

IS BIGGER REALLY BETTER

by Craig Marlatt

I recently heard a comment about a prophecy that came forth from a very prominent minister concerning the sudden trend towards extra large churches that is now happening across the country. The message of this prophecy was that before too long there would not be any small ministries around, but that only the large prosperous works would be able to continue in the days that lie ahead. As the director of a small ministry this thought was very interesting to me. Yet I believe that the prophecy is valid and may very likely come to pass. There are several things to be considered first if one is to view this prophecy objectively:

1. Does prophetic fulfilment always indicate God's will concerning specific situations?

2. Can prophecy be a warning sign given to change our current direction and to bring us into God's perfect will?

1. Does prophetic fulfilment always indicate God's will?

The fact that this prophecy may very likely be fulfilled, at least on some scale, is very disturbing to me and stands I believe as an indictment against the Church in the western world today. If these small ministries fail it will not be because God wills it to be so, but rather a result of neglect on the part of Church leadership. Because we have failed to inform the Body of Christ, by and large, just what her responsibility is to the needs of those around us we have developed a self-centered form of Christianity that allows some of us to spend most of our time showering under the blessings of God rather than sharing the blessings of God. In all of our growth and abundance we must be careful to be sure that we are not just increasing in stature in our own eyes rather than rising up to meet the demands and concerns of God's Kingdom.

There are several specific trends that I see appearing on the horizon of the evangelical Church that I believe are of utmost importance to the future of evangelism in this generation:

A. Isolationism

With this current trend toward bigness there is also a rising attitude of 'isolationism' that is growing fast in the Church. The idea is to create a total church environment. Produce programs for every member of the family from the kids to the singles, to housing for the grandparents and there is a very good chance that the entire family will spend most of their time 'at church' for one reason or another. The idea carries a lot of positive ramifications with it and is very attractive to the average Christian, especially those who have families and are looking for the right environment for their children, etc. The problem is that if the church was meant to be a retreat center from all the evils of the world then why did Jesus choose to place the first church body in the middle of a danger zone like first century Jerusalem?

B. Professionalism

The secular media and Madison Avenue have made such an impact on our society

that even the church itself expects to be entertained and solicited before it will fulfil its duties; hence, whoever offers the best entertainment and produces the highest quality of solicitations will get the best return. In my opinion this current trend, more than any other, is indicative of how much the Church has been affected by the worlds view of what makes something good or bad.

There is certainly nothing wrong with being professional in what we do, but we must not exchange spiritual sensitivity and anointing for professionalism. As hard as it may seem we must face the fact that many well meaning Christians will choose their church on the basis of what that particular group has to offer. This definitely produces many benefits for that person or family if the right choice is made but such a mentality may hinder the flow of God's finances and enablement from reaching the places where it is most needed. It is a never ending cycle to try and satiate the appetite that this mentality produces. Because this type of Christian will constantly be trying to better his or her own worship environment much of the money that could be going out for ministry to the needy and evangelistic efforts gets spent on better pews or fancier buildings.

If we compare the tremendous difference in the church income that is spent on ourselves (buildings, programs, equipment, etc.), and the money and time that goes into helping those who have severe needs around us we will quickly see the wrong in our current approach to "Church". Because those ministries who are reaching out to the needy are often small struggling entities they will soon find it impossible to compete with the large churches in their efforts to raise funding from the Christian community. If this happens then who will minister to the ones who don't fit in with the crowd? If we isolate all of the resources and bring them into the large churches and use them to accommodate ourselves and enrich our own lives then who will help the desperate people around us? They will soon be forgotten and left behind in the whirlwind of religiosity!

2. Can prophecy be a warning sign given to change our current direction and to bring us into God's perfect will?

Anyone who has even a basic knowledge of Bible prophecy will know the answer to this question. God often spoke through His prophets with reprimands to His people. But there would nearly always be room for repentance within the context of the prophetic warning.

If we look at Isaiah 1:10-23 we see that God is calling His people Israel 'Sodom and Gomorrah'. Why? Because in spite of all of all their religious duties that they were fulfilling they were not pleasing to God. Although they were faithful in the assemblies, and the meetings, and the feasts, and fastings and the like, yet they had forgotten the character and nature of God, and because of this He would not hear their prayers, etc.

What was God's demand before He would receive them? "Wash you make you clean; Put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; Cease to do evil; learn to do well; Seek judgement, Relieve the oppressed, Judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now let us reason together, saith the Lord" (Isaiah 1:16).

God definitely wants His Church to prosper and grow, but we must not forget to minister to the neglected people who have always been important to the Lord. In fact in Isaiah 58 God show us that His plan for blessing us is wrapped up inside of this very thing. "To loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, . . .to let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke. To deal thy bread to the hungry, to bring in the

poor, and clothe the naked.” If the church does this God says we will have light, health, righteousness, and He will protect us. He will guide us continually, and satisfy our soul in drought. He will make our bones fat and cause us to be like a watered garden, and like an unfailing spring. That our people would build the old waste places, raise up the foundations of many generations, repair the breach, and restore the paths to dwell in.

Let us learn a good lesson from history. The cause of Christ is rarely advanced just because the Church possesses great riches, but rather it is moved forward by the Christ-likeness that is exhibited within the Church corporate and in the lives of individual believers. If this trend for bigness is really from God then the Church leadership must fulfil its responsibilities to those who are less fortunate, and we must do so now, not after we’ve arrived at our own personal goals.

I have been accused of not believing in the message of prosperity for God’s people, but that is far from the truth I assure you. I do agree that God wants His people to prosper, but I believe that if God wants any of us to prosper then He wants all of us to prosper. I do not believe that this will happen if we pull away from the harsh realities that exist around us, the poverty and desolation that has overtaken many of our brothers and sisters who are not able to ‘make the grade’ when it comes to keeping pace with the prospering crowd. If we are to be like Jesus we must resist the temptation to withdraw into a Christian World and fool ourselves into believing that everyone who really follows God will be doing as well as we are. Such naivete is unbecoming to those who claim to be so enlightened.

Until we can say “he that had gathered much had nothing over; and he that had gathered little had no lack” (II Cor. 8:13-15). there is no justification for spending huge amounts of kingdom money on structures of clay ! How quickly do we forget the admonition of Jesus to His disciples in Matthew 24 when they came to show him the buildings of the temple: “See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you there shall not be left here one stone upon another that shall not be thrown down.”

Let’s return to God’s vision and purposes in this world. He has not left us here to build a kingdom. Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world”. If it was true for the Master, should it not be true for his children? Let us use the tremendous resources that God has given us to reach out to those who have yet to be touched by His life changing love. They deserve more than the scraps that fall from our full tables!

I pray that we will not see the fulfilment of this prophecy but I am preparing my heart to continue even if we do. I pray that in years to come many Christians will experience the joy of giving of ones self radically for the purposes of the Kingdom. That as the coming of the Lord draws nearer many will consider not their own lives but give themselves for the sake of those around them. I believe that there will be an End Time Army that will not be given over to the monuments of man’s ego but will rise up to stand against the devil’s thrust and risk all for the cause of Christ! They will not necessarily be big in number but they will be mighty in battle. And they will take the light to where the darkness is prevailing.