

Becoming De-Westernized

by Don Toshach

As the Taliban regime in Afghanistan has fallen like so many political/military/ cultural/spiritual dominos, the newspapers and TV news pundits are discussing the future of the country. After years of Islamic fundamentalist extremism, a transitional government structure is now in place under the watchful eye of the U.S. and its allies. Beards are disappearing. Women's veils are being removed. Movie houses are again open. With positive changes that come with these developments, there is a danger of a people losing its distinctiveness and becoming wedded to another system of bondage as it embraces the values and mores of the West in the name of freedom and enterprise. As the Who's classic song "Won't Get Fooled Again" says: "Meet the new boss, same as the old boss."

The new/old boss is westernization. It might be defined as the "we're right-you're wrong" mentality. Have it our way. Be linked to the global economy and community. Use our technology; watch our television shows and movies. The influence of America and the West is infused into our political systems, music, higher learning, sports, and fashion. Look like us. Dress like us. Think like us. Be like us. Buy our stuff. Be hip; be cool. If you don't, you'll be behind, not with it. For those of us in the West, we don't even recognize how westernized we've become because it's so deeply ingrained within. Only when having to light a candle during a power outage or using an outhouse while camping do we catch a glimpse of how utter dependent we are upon the system and how sharply that contrasts with the rest of the world.

Westernization has permeated the church. The organic, apostolic, communal gatherings featured in the book of Acts have been replaced by ones run by suited professionals with stopwatches. Highly structured. Highly cerebral. Highly sanitized. Featuring a God who's understandable and safe. Everything org-charted. A congregant knows what's going to go on in this kind of church this week, next week, next month, and next year. Predictable and comfortable.

What's wrong with this picture? Welcome to the machine, Stepford children of God! Whatever happened to the Holy Spirit? The Western church bares little resemblance to anything in the Bible, but everything in our faster, better, cheaper business world. The consequence? It is largely devoid of life and power of the Spirit kind. It is as westernized as a Carl's Jr. Western Bacon Cheeseburger.

The difficulty we face now is attempting to figure out what it means to de-westernized. Doing this leads us into irony. Even if we could figure it out completely, we would be westernizing our very definition of de-westernization! It cannot be subject to our left-brain analysis. The western mindset is programmed to evaluate and act upon information that fits conventional wisdom. Therefore, the de-westernization process has do with "being in the Spirit," which requires seeing and hearing from God differently and preferring an unconventional and revelatory wisdom that's other-worldly.

Right now, for those who chose this path, becoming de-westernized means that we permit God to challenge EVERY assumption, presumption, and expectation. What worked so well yesterday not only may not work today, it may be disobedience if you try it again. We search the Scriptures to explain our supernatural experiences with God. Our encyclopedia data banks of knowledge, our credentials, the ways we encounter God and He encounters us—all are becoming unraveled and liberated from the comfort of the known and anticipated. De-westernization comes not only to dismantle our structures of religiosity, "both apparent and hidden," but it seeks to re-birth us into life in the Spirit that the mind was never intended to capture or control.

In the book of James, it says that an ordinary man like Elijah could pray for rain and it would pour. Ezekiel had dramatic visions. Daniel and Joseph dreamed in Technicolor specifics. Jesus could suddenly disappear from angry crowds threatened his premature death. Philip talked to an angel of the Lord, evangelized a queen's servant, and then "the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip

away” in a world without airplanes and bullet trains (Acts 8:39). Throughout the Scriptures we receive the clues of a supernatural life we have only begun to taste. Little by little, with each God encounter, we join the legions of God-chasers before us who regularly crossed over the boundaries between heaven and earth. They were strangers and aliens, earthbound misfits, and supernatural beings. Their daily lives were governed by the whim of the Spirit.

Recently God led me to read through the book of Jeremiah. I've discovered a couple of nuggets of buried treasure hidden in pronouncements of judgment against stubborn rulers and stuck people. Actually, the process of reading Jeremiah has been a journey into de-westernization. I can't figure it out entirely, and neither can the authors of the commentaries on my bookshelf!

Jeremiah 1:10 establishes that a work of God requires personal and corporate demolition prior to building and planting. John Scotland, a prophetic voice from England, questioned why many are building in a season of demolition. The tearing down, uprooting, destroying, and overthrowing has been happening because God and His River are doing the lion's share of the work. Only the constant rushing living water from the Throne has the force to carve deep canyons into bedrock, and to remove and carry away the embedded rocks of slavery and usher us into the delight of freedom in the Father. Many have treated the River as a carbonated soda or a day at the God Spa, mere refreshment before moving on to something more important and tangible. Unfortunately, they are pouring concrete foundations over the human rubble of pride and fear, and erecting structures that will contain the reluctant blessing of God without the fullness or the lasting fulfillment.

For those perceiving the new things of God, the westernized church no longer holds much attraction. We grapple with how to honor the mainstream churches whose theology cages the Holy Spirit, and those ministries that ran aground on the sandbar in the River and took it as a cue to get a tan and mount new campaigns to win the world and hold large conferences. How do we bless pastors and churches that have channeled the River into their denominational aqueducts, or kept some out in Tupperware containers to be opened cautiously and poured out sparingly in special services? It's a struggle, to be sure.

The perceivers of and participants in God's new thing are people who are of the Spirit and function in the Spirit. After all, we've been “given the one Spirit to drink.” (1 Cor. 12:13). The long-prophesied saints movement is beginning to emerge as a dandelion in the crack of the concrete sidewalk of pastor-dominated, performance-oriented, purpose-driven church paradigms. Throw away the spiritual gifts assessment tools and laypeople mobilization strategy notebooks. The days are here when the Lord is not coloring outside the lines, but He's erased the lines and is putting the crayons into our hands. For pastors, it feels like unemployment, but it is actually redeployment. For others, it feels intangible and illegitimate, and it is! This is the essence of the mobile amoeba of the early apostolic church found multiplying endlessly and unyieldingly in the book of Acts.

Permit me to highlight just a few other things that the Lord seems to be addressing in this season:

* We are in the church, but not of it. Don't get me wrong. Of course, we are in and of the body of Christ universal and local. As part of the church, we share a common identity with Jesus, but we do not accept the values and practices of thoroughly westernized churches and denominations that discount or ignore the necessary empowerment of the Holy Spirit in every aspect of gathering together and going out to be the gospel. Do not expect our increasingly de-westernized mindset and enjoyment of being in the Spirit to be understood, valued or embraced by westernized people or churches. It won't. Remember: There is no such thing as a popular revolution. In the interim, ask God for the right heart to bless that others in the body of Christ who it seems to us are settling for old wineskins, and shelter you from a critical spirit.

* The church in, of, and by the Spirit is the church of the Post-It Note. It's definable only in its ability to be stuck onto what God is saying and doing for a moment, or even for a short season.

This movement is not about the pastor being bored and needing to change things for change sake, but a people of God becoming a prophetic demonstration and acting in the opposite spirit for the purposes of intercession and other things that the Lord has purposed NOT to reveal. The First Church of the Post-It Note is simple, able to be repositioned, and even in some ways, disposable.

* We are witnessing the erosion of our evangelical arrogance. For too long we have lived to be right and do the right things. Note that that was and is the spirit of the Pharisees. All aspects of ministry are changing; especially the prevalent forms of worship and teaching that have been largely captured by the western mindset. Be open and flexible. God is demanding for us to shake the dust off our souls and the comfort mechanisms of what it means to be productive Christians and have a church of so-called "good reputation." Watch spontaneous song and prophetic words, art, and demonstrations of all varieties chip away at this evangelical arrogance as we are confronted with ideas, concepts, and assignments that appear foolish and inconsequential. They are not!

* We are seeing the initial release of apostolic fathers. We have lived in an era of theoreticians instead of practitioners, and figureheads instead of fathers. We've looked to pastors to be our replacement dads instead of our heavenly Father. We loved our new dad for a season before we killed and ate him, and shopped for the next new and improved model that would ultimately fail us again. Fortunately, the River was sent to help us deal with such issues of transference and to heal us from our father wounds. This flow has brought many of us to the place where the Lord desires for us to father others. "Fathering" is not age- or gender-exclusive. Much of prior fellowship in the church has come with fix-it agendas, with home group attendees as paramedics applying bandages at the first sight of blood. The rise of the fathering will release the wounded healers to father in a way that is truly redemptive, focused more on hands-on prayer than man-handled advising. In this way, we begin to become home to one another.

* We're going to deeper levels of sonship and sovereignty. The other day I stumbled upon another nugget in Jeremiah nestled in a diatribe against lying prophets: "Am I only a God nearby, declares the Lord, and not a God far away? Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him? Declares the Lord. Do not I fill heaven and earth? Declares the Lord." (Jer. 23:23-24). In this season, our God seems to have His finger on ever-deepening levels of discovering who were really are as true sons and daughters of the living God. That's why many of us are struggling financially and wondering at times whether we missed the turn and God went the other direction. The issue of provision is one tool the Lord uses to test our faith and trust in trying times. As well, in the midst of a season of bridal-suite intimacy on the one hand, we are challenged to rely upon the "faraway" God, who cloaks His omni-availability in periods of agonizing silence and apparent distance. We visit the land of paradox, as we feel beloved and forsaken by God at the same time. We wonder about our destiny and security. Yet again, we place ourselves in God's hand of control that fear would be replaced by love.

* We have added a feasted lifestyle to our fasted lifestyle. I am convinced that while the Bridegroom is present, I am to be a part of the Feast, not the fast (Matt. 9:14-17). If the Bridegroom is not present, it may be time to fast. The restoration of the significance of the table of broken bread and new wine is also being folded into a new place of simply delighting in enjoying the presence of Jesus at a meal. For too long we've ritualized and compartmentalized communion to make it a separate activity in the course of a worship experience. However, we've experienced worship in a new form as we've gathered for a barbecue, a potluck, dinner at the Cheesecake Factory, or wherever. No guitars, no sermons, no admonishments to stay on task with appropriate spiritual talk. We are feasting, freshly delighting in the Lord and one another, reversing the process of relational burnout, learning that family can rise above the dysfunctional, and saying goodbye to more tired, segmented western church small-group formats. In addition, we are acting out the truth of Psalm 23 in the kingdom now of the Lord preparing a table before us in the presence of our enemies.

* The Lord may not be as concerned about the sins we commit as the attitudes we permit. This statement is not about being light or permissive toward sin, but it encourages all of us to target the seedbed of sin, "our unwashed attitudes toward God, people, and things that seek to entrap us, make us jaundiced and jaded, and keep us from the very spiritual life and health we claim to possess. Attitudes can be like spiritual anthrax, "permeating and infecting everything and everyone. Hold your opinions loosely, and dispense mercy rather than judgment towards others and yourself. And be careful to not be a disgrace by dissing the grace that is so readily accessible through Christ.

In this season, we are seeking to move to the rhythms of Jesus. Our sails are hoisted, waiting for the Spirit wind whose origin and destination is unknown. We are slowly but surely becoming de-westernized.

Don Toshach is with Metachurch and the Third Day Churches, Inc. network in San Diego, Calif., and is the editor of the bi-monthly Kaleidoscope newsletter for forerunners of the emerging church. Don, a graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary, has planted four churches and is the author of A Thirst for More (free download at www.thirddaychurches.com). He and his wife Carolyn have three children and live in the San Diego area.