

A PREZ RELEASE

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(Monthly commentary from the President of the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary)

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"When the windows facing towards the reign of God get closed, darkness descends upon churches and the air becomes heavy. When the windows facing toward the reign of God are opened, the life-giving breath and light of God give the churches fresh hope." Those words by eminent theologian Miroslav Volf speak prophetically to me.

I am increasingly aware that the church in North America is impacted by its refusal to acknowledge how much the culture around us has impacted what we look like and our subsequent effectiveness. It does not matter where one places their mark on the theological spectrum; we have lost the battle for the public arena. While there are wonderful examples of God's renewing influence on the church across this nation, we still must ask how much of any current model of church life is really just a new and more novel way to dispense religious goods and services to people's surface "wants." **We must ask serious questions about whether or not current definitions of ministry effectiveness are just the religious market's response to a consumerist society where all of life has been reduced to the buying and selling of products...real or spiritual.**

There are clear sociological signs that this is an era that is typified by seeking. In such an atmosphere, church leaders must ask which of the following questions is prior: Humanity's seeking for "god" or God's redemptive seeking after His human creation? Could it be that people are pretending to seek God, but are really looking for a controllable highly predictable "god" of their own design? Could it be that we actually call ourselves effective ministers by providing the goods and services that fit the current design for "god" that is fashionable?

We must move away from believing those arguments about the validity of singing out of a hymnbook or off the latest Hillsongs or Delirious CD actually comprises the fundamental issue leading to church effectiveness. Prior to the crucial need to understand and take seriously our culture (to be seeker-sensitive) is the need for the church to be sensitive to the One who seeks the Church, who in fact demands not only sensitivity but also obedience.

Miroslav Volf's early childhood in a Pentecostal pastor's home in Yugoslavia taught him that there could be no effective church without the reign of God and no reign of God without the church. My childhood as a Pentecostal preacher's kid included a regular dose of C.M. Ward on the weekly radio broadcast Revivaltime. Ward never failed to remind us of the prophetic words of Zechariah. *"It is not by might nor by power but by my Spirit, saith the Lord."* I will admit to having let those words degenerate into somewhat of a mantra like incantation. But 28 years in the ministry have pushed me back to the sheer reality of Zechariah's statement. Our culture has offered overwhelming resources to do a seemingly effective job of ministry. Too many ministers today (including myself) are Type A workaholics who believe that sheer perseverance and bulldoggedness will guarantee effectiveness. But the commodities of human design (might/resources and power/resoluteness) cannot offer our world the eternal solution it needs to rescue itself from auto-destruction.

Volf's childhood lessons are right on target, the only hope for this world is a church whose windows are open to the eternal redemptive mission of God that captures it and propels it in being a "church for the sake of the world."

The church in North America may now be marginalized from the public arena, but could it be that we have just entered an era that most approximates the conditions of the early church where the church thrived on the margins of society? Could it be that in this present reality we can re-think the essence of what it is to be the church in a pluralistic society? I'd like to suggest that we Pentecostals can respond to this current culture with a message that is understandable. Life-changing encounter with God (that C.M. Ward would have said occurred from the "top of your head to the soles of your feet") has always shaped our Pentecostal identity. A seeking generation longs for the stories/testimonies of changed lives, searches for a vocabulary and demonstration of a force larger than themselves. Dallas Willard (a USC philosophy professor and author of The Divine Conspiracy) says churches are full of people hungry for God, but those same people live in frustration when they don't have an accompanying faith that God could really change their lives and because they have never really seen God do anything. Willard observes that "if you are to have churches where lives are really changed you need to maintain the **visible signs of the Holy Spirit.**" (Can I hear you say amen? AMEN!! Preach it Brother Willard!!!)

We have to come to grips with where Christianity is headed in American society, yet we need not respond with isolationist strategies that only marginalize us further. Maybe the words of John Wesley can offer us some clear perspective:

Set yourself afire, go into society and let them watch you burn!

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Upcoming Event. . .

Do you know anyone who might be interested in attending AGTS? We are having a special **Seminary Day on March 24**. This one-day special event will provide every detail for a person considering attending AGTS. For further information check out our website at www.agseminary.edu or e-mail us at jswartz@agseminary.edu or call **1-800-467-AGTS** and ask for Joyce Swartz.

Check it out.....

Books

Revival that Reforms, Bill Hull, Revell 1998 (0-8007-1752-x)

Some quotes from the book, "*If spiritual awakening is to come to the church it will require both revival and reformation.*" "*Revival brings power--reformation transforms that power into lasting change.*"

Hull gives a fine historical background on an American understanding of revival and how it has changed over the years.

It's on the web. . .

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