Subject: The Great Experiment
Posted by jisamazed on Fri, 04 Apr 2008 01:45:37 GMT
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Hey guys, this is my take on how a good church and message went awry. It is from an entry on my blog from last year. Again I need to make it clear that I am no expert on the movement and don't claim to be. I am simply relating my perspective on what I saw and heard and what others said they experienced. I have communicated with others who knew HEF first hand, and their input informs my perspective as well. I'm sure that some of you have a clearer vision of it than I do, and I look forward to hearing your corrective responses.

Faith Assembly and the churches that it spawned might have been successful for the long run. They started with a good theological base (except the "first fruits" eschatology), and good theology is essential for the health of a church. There was freedom to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit during church, at least in some ways. The churches were challenged to be faithful to scripture no matter what the cost and no matter how different we were from the culture around us. There was a wealth of good teaching (along with some really bad teaching). There was a genuineness and lack of showiness when we worshipped the Lord. In the late 1960's and early 1970's, Hobart Freeman offered a scholarly input to a charismatic movement that had few scholars. He affirmed the place of both the prayer of faith and trials at the same time, a balance that was not often preached at the time. In the process of avoiding certain errors, he came up with some of his own.

However, I perceive that HEF became more and more isolated from the church of Jesus as a whole over time. He stopped most of his itinerant preaching by the mid-70's. Kenneth Hagin became theologically unbalanced, and some other teachers that he respected went to shephardship or got caught in immorality. Gordon Lindsay, perhaps his best mentor, died in 1973. By 1976 there was no one to whom he could be accountable and receive correction, or at least he did not think so. When listening to his tapes from that era, I detected a shift in his emphasis in the mid-70's and again in the late 70's. The focus shifted to how Faith Assembly was a bastion of truth among an apostate church. Instead of receiving life from other Christians, he slammed them and shut himself off from them for their various "errors", as if he did not have any. He became defensive about people dying in the church instead of listening to his critics and admitting his faults. The isolation produced some fear and pride. Slowly the church developed cult-like traits, and, like the frog in the pot of water, people were not aware of what was happening. As you can see from some of these posts, some people still are not aware of it.

I don't believe that most of the churches related to FA were built to last for a long time. I don't think FA itself was built to last beyond the first generation. There was little sense of the need to prepare the next generation to lead the churches. Jesus was supposed to come back long before the children were old enough to do that. The young people were told to obey their parents and learn the Word, which is fine, but it was rare for a teenager to be taken under wing by a word

minister and told, "You might be a leader in this church some day. I want to show you how it's done." At least that's the way it was in the 80's. I guess the early to mid 70's were different. When I started in the Grand Rapids group in the early 80's, teenagers were frequently reminded of their tendency to rebel, and sometimes downright mocked-- "You can't get a young person to pick up a quarter nowadays. 'Why, that's not enough to play that there video game'" (from Comfort for Troubled Times). College was frowned upon, though not outright forbidden, because it would corrupt a person. Therefore, young adults were left with the option of learning trades that did not require college education. If they talked spiritual they were given nods of approval, but if they questioned what they were taught they became pulpit bait the next week. Everything that could possibly be done to disillusion and drive away the second generation of Faith Assemblyites was done. Some stuck with it because they loved the Lord and did not want to rebel, or they really thought that it was all scriptural or because they had formed close relationships with others in the group. Or all three. I know something about that.

The structure of church leadership also contributed to the death of the group. Decisions was centered around the pastor or teacher, depending on what church you were a part of and who the teacher was. It was difficult to keep the leaders in check. Even though there was plenty of teaching against shepherdship doctrine (rightfully so), the control over people's lives through preaching and fear amounted to the same kind of bondage as shepherdship. People were afraid to question the leader. If they did, they paid for it. For years in the Grand Rapids church, there were no elders or deacons. There was no recognized local leadership apart from the worship leader. A certain controlling person in the church would report the latest gossip almost every week to the teacher, who came from 100 miles away and had little interaction with people outside of church. The person who was the subject of gossip would hear about it from the pulpit the next week, regardless of whether or not it was true. There are some people to this day who still believe that my mother brought a reporter to church. That was back when reporters were evil.

The "movement" could not sustain itself for long with such an authoritarian leadership structure. Some will argue that it was not authoritarian, but I doubt that such people have experienced a healthy, balanced leadership structure. Once you've sat under or participated in Biblical leadership you never want to go back to the FA model again. Yes, there are many such churches in the world that have top-heavy authority structure. Faith Assembly-type churches were certainly not alone with that problem. When Hobart Freeman died, there was some confusion, and the weight of leadership fell on men who were not prepared for it, or who admitted that they were not called to it. They did the best that they could, and sometimes really shined in spite of the situation. In some ways, the Lord used that desperation to bring a wonderful period of brokenness. However, "the Faith Camp" was set up for the chaos that ensued because there was such fear of compromise, and most of the men did not have the people skills necessary to shepherd the flock. A few did, but eventually the deliverance fad occurred in the mid-eighties because so many people needed help and so few were genuinely equipped to help them.

Add to that the isolation from other Christians, and you have a recipe for "short-lived

movement."

With more and more people leaving the church, hurt and wounded or confused or angry, there were not enough people joining the church to replace them. No one wants to join a legalistic church that uses weird terms like "I'm from the Coloma body" or "My head manifested yesterday" and thinks itself superior to others. This problem happened in most of the related churches. We had no ability to reproduce ourselves. Mercifully, the Lord removed people from the churches and planted them in more healthy environments. Some people backslid and lived horribly.

Those of us who continued to walk with the Lord were able to bring some good teaching that we received to our new churches. In turn, we were able to receive some correction about some of our extremes. To this day, I still occasionally ask myself, "Why do I still have that conviction or believe that particular doctrine? That's not biblical. It's an opinion that people used to preach as if it were the Word." It takes a long time to get it out of your system. No more beat-down.

Faith Assembly was a great experiment. It was a noble try at being so isolated from the world and church that you did not need anyone- you did not need insurance, medical doctors, "denominations" or a lawyer. You could be passive and superspiritual and not engage your faith with the world. Sometimes the Lord blessed people anyway, simply because he honors faith. Sometime in the future we might not be able to access those helps, and we will be prepared because we already learned how to trust the Lord through those situations.

However, as a movement and a church, Faith Assembly failed. It was built for the short run, and it imploded under the weight of legalism, pride, poor leadership structure and isolation. The attempts to save it from self-destruction were too little, too late. It's really too bad. It might have had something really good to offer the body of Christ.

If you bite and devour each other, beware lest you be eaten by one another.

The Lord deposited some good things in us as a result of Faith Assembly, and for that many of us are grateful. We will take those positives with us for the remainder of our life journeys, and we will bless others when we can. Hopefully we can learn the lessons of what happens to a church that moves off of the foundation on which it was built. Christ is that foundation. On Him alone we stand.

One of the best books on leadership that I have read in recent years is "The Leadership Paradox" by Denny Gundersen. In it he warns about holding too close to "our ministry", and forgetting that it is ultimately His ministry, and His people that we are serving. Leaders who are insecure will do what they can to keep "their ministry" or "their position". Those who are secure will train others to take their place and be able to move on as needed. Their departure won't throw the church into chaos. They won't resort to fear or bullying or gimmicks to get people to stay, and certainly won't trash those who leave. Leaders in the church must continually remind themselves

why they do what they do and check their motivation. It was a convicting and enlightening read. Other books on leadership have been helpful as well: "Spiritual Leadership" by J. Oswald Sanders (Moody) is a classic. "Leading From the Inside Out" by Samuel Rima (Baker) is also good. "Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?" by Rowland Allen (Eerdmans) was written 100 years ago, but still hits a nerve for those who have a paternalistic approach to missions and outreach.

We tried. Hobart Freeman tried. He was fallible and made some serious mistakes, but he tried to make the church work. So did many other men of God. I appreciate the sacrifice that they made over the years in order to teach us, and many of them have done their share of suffering. But a church so isolated and extreme is doomed to eventually end. The Lord will not allow His children to be in bondage forever.

We are thankful for what good we received, but it is really nice to be free from bondage.