. What is "it" about? It's about seeing the Lamb Which Was Slain receive the reward of His suffering. From the perspective of 5-Fold ministry, the 5-Fold ministry doesn't serve the Church. We do not serve for a shirt and ten shekels. In a very real sense, 5-Fold ministry serves the Lamb Which Was Slain, it's purpose being to so equip and to so build up the ekklesia that the Lamb will, through the obedience of His ekklesia, receive the reward of His suffering. Our goal, the purpose of our labors, isn't to plant house churches or any other kind of church. It is to honor and serve the Lamb, that He might build His Church and might receive the reward of His suffering. Anything less is unworthy of Him, or of our calling.

Second, it's time to die to self. It's time for God's 5-fold leadership in the House Church movement to end the seemingly endless debate and discussion about "house church finances," who should get paid for ministry and who should "make tents," by declaring that we will no longer work for the promise of a shirt and ten shekels. It is time for us to undergo a profound "death to self" regarding these things. It is neither our responsibility nor calling to account for the failure of people within the movement to give radically and sacrificially. Anyone who wants to stand before God on judgment day and explain why their lifestyle and their "best life now" was more important to them than seeing the Lamb Which Was Slain receive the reward of His

suffering is welcome to do so. Any HC person or group that wants to explain to the Lamb why a philosophy of "tent-making" was more important to them than radical, sacrificial giving so that the Lamb might receive the reward of His suffering is certainly free to do so. But I no longer have any interest in the debate. Death has suddenly become a strangely liberating experience. I no longer labor for the vague promise of a shirt and ten shekels.

Third, it's time to reclaim the "lost heart of the Church". I am truly sorry. I have tried repeatedly to return this burning coal to the altar from whence it came, but with no success. Just when I think I have rid myself of it I find it on my doorstep the next morning. This past week, in the dark night of my own soul, it returned and refused all my efforts to convince it to leave. This burning coal has a name: Repentance. Repentance has become what I refer to as "the lost heart of the Church." God is calling His ekklesia to repentance for reasons too numerous to list and explain here, so I'll only touch on one that is immediately appropriate to our discussion. There is an old adage or truism which says, "The old move of God always persecutes the new move of God." I have slowly come to both a realization and a conviction. When God begins to do a new thing He must first bring His people to a place of repentance regarding the old thing. Why? Because embracing the new involves both a change of mind and a change of direction or behavior. It isn't that the old is morally wrong, sinful or bad. It is simply that God is going in a new direction, and that new direction demands a profound change of thinking in us. A profound change of thinking that results in a profound change of direction is, by definition, repentance. If the HC movement is to experience the explosive Acts 2 type of growth that we all long for, then the movement needs to come to a place of profound repentance; repentance for the old things we have walked in while God was doing something new, repentance for holding God's move hostage to the promise of "a shirt and ten shekels". God is preparing to unleash a "new thing"; and the proper response on our part is a profound death to the old.

Entering Into This New Season

Why is God doing all of this now (and why O why didn't I take the blue pill!)? He is preparing us for what is coming. The River of God's Spirit, the River of Ezekiel 47, is about to flow through God's people in power the likes of which has not been seen or experienced by this generation. In preparation God is raising up vessels who have experienced a profound death to self, for whom an offer of a shirt and ten shekels holds no attraction whatsoever, and who have sworn unswerving allegiance to a Kingdom whose motto is written large in red letters upon its gates and battlements: "That The Lamb Which Was Slain Might Receive The Reward Of His Suffering."

Are you in, or are you out? Decide. The ship sails with the tide.