

The 21st Century Restoration

Roger E. Dickson

Something wonderful is happening. It is happening in the religious world of Christendom. There is a sincere desire in a new generation of truth seekers who are morphing out of a restricting cocoon of institutional religiosity into a new paradigm of servant word warriors. This is a yet to be identified army of those who are seeking the simplicity of New Testament Christianity in the midst of a divided religious world that has failed humanity. This spontaneous emergence of believers seek to be delivered from a churchianity that brought itself into bondage by religious authorities and an encyclopedia of religious traditions that are without number. Religious chaos now prevails in a world of Christendom where the traditional “church” has in many ways failed. And from this chaos in the past few decades, a new generation of believers is emerging to change the course of Christendom.

The millions who are a part of and are witnessing this worldwide phenomenon are calling it the “2nd Reformation.” When we look from today 400 years back into our past, we can understand this reference. Roman Catholicism, and the ignorance that prevailed during the Dark Ages, keep people in bondage for centuries before the beginning of the Protestant Reformation Movement. However, in the Protestant Reformation Movement, people sought to satisfy the unquenchable human yearning for freedom. As a result, a few brave men stood up with translations of the Scriptures in the local vernacular of the people. Some of these word warriors were excommunicated from the fellowship of the heritage of religiosity that they had received from their fathers. Some fled into hiding. Others were murdered by being burned at the stake in the town square. However, regardless of the oppression of the Reformation leaders, and the attempted suppression of their followers who cried freedom, the paradigm shift was made over a period of 100 years. Historians now refer to that morphing from the institutional religiosity of the past into a new paradigm of Christendom as the Reformation Movement.

But today, there is another religious paradigm shift from the Reformation Movement itself. When those of the Protestant Reformation took sides against one another, they created a socio/religious dynamic that would inevitably deny the individual’s quest for freedom in Christ, and a direct relationship with Jesus through His word. What is happening today was predictable.

People seek relationships. Religious people seek relationships that are based on Jesus, the One who died for them in order to establish eternal bonds of fellowship.

When the restrictions of institutional churchianity began to choke those who sought to be free and in fellowship with one another, the mold was cast for history to repeat itself.

So it is happening again. However, there is something different with this “2nd Reformation.” It is not an attempt to reform an old structure. Reformation movements, unfortunately, seek only to reform existing institutions. Baggage of the past is always carried over into the new movement. Reformation churches naturally embed within their orders and organizations dictates that will eventually call for another reformation, a reformation from themselves.

The same is often true of proclaimed restoration movements. Most restoration movements simply salvage baggage out of worn out reformation movements. They often collect scriptures to justify themselves as “biblical,” but practice and behave according to the reformation heritages from which they fled. They too embed within their orders and organization dictates that will eventually lead them back to that from which they fled. There is nothing more blinding than a reformation that has disguised itself as a restoration. The adherents to such movements are often too arrogant to confess that they hid behind their backs the baggage of former reformations. In doing so, they also set the stage for other restorations, restorations from themselves.

But what we are experiencing in Christendom today is something different. It is a strenuous effort to break out of the confining wineskins of old restricting traditions and a religious paradigm that has long since lost contact with the physical and spiritual needs of humanity. It is a generation that is simply bored with ceremonial assemblies while attendees are orchestrated through the acts of a playwright (worship leader). It is a generation that seeks the source from which faith is derived, the word of God, and an opportunity to express its principles in daily living. This generation knows enough about the Bible to understand that the assembly-oriented religiosity that was characteristic with the typical religious group of their heritage is sterile and foreign to the cultural instincts of a Facebook generation.

In the true definition of the phrase, the global paradigm shift in Christendom that we are witnessing in this century is in many ways a true “restoration movement.” It is not a restoration movement as many of those restorations that have taken place at various times and places after the 2nd century apostasy, which restorations doomed themselves to failure because they were only disguised reformations. Those restoration movements often brought with them institutional baggage that condemned them to return eventually to that from which they originally fled. Embedded doctrines, hermeneutics and ceremonial traditions destined them to become the source from which others would eventually also have to escape in order to search for the ancient order of primitive Christianity.

This new restoration, the 21st Century Restoration Movement, will eventually be written in history books as the movement that changed Christendom. It will be such because it is not an effort to remodel old norms. It is not an attempt to refocus twisted scriptures. It is not an effort to rehash cloned interpretations that were actually formulated through the maze of past bondage theologies. This new movement is defining itself to be far different from all “reformations” and “restorations” that have taken place since the 1st century.

What is exciting about this 21st Century Restoration Movement is that it is driven by faith. It is a change into a direction in Christendom for which there are no history books from which to determine its course. Those who are on this journey often do not know where they are going, other than with their faith that will direct them with God. They find it exhilarating to walk again by faith, being directed only by His word.

Observation 1 **ORIGINS OF CHAOS**

Social changes in any society always spill over into the religious behavior of citizens. In some ways, therefore, some sociological changes in the world in which we live have been the impetus to what we are experiencing in Protestant churches throughout the world today. However, the primary impetus that has sparked this paradigm shift in Christendom originated from the religious world of Christendom itself. The change in the sociological networking of nations, combined with challenges in the world of Christendom, have together germinated the restoration that we are experiencing today. Consider the following brief review of socio/religious changes that have been the engine that has driven the 21st Century Restoration Movement:

A. DENOMINATIONAL SEPARATION

Christendom is reacting to 400 years of separation between Protestant groups throughout the world. Specifically, traditional denominations have developed the foundation upon which a new generation has reacted. Denominational religiosity took people so far from one another that it was only predictable that they would seek to come back together. Traditional churches will continue to exist in the future, but they have been the spring board from which millions are leaping in order to find a new way. Those who first ran from traditional churches started forming “community churches,” but now they have discovered that the community churches have to a great extent become that from which they fled. Even those who thought that they had a patent on

restoration have also succumbed to the exodus from denominational power structures and traditions.

When churches are in decline, it is not always the result of an unreceptive society. As the members of any particular church grow old, they often age out of contact with succeeding generations. They culturally take the church with them into being a church culture that is disconnected with succeeding generations. And when restorational churches, who believe that they have had a copyright on truth and behavior, age, they too will grow out of touch with the generations that follow if they are unable to separate Baal from Bible. What is unfortunate in such situations is that restoration churches have a difficult time separating culture from truth, and thus they see the younger generation as rebellious to “the truth.” This lends them to cry out condemnation of supposed change agents and strawmen they have created after their own imagination.

B. HERITAGE OF TRADITIONS

As the traditional protestant denominations aged, so did their traditions and their churches. As restoration churches began to crystallize into a church that serviced only the generation that gave them birth, they too developed a heritage of traditionally-linked truth that had little appeal to the 21st century citizen. The religious heritage of traditions that was formulated by the past no longer filled the needs of a generation that seeks connectivity. We live in a “YouTube/Facebook” century that is wearied with a heritage of traditions that have separated believers from one another. The traditions of the past not only failed to meet the needs of this new generation, they have also become symbols of separation in Christendom. Though the traditions were not inherently wrong, they were to a great extent traditions that the succeeding generation relegated to the past in order that they define and determine their own future.

C. LEGALISTIC RELIGIOSITY

Traditional institutional denominations are propped up and promoted by systematic theologies that have traditionally identified each particular group of the Protestant Reformation. In order for any particular denomination to continue to exist, there had to be a legalistic approach to the identity of the heritage for each group to continue. Those who aligned themselves with a “proof text” theology were not innocent in this matter. Proof texts were legalistically interpreted and applied, and thus become the standard by which identity of the faithful was determined. Traditions, combined with a legal approach to theology, crystallized each group, and thus separated them from one another to

the extent that neighbors could not commune with one another lest they be seen to have compromised their beliefs. This became so divisive in society that it was commonly stated, “Do not talk to your neighbor about politics and religion.” What should have been so natural for a disciple of Jesus to do – talk about “religion” – was banned.

D. JUDGMENTAL THEOLOGIES

The natural result of legalistic religiosity was the development of beliefs (theologies) that became the foundation upon which one neighbor judged another to be either in or out of the kingdom. A century of debate over theological issues has led to a denominational separation in which there is little communication. When Christendom forgot the simplicity of Christianity, a heritage of categorizing judgmental opinions became the theology of each particular denominating group.

E. POWER PEOPLE AND PROGRAMS

Jesus said that there would be no lords or authorities among His disciples (Mk 10:42,43). However, denominational separation and traditions were sustained by a clergy, or eldership, who have assumed authority and lordship over each particular autonomous group. Authority was assumed to be the foundation upon which a particular denomination existed, and thus the center of reference for the attention of the membership. Permission from a central system of authority had to be granted before individual adherents could respond to the grace of God to do good works. In order to enforce authority, organizational structures were established from which permission had to be sought and granted before any individual member of the organized religion could act. Whether from a preacher/pastor, or an eldership, the assumption of a percentage of authority from the all authority that Jesus has on earth led to a generation of freedom-seeking people who wanted deliverance from the bondage of Egypt.

F. CHURCH-HOUSE CHRISTIANITY

What solidified the Protestant Reformation into a divided world of crystallized religious groups was the exaltation of a sanctuary into which dominated adherents could be brought in order to maintain the identity of each particular group. Church buildings, therefore, became more than convenient places to meet on Sunday morning. They became landmarks of identity in each community into which the “faithful” had to meet in order to be identified with each autonomous/denominating group. They thus became

symbols of tradition, heritage, separation, and the location where authority-thirsty people could be reaffirmed on a weekly basis. If adherents were not present in these monuments on Sunday, they were deemed unfaithful, and subsequently, the target of a leadership that claimed them as their sheep. Attendance in the building, therefore, became the signal that one was loyal, either to the primary leader of the group, or submissive to the powers that existed.

It is the basic nature of man to be free. It is the way God made every human being that has been born into this world. The preceding heritage that has been handed the world today seeks to rob the individual of that basic desire for freedom. What has happened, therefore, is that we are living in an era of men and women who seek to cross the Red Sea. They have no idea where they are going. But they know that a desert wherein faith must be exercised is better than the taskmasters and bondage of a religious world from which they are escaping. Their reason for leaving bondage may be basically for negative reasons. However, a world that has been burdened with those things that are so contrary to basic human nature, has moved them to burst out into freedom. Religious people want to be free, free indeed. It is only natural. It is the nature of the God-created human spirit.

Observation 2

CHRISTENDOM IN CHAOS

I was once reading the book *Pagan Christianity* (Frank Viola & George Barna) in an isolated coffee shop in Manitowoc, Wisconsin. After enjoying my coffee for about thirty minutes of reading, a lady came over and said, “I saw you reading that book. My mother is reading the same book. Should I read it?”

My answer was “yes.” She then explained what she and her mother had decided to do. “We have decided to awake every morning, read the Bible, and pray for the day. Is this OK?”

This young lady and her mother were not connected with any traditional church, and did not want to be. They were “religiously unchurched.” They had no desire to step inside a church building and express their faith. But they did want to connect with God. She and her mother illustrate millions throughout the world who are driving past church buildings every day in search of a relationship with God in order to deal with the problems of life. Are they “unchurched” because they want nothing to do with the “church” from which many are fleeing because they feel no need to be drawn to cold cathedrals and calculated ceremonial assemblies? These two people represent a reli-

giously unchurched generation. So if the traditional church does not appeal to them, what shall they do? More important, what will the traditional church do to go after these religiously unchurched seekers?

I was once sitting in another coffee shop in middle America – I do like coffee – with a millionaire many times over. He said that before he obeyed the gospel, he drove by church buildings that had no appeal to him. “The religion that was represented by the building,” he said, “had no appeal to me and my needs.”

The historian must determine why there are millions of people in the world who are now driving by existing symbols of faith in order to discover a personal faith and relationship with God. We indeed live in a new world order wherein faith seeks to be expressed through relational experiences with fellow human beings, rather than the traditional symbols of faith as magnificent meeting houses and entertaining assemblies. There are millions of truth seekers who are moving from the religiosity of one paradigm into one with which they can identify one another in a relational encounter. They are defining the new paradigm of Christianity. And in doing so, they are in many situations supplanting the past by redefining simple Christianity. What any good disciple would do in this situation is what Paul said two thousand years ago. “*I have become all things to all men, so that I might by all means save some*” (1 Co 9:22). As all foreign evangelists, Paul, in his travels, moved from one religious/cultural paradigm to another by crossing a border. Unlike those who are for their lifetime confined to only monocultural experience, the traveling evangelist sees and understands different social and cultural environments wherein the simplicity of Christianity can be applied. What the monoculturalist sees as apostasy, the multiculturalist sees as an opportunity for Jesus.

When a monocultural society begins to change, social chaos arises within various sections of the society, which chaos is often unnerving to those who are monoculturally ethnocentric. This is happening in the religious framework of many First World urban cultures today. And when something happens in the traveling and internationally active culture of the First World, it is eventually distributed throughout the world. If you are not experiencing the existing change in your particular area of Christendom, then hang on to your seat. It is coming your way, especially to those who live in urban centers throughout the world. What is happening today will take a century to play out in the history of mankind, and thus it will eventually come your way.

There is a global paradigm shift that is happening in the world of Christendom. Only those who are isolated in remote villages, or remote thinking, would deny this. When people see change, however, they often build religious forts. The more they are frightened by the change, the greater the resistance against change, and thus the walls of the fort are built higher. Fear is usually generated when cultures and traditions are in a

state of transformation.

We are creatures of habit, and thus do not like to change from our past. This is particularly true of older people. However, we must as Paul have no fear of changing, for he knew the skill of becoming all things to all men for the sake of evangelism. And such should be the character, or skill, of the Christian. God's word never changes, but people do. Christians, therefore, should never fear changes that take place in the societies in which they live. They should look out and see the opportunities that are being created by the changes. When social chaos occurs within a culture – and all cultures go through periods of social chaos – we must understand that society is groaning in order to produce something new. Thinking Christians perceive these changes. They then go to work as Paul in order to see how they can “become all things to all men” in order to preach the simplicity of the gospel to the new generation that will come out on the other side of the social chaos. Instead of fearing change, therefore, Christians should see the change as an opportunity for evangelism. Since the world is now experiencing a religious paradigm shift that it has not experienced for centuries, we should be excited about the new opportunities that lie ahead. Faith, not fear, should be our foundation that will drive us to take advantage of the receptivity of new opportunities.

It is our mandate, therefore, to identify the new society to which the past is giving birth. This is always exciting, for we never know what society will produce when it goes through the natural process of change that the world is presently experiencing. And in these times, the changes that are happening are affecting the way people relate to God. The following observations are a few of the exciting things that are laying the foundation upon which we have some great opportunities to reach others with the simple gospel of Jesus:

Observation 3

FLIGHT FROM POWER STRUCTURES

We live in a world where the Third World is becoming more educated, and more in touch with the economies that bring a better life. In the last fifty years there has been a tremendous surge of education in Third World countries. With education comes change, a new leadership and a desire to connect, not isolate. But with education also comes a desire to be free, truly free.

On the African continent there has been a concerted effort in the last fifty years to educate the masses. As the educated become a functioning part of society, they naturally throw off the ignorant and unlearned leadership of the past. A generational divide subsequently occurs between the educated and the uneducated, both in society and in

religion. The educated are no longer satisfied with the traditions of the past. They have learned something new, and thus seek to implement their knowledge into real life experiences and productivity. Churches have not escaped this change. Churches are no longer satisfied with a leadership that is crippled by the traditional past. They are seeking a new and vibrant leadership that has new ideas and new dreams. If the traditional leadership does not give way to an educated generation, then what comes next is only inevitable. The new leadership breaks away from the past in order to lead fellow believers who are university educated. They seek to meet the challenges of their own generation of educated citizens.

In the political world, we live in a time where the new leadership in the Third World must submit to the democratic vote of the educated. The politically power hungry boss of the past is no longer able to rule in a democratic government. Illiterate leaders of the past in the Third World are being replaced by university educated leaders who want to lead their people to freedom of thought and behavior, and primarily, to a better standard of living. With this social change comes change in the old structures of religious institutions. Religious people, too, seek to be set free from Diotrephes led churches that imposed bondage, rather than the freedom that comes through the grace of God (See Gl 5:1,2).

Ignorance too often lends one to be submissive to those who are more dominant. The problem with illiterate societies is that they are often led by those who seek to dominate or control for selfish reasons. But when Christians learn that they have direct access to the One who has all authority, then they realize that submission to authorities and lords in religion on earth rob them of their freedom to serve the Lord directly. An ignorant people can never be a free people, whether in the political or religious world.

In the 21st Restoration Movement we must not discount those the First World has often ignored as Third World. Though driven by different sociological engines, both worlds are moving in a similar direction in reference to their faith. Both worlds have become the seed bed that is giving rise to a new world of citizens who seek change. Christendom is not escaping the influence of this change. Old traditional churches with legalistic theologies are dying. They represent the past and a generation of domination and domination that reeked with the thirst for power by those who have patterned their leadership after the chiefs and dictators who suppress the people. But this is all changing. University diplomas have signal a massive change in the Third World. Those who hold the diplomas are no longer satisfied with sitting in an assembly that is led by a leader who has had no formal education, and even worse, who can neither read nor write.

Observation 4

THE FLIGHT TO FREEDOM

The desire for freedom in the political world has spilled over into the religious world. People seek freedom from the restrictions of religious organizationalism. They want freedom from institutional religions that have for centuries duped them into following that which led them away from God and one another. They seek freedom from the confining religious structures of the past that did not allow the individual to grow, to serve from the heart needs that present themselves in the daily Christian life.

When educated people seek freedom, they do so, not as rebels or anarchist, but as people who want to guarantee their freedom by submission to the will of God. Those who fear freedom usually interpret those who are seeking freedom as people rebelling against law. But such is not the case with those who seek to be truly free. Law guarantees freedom from the dominance of personalities and those who would impose traditions and opinions. Law guarantees freedom from the preeminence of popes. Freedom in Christendom must always be directed by the word of God, lest those who seek the freedom again return to that from which they fled. It is for this reason, that the truly free are led to freedom by law.

In the case of the believer who is seeking freedom in this present world, he is finding his way out of the labyrinth of institutional religiosity by going to the word of God. And this is exciting.

People have tried to be free by simply rebelling against the fathers. Jesus did not encourage this. *“You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free”* (Jn 8:32). Truth sets us free because it is the compass that directs us out of the confining religious structures of the past. Tradition always misdirects us simply because tradition is of our own invention. Jesus came with a compass, a compass of truth. And if we follow that compass, we will be free indeed. *“Therefore, if the Son will make you free, you will be free indeed”* (Jn 8:36).

What is now happening in many places of the world today is that the search of religious people for freedom has driven them to the word of God. What more could those who know the truth ask? People are tired of “pastor-driven” churches. They are exhausted with hyper assemblies that leave one emotionally drained after the closing prayer, and with no relationship with fellow believers. They are stressed out with organizationalism that has stymied spontaneity and structured “faith” after some highly organized corporation. They have been browbeat by the domination of so many pastor/preachers that they yearn to be delivered in order to serve Jesus. They cry freedom in a world of religious bondage.

What millions are doing is simply going to their Bibles. They know that Jesus promised freedom, and now they seek that freedom through His word. And they are finding it. They are stripping away the traditions, the organizational structures, the programs, and meeting with their mothers for prayer and reading the Bible in their homes. They are doing so just to be free. In many cases, they see no opportunity for spiritual growth in the existing structures of the traditional church. They will thus never darken the church-house door. The traditional church thus rights them off as “un-churched,” then carries on with a religiosity that is out of touch with some real opportunities. Those who are out there searching are thus identified as the “religiously un-churched.”

Religious symbols that were once a part of the heritage of this generation of truth seekers have now become obstacles to their freedom. They will drive by these obstacles because they represent bondage. They will not seek the leaders of institutional religion because they see them as popes of bondage. They see them as recruiters who seek to bring adherents into a structure that must be supported by money and existing power structures.

We now have a generation of institutionalized adherents who crave freedom from a heritage that cheated them of a personal relationship with God. This generation became more fearful of the guards of the institution, than the God of creation. They now cry out that the prison doors be swung open. And as all institutionally minded people, they are fearful of what lies outside the prison, but they know that they do not want to return to that from which they are being released. Many of these who have been freed go astray, misdirected again by false leaders and their own lack of knowledge of God’s will. But those who are educated in the strictures of freedom, know that they must have a guide. Therefore, millions are arising from their beds in the morning, getting on their knees, asking for wisdom, and then reading their guide books on freedom, the word of God. *“The truth will set you free.”*

Observation 5 **SEEKING A NEW LEADERSHIP**

Now what would the present leadership of the church do? Please keep in mind that the old evangelism techniques of the past may not work. We must keep in mind that techniques are from man, but the message of the simple gospel is from God. It never changes. For this reason, it would certainly be our first step to sort through the catalog of traditions and traditional interpretations of Scripture in order to discover the simplicity of the message of the gospel. This would be our first method, and possibly the most

difficult.

The preceding will be challenging if the heritage of your church has been historically legalistic in theology. If it has been, then your “method” of evangelism will certainly not work. **This generation of the world cannot be evangelized by seeking to recruit people from one legalistic church to another legalistic church, from one institutional structure to another.** I have had Africans ask me why many of their converts have returned to their former denomination after a few months after their “conversion.” The answer is obvious. If our method of “evangelism” is to convert from one social and legal group of people to another, the appeal of the friends of the new convert in the group of origin will be too strong. The new convert will succumb to his or her yearning for lifelong friends, and subsequently return to his or her former social club. Legalistic presentations of the truth have little effect on an educated generation that can see through legalistic interpretations of Scripture. The legal appeal of “another gospel” may have been effective in the past to convert an uneducated generation to “five steps of conversion” and “five acts of worship,” but that day is long gone in urban centers throughout the world where educated prospects can think abstractly.

Building a “church building” will also not attract a generation that is seeking freedom. The buildings remind them of the past, of a confining religiosity from which they have fled. These new seekers do not seek confinement of their relational culture in a building, but interactive assembly in coffee shops, parks, schools, etc. They are not of that generation of people who confined their faith inside the four walls of a dedicated sanctuary. That was the past. The present and future is a daily Christianity wherever two or three can be gathered together in the name of Jesus. And if they can be gathered around a common work, it is even better. They have come to realize that disciples develop a greater relationship if they can work together hand-in-hand in the vineyard in order to accomplish a common task.

Focus is not on numbers, but relationships. The West has always counted success by reading results on performance charts in the corporate board room. This thinking spilled over into the meeting rooms of the saints, and consequently, many decisions were unfortunately made by those who had no patience for God to work through the word over a great deal of time. The Third World focuses on relationships. It may be that the new generation of the West is beginning to realize that at least in this area of social development, the Third World is right in what the West has lost because of its activity-oriented society.

One thing is very apparent in reference to a generation of relational members. They do not look to sages with pronouncements from the stages in order to be driven. Sitting as a spectator to listen as a mute in a pew no longer appeals to this disciple. And

thus, preacher/pastor driven assemblies and one-man-bands have little appeal to a generation that is individual and relationally driven. This new generation seeks Jesus directly, independently and individually. They have been wearied of having to go through some authority figure in order to access the Man. They seek to fear God more than man, and thus they are fleeing from one-man existing churches in order to go directly to Jesus through His word.

People need friends. Any religious group that has founded its existence on the charisma of a dynamic speaker, sophisticated programs, or energetic assemblies will find that their numbers are diminishing. One can enjoy a great oration from a dynamic clergy, join in with a choir of inspiring singing, exhaust oneself through emotional outpouring, but after the closing prayer, have no friends. The tragedy of the institutional church was that it primarily focused primarily on perfecting assemblies, while ignoring associations.

Seeking to emphasize one's religious heritage as a means to stay the exodus will not work with this new generation. This generation of truth seekers is not heritage driven. It is their heritage from which many are fleeing. They see their religious heritage as an institution of bondage that confined their freedom. They see their heritage as social intimidation to bring them into the prison of the traditions of the past, which traditions have become somewhat repulsive. They do not seek to return to either reformation theology or a restoration heritage. What is so encouraging about this generation of truth seekers is that they want to peel away all the traditions that have so clouded the simplicity of the truth. They want to know the truth by digging through all the historical rubbish that has been clinging to Christendom for centuries. And in doing this, they are making an awesome discovery.

This discovery is that Christianity is actually simple, tradition free, and in contact with the emotional and practical needs of all men in all cultures. And because relational seeking people are discovering the simplicity of the gospel, they have to some extent argued with their fathers for handing them a religion that was so encumbered with the traditions of the past.

A. DRIVEN TO ONE ANOTHER

Now this is exciting. Once people start scaling away that which identified their particular denomination, they realize that the simplicity of the gospel brings them together. Millions are discovering that truth does not separate one honest believer from another honest believer. It unites. And when believers have the same desire to sluff off the traditions and partyism of the past, they find themselves on roads that eventually

lead them together.

That which denominated them becomes the curse from which they seek to flee. The deepest human urge is to be together. We fear loneliness, and thus crave the companionship of one another. The tower of Babel was built on the urge for human companionship. God made us this way. But what religionists have done throughout history is the opposite. Churches that are fundamentally contrary to the basic human nature of man to associate with his fellow man will continue to diminish. God made us social, and thus we seek to be together. And being together does not mean being present in large assemblies, but in assemblies wherein individuals communicate and interact. There is a new generation that seeks assemblies wherein individuals have the opportunity to interact with one another in a participatory fellowship. For this reason, the explosion of house churches throughout the world is the manifestation of a religious world that seeks to connect.

The phenomenal flight to house churches did not come because some have sought to restore a new doctrinal truth. House churches are only a manifestation of a social change, a change from the corporate, institutional church of the past 400 hundred years that became cold and indifferent. House churches represent a change in the people of societies who seek to be relational. The leadership of growing churches have recognized this social change, and thus have encouraged small groups to emerge as the church throughout any particular community. The leadership of the true ekklesia is not intimidated by those who seek to be relational in their communities. They are not threatened because they claim no authority over the ekklesia of God, and thus encourage people to seek people wherever they can meet for mutual exhortation.

The concept of the “big church” of the last century worked against the spirit by which people seek to commune with one another. The failure of the “big church” was that it work against the innate nature of the individual to have close friends. The “big church” today, has changed. It no longer identifies itself with large single assemblies, but with small relational assemblies throughout communities. Its size is not determined by the number of heads that can be counted in a single assembly on Sunday morning in one building.

There is nothing wrong with a church building. Unfortunately, they have become representative of a cold cluster of mute individuals who have no contact with one another outside their walls. They not only represent an unfriendly atmosphere, they represent isolation into denominated groups throughout any community where they are situated. Church buildings represent a denominated religiosity that is contrary to the desire of believers to be together in order to survive the hostile world in which they live.

I once had a conversation with a social worker in South Africa who said to me,

“The people do not want to go to church.” However, they will talk for hours about church and Bible with one another on a street corner, in a pub, or a restaurant. I must personally confess that I have met with fellow Christians for three to five hours in meetings in a restaurant talking about God, the Bible and Jesus’ work among the people. That’s church.

The symbols of religious division are shunned by this new generation of disciples who seek to be together wherever two or three can either converse or work in the name of the Lord. This is the reason why those who seek freedom in Jesus are repulsed by religious power structures, organizational restrictions, and leaders who seek to dominate the minds of freedom seekers. There are millions out there who personally seek the authority of Jesus in their lives as opposed to those who would have authority over them in this world. They seek the Lord, not lords.

What is happening, therefore, is that as the traditions that defined one’s particular religious heritage in the past are being stripped away, truth seekers are coming together. When they discover the fundamental simplicity of Jesus and His ekklesia (“church”), they discover that they agree on more than they disagree. They discover the universal ekklesia that is identified, not by the heritage of a sacred institution, but by the disciples’ love for one another and desire to serve humanity.

B. NETWORKING FREEDOM

Those who are still isolated with a denominational partyism spirit will have a hard time understanding a generation of truth seekers who are searching for one another on common ground. There are those who seek unity in order to sustain their particular denomination, or religious affiliation. But this new generation of truth seekers is searching outside their heritage in order to find other previously confined inmates who also seek deliverance from their institutional past.

As seekers peel away the denominational restrictions that have separated believers for four centuries, they are discovering one another. They seek to network with one another in a spirit of individual freedom in Christ. They seek fellowship, not isolation. Denominationalism isolated them for so long that they are driven to one another on the common ground of Jesus and His word. This religious/sociological movement presents the ekklesia with a tremendous opportunity. It is a tremendous opportunity if the ekklesia can reach outside its own cocoon in order to make contact with those who have no desire to “convert” from one denomination to another, but simply to be simple Christians in a world of religious confusion. If this is to happen, then the disciples of Jesus must define themselves according to the undenominational simplicity of the New Testa-

ment ekklesia.

This is not a Catholic church movement. It is not Catholic simply because it was autonomous groups that were structured after the Catholic church that caused the problem in the first place. In order to guard against becoming another Catholic church, the Reformation Movement leaders preached the autonomy of each denominated group. Such teaching only led reformed churches back to Catholic organizational structures that focused on authorities and lords within each “organized” denomination. Those who fled from Catholic structures thus developed their own synods and organizations that were again focused on figures of authority. From this came restoration movements that dissolved the synods, preached against the Catholics, and then established Catholic power structures themselves within each autonomous group. Church history reveals that people went from one universal Catholic Church to individual autonomous catholic structures wherein they denominated themselves from one another.

It is from these organizational (institutional) structures of the last four centuries, that are based on some center of earthly authority, that a generation of freedom seekers are searching their way out. It is a restoration that seeks to focus only on Jesus with only the authority of His world. In fleeing from authoritarian structures that brought believers into bondage, the millions who are seeking Jesus today are drawn to one another by the common cause of restoring the authority of the word of God in their lives by submitting to the One who has all authority, Jesus. It is a generation of people who have learned that any authority among men on earth in the religious world hinders total submission to the authority of Jesus on earth through His word. They have grown weary of seeking permission from men on earth to serve, and thus seek to serve in freedom that was granted to them by the Prince of Peace two thousand years ago who promised, *“If the Son will make you free, you will be free indeed.”*

We must not misjudge this restoration to be the result of an anarchist spirit. Those of this group are anarchists only to those who seek to remain institutionally minded, for it is from this mindset that they are fleeing. It is only natural that the guards of a prison sound the alarm when prisoners escape. But we would rejoice, not seek to imprison again. If we claim to understand the freedom disciples have in Christ, then we will rejoice when freedom seekers seek to joint themselves to Jesus, rather than some prison of human religiosity. Those who are free, and enjoy the freedom that they have in Christ, should rejoice over these who also are seeking freedom.

A common search for freedom in Christ has brought them together. It is a discovery of true unity that is based on a common submission to Jesus, not on organizational connection with one another. It is not unity within denominated groups, or unity through cloned interpretations, or the social acceptance within churches that have

become social clubs. It is an exciting unity of those who are coming out of denominated groups in order to seek unity in diversity that is based on Jesus and His word. The power of the movement is thus in the fact that it is not a movement that seeks unity between particular groups. It is a movement of disorganized groups who have a common goal. This is not a Babel unity movement that seeks to build institutional towers of big churches that would seek glory for themselves. On the contrary, it is a movement of small groups who are disorderly dispersing throughout the world as leaven in order to be fruitful for the purpose of populating the kingdom of God. They seek to be hidden as leaven, doing their work of influencing the whole world loaf.

What frustrates the institutionally minded is the fact that they cannot “number Israel,” and thus include them among known Israelites on church registers. The institutionally minded cannot find these groups in local phone books, or identify them by monuments that have been built on street corners. These “leaven disciples” can be located on Sunday morning only by driving throughout local communities in order to find a group of vehicles parked in front of a house. Their membership was placed in heaven upon their obedience to the gospel, and they will not change it by placing it on the attendance role of some institutionalized church.

In the midst of a non-Christian world that is becoming increasingly more hostile to Christianity, believers are seeking a faith that will bring them together into a united force against the wiles of the Devil. In an increasingly secular world of those who have no desire for faith, there are those who are seeking how they might become the universal ekklesia that seeks to save as many as possible before God brings an end to a world that is becoming more difficult for the those of faith. It is for this reason that truth seekers are looking for a restored faith, common fellowship, and freedom that is based on the direction of Jesus through His word. These are truly exciting times for world evangelism for those who can see the work of God in preparing the fields for harvest. As this united band of believers permeates the loaf of humanity, in its hidden existence it will find those who are of a kindred spirit. They are thus becoming God’s ekklesia through which He will reach this world. This ekklesia does not look like the traditional church, and because it does not is the power that it has to represent Jesus before millions who “do not want to go to church.”

C. SERVICE-ORIENTED DISCIPLES

Another characteristic of this generation of believers is the behavior of their lives. It is a behavior that is somewhat different from previous reformation or restoration movements. It is a behavior that is sparked by service, not doctrine. It is a movement of

disciples who are moved by a Person (Jesus), not by human personalities.

In previous reformation or restoration movements, churches were established and built through victories in battles of debate over doctrine or catechism. The victorious formed their own denomination, and thus secluded themselves from those with whom they disagreed, or from those they had conquered in a doctrinal debate. The systematic theology of these newly established movements or churches was often reactionary, and thus to some extent their objectivity in interpreting Scripture was often questionable.

But this new generational response to faith is based primarily on a response to the person of Jesus. Its response to Jesus is defined by a desire to respond to social needs. “Voluntourism” has to a great extent replaced “campaigns.” In the past, teams of campaigners were sent forth in order to win singles out of the camp of the enemy. They did so in an effort to either grow an existing body of believers, or initiate new groups in the midst of opposing groups with whom they doctrinally disagreed. Churches were thus established that were based on what a particular group did or did not do in a calculated assembly, instead of what a group did to serve a community. Churches established their identity on the foundation of a catechism of belief, not on what they did to manifest their love for the community in which they lived. These doctrinally “sound” churches thus sat in the midst of communities throughout the world, having little or no communication with those with whom they disagreed on often minute points of either Scripture or tradition. In their separation from the community they were to reach, they became groups that were identified by doctrinal catechism instead of their efforts to reach the local communities in which the members lived. They contented themselves with a false sense of security by reassuring themselves every Sunday that they “had the truth.” They became a colony of contentious contenders.

But a new generation has arisen that has no desire to be skilled in the art of debate. Those of this generation seek to interface with a world that seeks friends. They are thus redefining the relational behavior of the ekklesia in the midst of a highly unevangelistic generation of the traditional church. They are people oriented and service driven. Instead of arrogantly huddling themselves every Sunday in assemblies of self isolation, they are leaving the buildings and authority structures in order to volunteer to serve in the lives of others. In reference to their going into all the world, a new word has been invented to replace the word “campaigners.” They are now called “voluntourist.” Voluntourists seek to show people how much they care, before speaking the word for which they care so much.

D. WORD-FOCUSED

The new generation of seekers will go in one of two directions: (1) There will be those who are more relational oriented, and less word directed. (2) There are those who are relational oriented, but seek to be directed by the word of God as they find their way out of the milieu of institutional confusion that has stymied Christendom for a half century.

Those who forget the word of God in their search for definition and direction will go the way of all movements that are humanistic. They will create a religion after their own desires, and thus join the host of man-made religions of the world that are humanitarian, and yet misdirected by a god they have created after their own imagination. They will lose their sense of God in a world of religions that cannot focus beyond the calamities of humanity.

But there is a tremendous opportunity for those who are seeking direction through the word of God in order to find their way back to the cross of Jesus. This is a generation of people who are truly Psalms 119 driven.

The literary structure of Psalms 119 is fascinating. The Psalm is outlined into divisions by the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, one letter representing each division. Each division focuses on a specific aspect of life. The psalmist interwove the word of God around each aspect of life, and by doing so, allowed the word of God to mold the thinking of those who would focus on God while they faced the challenges of life. Throughout each verse of the Psalm, the psalmist turned the minds of the readers to God and how He only can direct one through life. If one would be pleasing to God, therefore, his life must be woven around the commandments, statutes, precepts, judgments and law of God.

There are millions of people in the world today who are seeking the simplicity of Christianity that is not entangled in the quagmire of the traditional religiosity that has so encumbered institutional churchianity for centuries. These millions are searching. They need direction. They seek fellowship with those who are of a kindred spirit. They want to be free. They are thus not searching for another domain of bondage, but a relational environment wherein they can serve others as their God has served them. They are looking only for the authority that manifests itself from the throne of Jesus, not for the lordship structures of men who seek to bring others into the bondage of either opinions or traditions. They seek no transfer of membership from one institution to another, but freedom from that which defines institutional religiosity. They are just not into denominational religiosity.

These are thus exciting times and opportunities for the preaching of the One who came in order to set us free from ourselves in order that we might be the servants of all. They are exciting times for those who have not taken the ekklesia into a spirit institu-

tional denominationalism that separates members from those who are searching for the truth of the gospel.

Epilogue *The Emerging Ekklesia*

This is an epic wherein the ekklesia is emerging from the institutional denominations of the past in order to manifest herself as the one universal body of Christ. The ekklesia that seeks to restore herself is now calling all the world to focus Jesus, not on a particular denominating body that is cloned after those that identified Christendom in the past. History has taught the ekklesia a great lesson. Institutional religiosity cannot call people to the person of Jesus. Neither can the simplicity of the gospel be used as a cloaked means by which to recruit people from one institution to another. The pure gospel brings people to the foot of the cross and in front of the opened tomb. No organization can take people there, for all the organizational sects are back in Jerusalem with the religious establishment. It takes individuals to bring individual people to the person of Jesus. When people see Jesus in one's life, they are drawn to that love, for it is by that love that the ekklesia is identified. People relate with people, but not with an organization, even though it is called "church."

What is happening is that people are discovering the truth that individuals can establish a covenant with God directly. One's relationship with God is not through a religious institution. The ekklesia is the serendipity of individual obedience to the gospel, not the means by which a relationship is established with God. The ekklesia discovers herself when relationships are established with individual members who have obedience to the gospel in common. It is no longer "join the church of your choice," but join yourself to Jesus. When those who have joined themselves to Jesus discover one another, they begin to discover the universal ekklesia.

It is for the preceding reasons that the ekklesia must always function as the hidden leaven of the loaf, but work in harmony with all the other microbes of leaven that continue to multiply throughout the loaf. Each individual microbe of leaven is present in the loaf of the world. Those on the outside of the loaf cannot see each individual microbe. We cannot see their work. But we can see the results of the work because the loaf begins to grow. There are no bands and buildings, no monuments on the street corners, or great public relation campaigns. The true ekklesia does not work in order to bring glory to herself. All things are done in the name of Jesus in order to bring glory to God. It is the universal ekklesia working in government, civic groups, institutional churches, political parties, and every other organization of man. The ekklesia can so work as leaven because she is not an organization of man, but the kingdom reign of Jesus within the hearts of men.