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Prophet Jim Smith. December 2004

The marks of a Missionary Church. Prophet Jim Smith. Part 1

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Looking out over the world from my office here in England, it doesn't take a genius to see that there is trouble everywhere. The economic situation is wiping out the wealth of Asia; the Russian currency is becoming almost valueless; the economies of South America are beginning to tumble as the tidal wave of economic collapse begins to wash around them. Many of the economies of the developing world are in bad shape, with their debt to the Western Communities contributing to the economic uncertainty.

Struggle is apparent in many countries. The Americans have just bombed Afghanistan and the Sudan, in response to terrorist outrages against their citizens. This has only succeeded in making the world a much more dangerous place. The Middle East remains as unsettled and potentially dangerous as ever. Religions struggle for ascendancy, with Christian witness and values under pressure in many places from fundamentalist Islam, from Secularism and New Age. Spiritually, Europe is rotten to the core, a residence of former glory but current spiritual decay. Surely such confusion and uncertainty has not been seen for many years.

This is the reality, but it is not all gloom. When America bombed the Sudan, my heart was filled with anxiety. What would this do to world affairs, and especially to Africa? I wondered if America had lit the fuse to an enormous explosion of fundamentalist Islam, which would sweep Africa. Then the Lord spoke to me. "Perhaps" he said "I am planning something much bigger than a wave of fundamentalist Islam. Perhaps I am planning to ..." "To what Lord?" I asked. But tantalisingly, He has left me to think the rest out for myself. I remembered a vision I had on Pentecost Sunday 1998. While I was worshipping in my Church, I saw the Spirit moving and a great wave of fire sweeping from Nigeria, and across Africa. I was so excited. Is this what God is planning? Is this why all the chaos and confusion has risen up, to try and deceive the people of God, and spoil the things God is planning?

This raises the question, which is the theme of what I am writing here. If God is planning something special, what kind of Church do we need to be, so that he can work with us and through us, to touch the continent of Africa, and from there, the rest of the world? My conviction is that we have got to become Missionary Churches - centres from which God can send us out to do His will. I don't have the full plan for such a Church. But I have written here some of the marks which such Churches must have, and I challenge all who read this to work hard in prayer and study, to see if these things come from God, and if they do, to begin to apply them to their own local Church.

Be warned. A Missionary Church is a powerhouse of the Holy Spirit, not a holiday centre! To live in such a Church is profoundly challenging to everything we believe in, and to the way we live our lives. Missionary Churches are revolutionary- they revolutionise those who live in them. It will never be comfortable, or peaceful. But those who live in such Churches may be like those soldiers Gideon took with him into battle - they will not have to listen to others speaking about the great works God has done. They will see the Midianites defeated with their own eyes and God's Kingdom coming in power. What a privilege!

Antioch

“In the Church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen, and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them, and sent them off.” (Acts 13:1-3)

The Church of God in Antioch was born into mission. We read “Now those who had been scattered by the persecution travelled as far as...Antioch telling the message only to Jews. Some of them however went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.” (Acts 11:19) These Christians, who were to form the heart of the Church in Antioch knew that what they had could not be kept to themselves. They had a vision and a passion for Jesus, and were determined to share it. This caused initial alarm, but when Barnabas was sent from Jerusalem to investigate, he was thrilled with this move of God, and commended the Church to the Apostles. (Acts 11: 22-26)

So Antioch came into being – a Missionary Church, strategically placed to thrust out with the message about Jesus to Asia and beyond. The Christians there soon began to order themselves into a fellowship. We see that they had prophets and teachers (Acts 13:1) and they were soon to have their very own Apostle in Paul of Tarsus. Other prophets and evangelists were not far away at Caesarea, and we can safely assume that these ministries also grew in this powerful Missionary filled body. When Paul arrived his ministry would soon teach them that the kingdom message was not just about bringing men the good news, or even planting Churches, but was for the transforming of the minds of men (Romans 12: 2) so that creation might reach its fullness (Romans 8: 19) and the sons of God might be the agents of reconciliation between God and his creation. (2 Corinthians 5:18) In other words, Paul brought them the full Kingdom message - that it is the world we are seeking to change and save, not just calling individual men to repentance and faith.

Into this pulsating Church, God brought Paul on his Missionary journey. In Acts Chapter 13 the Church accepts his call, and sends him on his way. The verses which describe this event give us a clear insight into the heart of the Church, and give us some ideas as to what we should be looking for and expecting in a Missionary Church today. We have no option but to study and learn. Jesus left us the mission “Go and make disciples of all Nations..” In these words he committed us to being a Missionary body – a Church with a clear calling and commitment. We very much need the insights from Antioch if we are to build from gold, and not stones, wood and straw. (1 Corinthians 3:13) If our Churches are to be springboards for a major Missionary thrust into our countries, and beyond to those areas which at present are closed to us, then we need to learn again these lessons.

FIRST RULE- The Holy Spirit.

The fundamental principle of a Missionary Church is summed up in these words from Chapter 13 verse 2 – “The Holy Spirit said to them...” In a Missionary Church, the Holy Spirit is active - moving, stirring, speaking and stimulating the Church to action and service. This makes for a body which is in a state of constant expectation. In the wilderness wanderings of the people of God, we read these words:- “In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out- until the day it lifted. So the cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and the fire was in the cloud by night in the sight of all the house of Israel during all their travels.” (Exodus 40:36)

The people of Israel were a pilgrim people. They were ready to move and expecting to move towards the land of promise. Every day they looked for signs of God’s moving, and when they saw them, they moved. A Missionary Church should be like this - day by day being ready to move towards their promise. It There should be a powerful experience of restrained activity. Tradition and human institutions should be submitted to the move of the Spirit A Missionary Church should be a powerful, and even a frightening place to be. God is at work in a Missionary Church. Why do so many fellowships fail to become Missionary Churches? The reasons are simple, but the solutions more difficult.

Some Churches are bound up in denominational structures, rules and regulations. The Spirit cannot move in such places.
(Mark 7:8-14)

Some Churches are lazy, and comfortable. A move of the Holy Spirit would be too frightening for them. Some are worse – they have lost all heat and all fire. The dove can find no place to place his feet in such fellowships. (Genesis 8:8-9)

Some pastors are not truly called from God. A move of the Spirit would show their emptiness. Some are looking for worldly power and position. This is incompatible with a move of the Holy Spirit. (Luke 14:7)

Some Churches are too afraid of the uncertainties which come with a move of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit cannot be contained, and will not do things in our way, at our convenience or to our order. The wind blows where it wills,
(John 3:8) and we have to be willing to live with this exciting uncertainty.

Some Churches are unaware of the Missionary concept. They have a poor theology of mission, or no theology of mission. They have no concept of the five fold ministry, or in fact of any pattern of Biblical theology and mission. (Ephesians 4:11)

But some Churches are alive to the move of the Spirit. They are open to the voice of God, and are being daily released into God’s purposes. These Churches have grasped the first

and most essential principle of mission - the Holy Spirit has to be the prime initiator and developer of the strategy.

If this is your Church, then I encourage you to study the marks which follow, and ask God for a deeper and wider move of the Spirit. If this is not your Church, then I encourage you to seek God and ask “Why is the Holy Spirit not moving in us as He should?” Then study the marks which follow, in the light of what God says to you.

THE MARKS OF A MISSIONARY CHURCH.

When the Missionary Church is spirit filled and directed, a number of key marks begin to show themselves. It is in studying and taking hold of these, that a Church becomes what God intended it to be. Each mark needs much prayer and study.

1.A Vision

“The Lord said to Abraham – ‘Lift up your eyes from where you are and look to the north and south, the East and West. All the land that you see I will give you.’”
(Gen.13:14)

Abraham needed a vision, which would sustain him through all of his pilgrimage. No matter what happened, he could always go back to that great vision. It gave him purpose and courage. The Church in Antioch had a vision. To the North lay the whole of Asia, as yet untouched with the Good News. The Church felt the weight of this great unreached people, and longed to do something about it. So when the Spirit said “Set aside Paul & Barnabas” it was easy for them to do it. They saw these two men as in part the fulfilment of their vision.

Missionary Churches have a vision – a vision of to transform the lives and the world around them and beyond. The vision is like the heartbeat of the Church. It affects everything that is done, gives strength to do it and courage in times of difficulty. Without it, the Church becomes dull, inward looking, and concerned with irrelevant things. It is exposed to the dangers of becoming lukewarm, faithless, trusting in the things of this world, poor, naked and blind.

How do I know if my Church has a vision?

In any household, it is obvious when there are no children around. It’s quiet, the floors have no toys on them, and no children come into the room. There is no need for a sign saying “No children here!” We just know that they are not there. In much the same way, know that a Church has no vision when we feel in our spirit that no vision is present. A Missionary Church, full of the Holy Spirit will impress its vision into us. St Paul describing something of his vision for the Church said this:- “Everyone who calls on the

name of the Lord will be saved. How can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?"

(Romans 10:14-15) We might paraphrase these verses like this:- "How can the people build their lives on Jesus, and change their Nations unless they are shown how to do it? And how can they be shown how to do it if the Church has no vision of telling them?"

What is the vision for your Church? (To answer 'to save the lost' is not a vision of mission. That is a part of the mission, but only a part.) If you have one, how is it being put into practice? If you do not have one, then begin to pray, and ask the Holy Spirit to show you why you have no vision, and allow Him to make the changes necessary for you to have one.

2.Worship

"Whenever the living creatures give glory, honour and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever."
(Revelation 4:9-10)

Heaven is full of worship, and so it is obvious that a Missionary Church will be full of powerful worship. This was true at Antioch, where the Spirit spoke to them while they were worshipping. The Missionary Church is very much in the hands of God. It is always moving out, going forward and taking risks. It needs the knowledge of the presence of God. Worship brings that closeness and knowledge of God. Worship brings God's people into the heavenly places, and then to the throne of God. It tunes us in with the worship of heaven, and gives us that encouragement and strengthening which flows from the presence of God.

In the presence of God we move into the flow of the Spirit:- "Then the angel showed me the river of water of life, as clear as crystal flowing from the throne of God and from the lamb." (Revelation 22:1) In the presence of God we are established again in the victory of the cross of Jesus:- "He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code with all its regulations that was against us and stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." (Colossians 2: 13-15) "Now have come the salvation and the power and the Kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night has been hurled down." (Revelation.12:10-11) In the presence of worship, God speaks through the prophets, and prepares a way for the preaching of the word of God. The Church at Antioch worshipped, and their hearts were prepared to hear from God about the direction of the Church.

Yet so often, Churches fail to worship God. They make a lot of noise, and sing religious words, but there is no Holy Spirit leading in what they are doing. At best, these Churches manage only to enter into praise, which is godly and blessed (“Shout for joy to the Lord all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness, come before him with joyful songs.” Ps100:1) but does not bring on the Assembly that sense of awe and majesty, which is the true mark of worship:-

“Do not come any closer” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.”

(Exodus 3:5) “Jesus..was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters - one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah. (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.” (Mark 9: 2-6)

At worse, Churches are merely copying the world, assuming that the right equipment, the right rhythm and the right movements will bring the assembly to worship. The responsibility for this failure to worship rests in many places.

Pastors fail to discern their worship.

The wrong people are put in charge of worship – people who have, perhaps, come from musical traditions in the world, and merely carry on the same processes they knew before, without any understanding of worship.

Musicians themselves do not know how to worship, and do not worship in private; musicians do not pray and wait on God enough.

Worship leaders are unable to discern the move of God in the assembly, reacting wrongly, or not at all to that move. Pastors fail to give a lead in this.

The people of God are coming unprepared to worship.

But worst of all, the people and the leaders do not want to worship. For pure worship exposes our hearts to the penetrating light of God’s presence. If we want to pass into the heavenly places, to worship at the very throne of God, then all that we are must be open to his gaze. Many do not want this. Why not?

Some pastors know that they are not pure and do not want that exposed before God.

Many of God’s people are not pure, and do not want to be exposed before God.

Many people are content with a lukewarm Church, where they can be comfortable, They do not want to be turned upside down by the Spirit of the Living God.

Many have little commitment to Jesus, and are unwilling to give him the all that he demands.

The Spirit of God is like a gently burning wick. (Isaiah 42:3) If wrong attitudes are present, and are not being changed, He will be extinguished, and the worship will deteriorate. I can say with great conviction that a Church without a depth of worship will never and can never be a Missionary Church.

Does your Church worship, or are you just a place of praise? Are the attitudes I have mentioned here present in your Church? How are you going to change things? How are you going to deepen your worship, so that God can speak to you?

3. Hearing the call from God

Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Matthew, Zacchaeus, Paul – these men all had one thing in common – they heard a call from God. For Samuel, it was a voice in the night to a young man - “Samuel, Samuel.” Eventually it took a wiser head to help him discern what was happening. For Isaiah it was the voice of God speaking into his powerful vision of heaven’s worship and glory - “Who will go for us? Who can I send?” For the Lord Jesus it was not a voice of call, but a voice of confirmation - “This is my beloved son. Listen to him.” These instances of the call of God should not surprise us. God promises “Call to me and I will answer you.” (Jeremiah 33:3) Jesus tells us “Whatever you ask in my name I will do.” (John 14: 13-14) It’s clear from the lives of God’s people in the past, and from the words of God himself, that he calls, and invites us into His service.

The leaders of Antioch heard the call from God, and in obedience, laid their hands on Barnabas and Paul. These two men in turn heard the call from God, and accepted both their commissioning, and the work to which they were called. This experience should be common in a Missionary Church. Why this should be is easily explained. The Missionary Church is aware of the vision of it’s work, and of it’s responsibility to that vision. It is also full of the move of the Holy Spirit. It’s obvious then that the Holy Spirit will be calling people into ministry, so that the vision can become a reality. This desire of the Spirit to call is backed up by the fact that members of Missionary Churches are hungry for the voice of God. They desire deeply to enter into ministry, so that they may be obedient to that call.

The Missionary Church hears the voice of God. This is quite clear. But the challenge is to learn to recognise that voice, to discern the true voice from the false, and to integrate what God is saying to individuals and the Church as a whole, so that the work develops with maturity and secure foundations. We abandon this principle at our peril. The enemy will sow false voices among us, and unless we take time to discern and pray, the true and authentic call of God will be destroyed. What do we do if many people are hearing from God? We rejoice, and then we begin to test, check, pray, share and talk together, so that we can keep the body of Christ safe, secure and moving forward. This places a heavy

responsibility on to the leadership, but it is one that cannot be avoided. Why is it that in some Churches, there is an absence of the call of God?

Some Churches do not want to hear - the voice will be too challenging.

Some Churches are immature - not giving God the chance to speak, and not recognising the voice when it comes.

Some Churches do not know how to test and check so that they hear the authentic voice.

Some Churches have unconfessed sin in their heart.

Some Churches have failed to realise that they need to hear from God regularly.

If you are hearing from God regularly in your Church, how are you responding to that voice? How do you check that it really is God's voice? If you are not hearing regularly, then spend time in prayer before the Lord to discover why. Perhaps a prophet or an Apostle can help you.