

Why, O Why Didn't I Take The Blue Pill?- Part 1

(The CMA Organic Church Conference)

By R. Maurice Smith

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It amazes me how certain movies become cultural icons. Yet it shouldn't surprise us. Despite the "bombs" Hollywood has a tendency to turn out - movies which cause all of us to collectively groan the words "You actually spent money on that?! What were you thinking?" Yes, in spite of all that, Hollywood is still able to occasionally turn out a movie (maybe one or two a year) which speaks to the human condition and touches a "mythological" reality that resonates with a vast cross section of society. The Matrix is one of those movies (O.K., the first Matrix was, by far, the best. The second was OK and, on the advice of my son, I didn't even bother to see the third one. What do a chicken and the third Matrix movie have in common? They both laid The Wakowski brothers would have done us all a favor if they had stopped after the first one. But even I can understand the phrase "big bucks sequel"). Now since it isn't my goal here to do a movie review or a treatise on "Myth, allegory and gospel" (which I do want to do sometime), let me move on to my point, namely, the painful reality of having taken "the blue pill".

Gale and I just returned (12:30 AM this morning) from the CMA Organic Church Movements Conference in Long Beach. It was excellent. We are still operating on "overload" and trying to digest everything we learned. I doubt I will be able to include it all in this newsletter (I could write a whole letter on Alan Hirsch's three presentations or on Wolfgang's two workshops on Apostolic finances), so I won't really try. Instead, I'll subject you to a steady water-torture drip of conference notes over the next couple of weeks. Our "budget trip" felt like the Smith's starring in "The Muppets Take Long Beach". It was an adventure. We arrived at LAX not really knowing how we would get to the hotel. There was no hotel shuttle and a rental car simply wasn't in the budget (Budget? What Budget?). So we explored the Metro bus and rail system, telling ourselves "Hey, if we were in Europe, this is what we would be doing!" When we arrived at the hotel (yep, we survived) we were told that they had oversold the hotel for the first night. As an alternative they offered to put us up for FREE at the nearby Holiday Inn. Now, there are certain words that resonate with those of us who live by faith and FREE is one of them. It was a blessing to our non-existent budget. To misquote Fozzy Bear from "The Muppets Take Manhattan": "The Smiths in their natural habitat, a FREE hotel room." (O.K., the real quote was "The bear in his natural habitat . . . A Studebaker!")

The next blessing for me was to bump into someone I had met nearly 5 years ago at a House2House conference in Waco, Texas. Guy Muse (along with his wife, Linda & their kids) is a Southern Baptist missionary to Guyaquil, Equador. Many of you may not know this, but on the foreign field the Southern Baptists only plant house churches, each of which is led by local people. And that is what Guy & Linda do among the residents of Guyaquil, a city of over 1 million people, where they have planted well in excess of 100 house churches and have trained many more leaders. Guy stopped me in the hallway at registration and re-introduced himself. Like many of you, he endures these weekly e-letters and occasionally finds enough encouragement among the verbiage to resist the temptation to UNSUBSCRIBE (although our partnership with the Klingons seems to have stemmed the tide of unsubscriptions. And they say threats don't work . . .). Like many others at the conference (including yours truly) Guy had "coasted into town" on spiritual fumes, probably asking the same question many of us were pondering, "Why O Why Didn't I Take The Blue Pill?" The remainder of the conference was the answer to that question. On a personal note, Guy, thanks for the fellowship, for the encouragement, for your testimony of a faithful life, and for the ride to the Metro station to get home! You, Linda, the kids & the ministry will be in our prayers . . . and I promise not to talk about you in any more newsletters!

The opening message of the conference was given by Neil Cole. His "title" for the message was "The Dark Side of Organic Church," but the title which stuck with me and most people was "Why O Why Didn't I Take The Blue Pill?" O.K., the reference is to the first Matrix movie. And I need to "set up" two scenes. In the first scene Neo (the Christ figure in the movie) meets Morpheus who offers Neo a choice. He can take one of two pills. Take the blue pill and he will wake up in his bed, nothing will have changed and life will go on as it always has. Or he can take the red pill and learn the truth about the Matrix, but if he does so, there is no

going back. As Neo reaches for the red pill Morpheus says, "Remember, all I am offering you is the truth." Neo takes the red pill, his world changes and he is introduced to the truth about the Matrix. In the second scene, after Neo has learned the truth he has a conversation with "Cypher" (who will later betray Neo and the gang) who says, "I know what you're thinking, 'Why O Why didn't I take the blue pill.'"

Welcome to the reality of organic/house church! Neil proceeded to enumerate (sounds so much better than "list") a variety of struggles that those of us involved in organic & house church have experienced to one degree or another (He even read parts of an e-mail he had received from someone who had come to the point of wanting to "throw in the towel" on the whole deal). Maybe you've experienced some of them yourself:

- Organic church is a mess; it's unorganized and it isn't easy;
- We see small gains with big pains;
- We wrestle with our own drive for success;
- Others think we're stupid for doing this;
- We don't see any fruit for all the labor;
- This stuff doesn't pay my bills;
- Hurting people (who doesn't have some of those) hurt people.
- Leaders fall away after you've shared their "success" stories with others
- Other people in ministry condescend to you with insightful and encouraging comments like "How's that little house bible study of yours doing?" (Thanks, Job's friends!)

Yep, organic/house church is messy, and there are days when those of us in the organic/house church movement wake up asking ourselves the same question Cypher asked Neo: 'Why O Why didn't I take the blue pill.' But we all know that we've taken the red pill and there's no going back. We all need to confront the realities:

- Organic/house Church isn't a job or a career; it's an adventure and a calling.
- Jesus had his Judas, Paul had his Demas, and we will have our own painful relationships and betrayals
- Organic Church is messy, so "build a bridge . . . and get over it!"
- It isn't my responsibility for someone else's bad decisions.

Our focus should not be on either our "successes" or our "failures" but, as Jesus told the seventy, our focus should be upon our standing with God, "The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name.' And He said to them, 'I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will injure you. Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven.'" (Luke 10:17-20)

On Friday Evening Neil was followed by Reggie McNeal, author of "The Present Future" and a couple of books on leadership. Reggie works among the Southern Baptists and speaks to numerous traditional church groups on issues of church and leadership. He was "scheduled" to speak on "Qualities of a Missional Leader." But God had other plans. Roughly a week before coming to the Conference Reggie was diagnosed and operated on for a melanoma on the back of his head. As he told us Friday evening, "I died this past week." Facing your own mortality does funny things to a person . . . and we were the beneficiaries. The effect on Reggie was to throw caution to the wind, along with throwing away his planned talk, and to speak from his heart . . . and from "the other side of the grave." I was literally too awestruck to take notes, so I am relying here on my memory of his talk, and on my wife who was able to take a few notes. It was a powerful talk, and I told Reggie afterwards that I could leave the conference now and be blessed. Here is what Maurice heard and took away:

It isn't about church. It's about the Kingdom. People aren't looking for a "good church experience"; they are looking for a good life experience as part of their personal journey into the Kingdom of God. Church should be like an airport, a place you pass through and that helps you along the way of your journey into a good life experience with God. An airport isn't a destination; it's a place that helps you on your way to your destination. But imagine a major airport - like Jackson-Hartsfield - whose goal was to accumulate as many planes and

people on the ground at one time as possible without letting any of them go anywhere? Sound's silly, even stupid, right? Yet that is exactly how many Churches view themselves - as a destination where Christians should be accumulated rather than as a way-station Christians pass through. We need to change our understanding of Church. Life isn't about church, it's about the Kingdom, and church is just one step along the way on the journey. Along the same line:

- ❑ There are lot's of "loops" in the Kingdom of God, and most of them are longer than our life-spans. God may begin a "loop" in someone's life which will not be completed in our life-span, and that's OK.
- ❑ God is in the people business, and we should be in it, too!
- ❑ You and I can't force a "organic/house church movement." If there is a movement, it's God's movement, not ours (ouch!).

With respect to the Kingdom of God, God wants to give His church two gifts:

1. Humility/Servanthood - Reggie expressed how appalled he is at the amount of pride in the Church today. God is unable to use that pride, so He must break it. He does this usually by allowing pain, suffering and brokenness into the Church and into our lives. The greatest unifier among believers and unbelievers is pain and brokenness. How the Gospel has been written in you as a result of this pain and brokenness is what people around you will read.

2. Confidence - God wastes nothing! You and I have been chosen for this time and this place. God is confident in the out-breaking of His kingdom and in His ability to use us in the process. Listen to the confidence in Jesus' answer to John the Baptist in Luke 7:20-28. The Kingdom is busting out!

Finally, Reggie ended with this observation: we're doomed so . . . we might as well die in what we love! Spoken like a man who has been confronted with his own mortality. Thanks, Reggie.