

## What We Are Hearing

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*"Many of us Christians have become extremely skillful in arranging our lives so as to admit the truth of Christianity without being embarrassed by its implications. We arrange things so that we can get on well enough without Divine aid, while at the same time ostensibly seeking it. We boast in the Lord but watch carefully that we never get caught depending on Him . . . Pseudo faith always arranges a way out to serve in case God fails it. Real faith knows only one way and gladly allows itself to be stripped of any second way or makeshift substitutes. For true faith, it is either God or total collapse." A.W. Tozer, "Root of the Righteous"*

### What We Are Hearing (that has produced such a "radical" change)

I want to begin by thanking those of you who responded to our last newsletter in which we announced the "winding down" of The Parousia Network - the house church network which has been our primary ministry vehicle over the past 10 years. Thank you for your prayers, your encouragements and your gifts. We continue to walk by faith (literally) as we walk out this new step of obedience. We are not altogether certain where all of this will lead, but like Abraham and Sarah, we are willing to leave the comfort of Ur and even Haran in order to discover God's will.

I thought it might be helpful to others of you to whom God may be speaking to share some of the things we have heard over the past few months which have contributed to the recent "radical" change. I claim no unique "authority" in what follows. Consider these the musings of one fellow pilgrim to another regarding the times in which we find ourselves today.

**1. Learn to listen and obey.** It is ALWAYS important to hear God's voice. And hearing his voice is the privilege of His people. After all, Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice and they follow me". But we have entered into a time when hearing God's voice amidst the clatter of competing voices has become uniquely important. For the past year God has repeatedly taken me back to this passage in the book of Jeremiah:

*"Therefore, thus says the LORD, 'If you return, then I will restore you-- Before Me you will stand; And if you extract the precious from the worthless, You will become My spokesman. They for their part may turn to you, But as for you, you must not turn to them. Then I will make you to this people A fortified wall of bronze; And though they fight against you, They will not prevail over you; For I am with you to save you And deliver you,' declares the LORD". (Jeremiah 15:19-20)*

The word translated "return" is Jeremiah's favorite Hebrew word for "repent". Let's note a couple of things in this passage. First, God is calling Jeremiah (one of the greatest of OT prophets) to place himself in a spiritual posture of on-going personal repentance - continually turning away from those things which distract him from God and turning his full attention and focus to God alone. Second, God is admonishing Jeremiah to "extract the precious from the worthless". Not everything you think you're hearing is genuinely from God. Get over it. Things must be discerned. The "precious" must be extracted from the "worthless". It was true for Jeremiah. It is true for you and me, too. The day you come to believe that every little thought you have is from God is the day you take a huge step toward deception. Write it down. Pray over it. Have others pray over it with you. Discernment is to prophecy what interpretation is to tongues. We ignore both to our peril.

But listening (and hearing) alone is not enough. We have entered a time when prompt obedience to what God is saying to you is critical. God began speaking to us several months ago (in the spring) about closing The Parousia Network, but we delayed. It was our ministry, our "identity", our source of income, the publisher for our books, etc. What would happen if we closed it down? Finally, the quiet voice we were hearing turned into a shout in July and we realized that God was challenging our obedience. So, here's the "rule": Obey NOW, ask questions later.

**2. Community Over Organization.** Contemporary Western Christianity is big on organization and short on community. The early NT church was a community first and foremost. Yes, they were also organized, but not as we understand organization. Community trumped organization. In contemporary Western Christianity organization trumps community. Why? Because "community" is fluid and may come-and-go but "organization" (i.e., corporate 501c(3)) lasts "forever". The times which lie ahead will demand a high degree of community and a minimal amount of organization. Unfortunately, most of us are only comfortable with the opposite (a high degree of organization and a minimum of community).

**3. Difficult Times Are Coming - Get Ready.** It simply isn't possible to communicate to you all that God has told us about what is coming (and quickly). The difficult times which are coming will be economic, social, spiritual and practical. Many of you on this list are already experiencing some of these profound changes in your own lives. I know because I read your e-mails. God has already been taking you through the fire, through the captivity, through the flood. Welcome to "The Joseph Company" - the company of those whom God is preparing in advance to lead many others to safety in the times ahead. You feel like you are dying. News flash: YOU ARE! My advice to you is simple: 1) die well - leave nothing of your

old life around for the Enemy to use against you later; 2) die quickly - embracing the lessons expedites the process and lessens the pain, and 3) die quietly - nobody wants to hear you whine (trust me)! There's not nearly enough cheese to go around with all that whine! Simply remember: the tears of God's people are so precious to Him that He stores them in a bottle and records them in a book for a future day of redemption (Psalm 56:8).

**4. Be Prepared To Walk Away From Your Tax-Exempt Status.** Churches are exempt from taxation by definition, as explained in IRS Publication 1828. You might want to read that previous sentence again. But did you know that the IRS also applies a 14 point test to determine whether or not an organization or body is a Church? Here it is:

#### 14 Point Test For A Church

- (1) a distinct legal existence
- (2) a recognized creed and form of worship
- (3) a definite and distinct ecclesiastical government
- (4) a formal code of doctrine and discipline
- (5) a distinct religious history
- (6) a membership not associated with any other church or denomination
- (7) an organization of ordained ministers
- (8) ordained ministers selected after completing prescribed studies
- (9) a literature of its own
- (10) established places of worship
- (11) regular congregation
- (12) regular religious services
- (13) Sunday schools for religious instruction of the young; and
- (14) schools for the preparation of its ministers

Could your organic house church meet this test? A pastor friend of mine whose church was applying for recognition as a Church was given a 24-point questionnaire to determine if they were a church (the questionnaire included such things as "Do you have a printed bulletin?" No bulletin? No church!).

My point is simple, yet profound. First, the IRS understanding of "Church" is increasingly institutional and organizational. You and your organic house church could easily fail to qualify. Second, in an age of growing financial problems on a national level, I fully expect the Church to come under much greater financial scrutiny and to experience growing financial restrictions regarding its tax exempt status. There is ONLY ONE simple solution to mute the argument. Walk away and say "No thanks, God has a better way."

**5. The Future of House Church Lies In A Few Basic Commitments.** Over BBQ hamburgers and chips, I was recently asked by someone in leadership in the house church movement at the national level what I thought about the future of house church in America. That sparked a 2+hour conversation (which culminated in all problems being solved along with a huge helping of ice cream and some wonderful home-made raspberry topping). Sans the ice cream (sorry) I will condense the conversation into a few basic thoughts, including 5 basic commitments. It is my opinion (which will buy you NOTHING at Starbucks without a \$5 bill) that the house church movement is currently facing some major challenges.

First, it is facing the challenge of "the Evangelical Borg". You remember the Borg of Star Trek fame - those scary looking half-machine-half-human creatures who specialize in terrorizing everyone they meet by declaring, "You will be assimilated. Resistance is futile". Yep, American Evangelicalism is sort of like the Borg. It takes radical ideas, which might otherwise threaten the collective status quo, and simply absorbs them when they aren't looking. Nearly twenty years ago Dr. Ralph Neighor shook the evangelical church structure by publishing "**Where Do We Go From Here?**" announcing the idea of the "cell" Church. It was a radical notion. But not anymore. It has been absorbed, baptized, pressed and dry cleaned by the Evangelical Borg. It is no longer a threat to the collective. The same phenomenon is now occurring to the organic house church movement. Ten years ago when I attended my first house church conference in Denver, organic house church was a radical notion (we had a whopping 70 people there). Jim Rutz and Wolfgang Simson were the only notable people with notable books on a national level (although people like Frank Viola were busy writing on the topic). Not so any more. The Evangelical Borg have taken note of the threat organic house church represents to the collective and the process of assimilation is now well underway. And this leads to my next observation.

This process of assimilation is made easier because American Christians have a hidden but very effective "Spiritual Default" button in their spiritual psyche. It has been placed there through years of cultural reinforcement and specific teaching. This "Spiritual Default" button causes unsuspecting Christians to automatically default to pre-programmed "factory settings". When this "Spiritual Default" button is pressed (usually in times of doubt or conflict), an American Christian will automatically show up at 11:00AM Sunday Morning on the door step of the last church building where he

or she enjoyed “great worship” or “a great message” or “an awesome teacher”, etc. (Note: some “Default” settings have been programmed for 8:00AM, and a few newer models include Saturday evening settings). And it is this “Spiritual Default” button that leads to my third observation.

As a house church movement, we have “over promised and under delivered”. We promised spiritual nirvana - the promised land of non-church and genuine community, un-encumbered by traditional baggage. When we failed to deliver (and many of us have), the result was that people “kicking the tires” of organic house church started responding to their “Spiritual default” buttons. What “pressed their buttons”? We did, by promising more than we delivered. How do we change the situation? By not attempting to be “everything to everybody” (it never works) and by stepping back and renewing some basic commitments. I’ll be brief, but here they are as I understand them:

**1) A Commitment To Make Disciples.** The Great Commission is simple and clear. As we are going, we are to make disciples by baptizing new believers and by teaching them what Christ has taught us. This isn’t a curriculum or a 40-day program. It is a lifestyle of faith, listening and obedience to Jesus as Lord as revealed in Scripture. Simple. But profound.

**2) A Commitment To Biblical Doctrine and Christian Orthodoxy.** I have said before and I will say it again, any movement that cannot define itself theologically - the difference between what it believes and what it does not believe - is doomed to oblivion. Theological ideas have consequences, and so does their absence. How important is right doctrine? Consider the reality that false teachers are to the New Testament what false prophets are to the Old Testament. Yes, correct doctrine clearly taught is important.

**3) A Commitment To Pursue Genuine Community.** As I observed earlier, the church has for the most part substituted organization for community. Why? Because genuine community is messy - because it honestly represents the messiness of the lives of real people who are still in the process of redemption and sanctification. Organizations, on the other hand, can avoid the “mess” of people’s lives by imposing Robert’s Rules of Order or by simply firing that troublesome staff person who insists on doing things “Jesus way”. I mean, come on. Jesus was a great guy and everything, but he didn’t understand the first thing about running a Christian organization (sic). Or as the late Michael Spencer (“Mere Churchianity”) observed, Christians today want Jesus on the cover, but not in the book. Genuine biblical community is a gathering of believers with Jesus at the center - a gathering of believers learning how to dance with one another and with God.

**4) A Commitment To Serve the Least of These.** It’s hard to be brief here since I’ve written an entire book on this subject. My suggestion would be that you read (and re-read) Matthew 25:31ff. Read it until you fully comprehend that, in some way which we don’t fully understand, there is a relationship between our deeds toward those in need and our faith, and that this relationship has eternal consequences. It is time for the people of God - particularly organic house church practitioners - to become legendary in our service to “the least of these”.

**5) A Commitment To Pursue Genuine Spiritual Awakening.** I have said before, and I will repeat myself here at the risk of great irritation to many good people. The organic house church movement as we know it today represents the best work of some of the sharpest minds in the evangelical church. But that’s not enough. We need, and are still missing, something that only God can give. A divine visitation. A burning coal fresh from God’s altar that turns smart Christians and house church practitioners into flaming radicals - carriers of that inextinguishable blaze which, from time to time, has set the world on fire for Christ.

Finally, I want to leave you with the quote from A W Tozer which opened this letter, and to challenge you to a greater step of faith than anything you have known thus far. These are the times in which we as Christians live today. God is calling some of you to step out in such a way that, should God not come through, the alternative will be total collapse.