

Teaching for 2-20-08

There's a Hunger Out There

We hear it more and more. It is expressed in different ways, but it is the same message. There is a great hunger in the Church to see and experience the reality of the power and the depth of God. The people of God are hungry for more of God.

Hunger is defined as a *strong or compelling desire or craving*. From a physical point of view, hunger is a natural response of the body indicating there is a lack in the essentials the body needs to maintain itself. If not satisfied, hunger can lead to malnutrition—which in turn can lead to starvation.

In the spiritual realm, hunger comes from our built-in need to know God and grow in our understanding of Him. There is a God-directed place for hunger, as represented by Paul in Philippians 3:10-15, “*I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection...this one thing I do...I press on.*” This craving—this pressing on—is a sign of maturity in the Christian life (vs. 15).

More recently however, new books and surveys are suggesting that some of this growing hunger stems from a lack of in-depth biblical teaching in the Christian experience. Believers who desire to press into greater maturity in Christ are becoming less satisfied with the offerings of the traditional or “institutional” church.

Where Does This Hunger Come From?

Some new books on the market (such as *Revolution* by George Barna and *Pagan Christianity* by Barna and Frank Viola) are controversial in their assessment of the current state of the Church. Although their content may offend some, it could be that these books serve as indicators that something is wrong with the Church in our day. These authors (along with their surveys and historical research) may in reality reflect the *lack of nutrition* that exists in most Christian “spiritual diets.”

For many years, the American Church especially has been feeding itself on non-nutritious spiritual fast-food. We have been told that activities, conferences, concerts, and events are what we need to feed us and help satisfy that God-hunger inside us. We have been gorging ourselves on mass events—the bigger, the better. We have people who have turned into “conference junkies” as they go from one conference to another. Yet in the final analysis they remain malnourished.

Perhaps it is God's mercy that He has allowed us to expend ourselves and our resources on events and programs. If we are paying attention, we are discovering that they will not satisfy that God-hunger within us. God is graciously allowing us to long for more, while at the same time showing us that drawing people to programs or filling seats in churches has a frightening result: *people who are over-active and under-fed.*

Recognizing Our Hunger

The light on the horizon is that we are beginning to recognize our hunger. More and more believers are bailing out of the institutional church because they are fed up with the lack of substance. They are recognizing the inability of these institutions to meet the hunger for the “God-reality” that continues to grow within them.

Authors like Barna, Viola, and Wolfgang Simson (*Houses That Changed the World*) seek to point out the malnutrition that exists within the institutions of the modern church. Increasingly we are asked where one can go to experience deeper feeding of the hungry soul. Whenever we speak of a “grass-roots” hunger among God’s people, we see a light of recognition in people’s eyes. People are increasingly discontent with personality-led, self-focused, self-promoting churches and ministries. This sense of deep hunger leads some to abandon the institutional church, while others express despair that their hunger will never be satisfied by existing institutions. People are recognizing that there is growing within them desperation for deeper truth and a deeper relationship with their God.

Addressing Our Hunger

This state of hunger in the people of God can illicit a number of responses. If we are in a place of spiritual leadership, we can become defensive and find fault with those who are pointing out the problem. We can blame people for not being *dedicated* enough. Or if we are among those whose hearts are longing for something more, we can easily become cynical or bitter against the Church and its leaders.

None of these responses are healthy or appropriate. What we need is the courage to be honest about our condition. In His letters to the churches in Revelation 1-3, the glorified Jesus called on the churches to recognize where they were falling short. They were to take responsibility and turn to Him in humility. While this growing hunger among God’s people is indeed a statement of the failure of how we have “done church” in the past decades, it is also an amazing opportunity for us to repent. We can repent by turning from those things that have been ineffective. We can turn from the focus on human beings and institutions, and instead turn our hearts to the only One who can fill this hunger in our hearts—the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Challenge Before Us

It is amazing how the human body recognizes when proper life-giving nutrients are ingested. It is the same in the spiritual sense when we focus on the deep nutrition of the Word of God. True hunger is satisfied when we earnestly seek the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ over everything else.

Let us begin to cry out with broken hearts for God to bring a transformation to the very heart of the Church in our land. 1 Corinthians 3:2 speaks of the need for spiritual “meat.” Can we give up those things we hold dearly in our institutions, and instead ask God how we can begin to distribute spiritual meat to God’s people? The challenge is for both leadership and laity to recognize our malnourished condition, repent before the Lord and one another, and commit ourselves to seeking a deeper knowledge of Jesus Christ. He is the Bread of Life who alone can satisfy our hunger.