

## **Behold the Lamb 5: Liberty and Loss**

A young Catholic priest who participated in a recent Living Waters Training engaged a lot with our mostly evangelical crowd; he got kicked in the stomach a few times by persons who introduced themselves to him as ‘having become Christians after they left the Catholic Church.’ Ouch.

What they meant, I think, was that they found a ‘spirited’ personal bridge to Jesus in one of many gatherings where their young-adult-ache for Him was quenched by a more dynamic spirituality than what they experienced as Catholic kids.

Beautiful. But also costly. On this 500th year anniversary of the Reformation, in which we celebrate the freedom to change and change again our approach to how we gather as Christians and why, it may be wise, even healing, to consider the downside of ‘start your own’ church movements. (Will we ever forget Robert Duvall’s film ‘The Apostle’ in which he ordained himself through the laying on of his own hands?) Don’t get me wrong. I value many of the lifeboats launched from the leaky vessel that the Catholic Church had become by the 16th century. But I also witness the fissures of ‘reform’ that continue to fan out, fractures that fracture people who conclude in their confusion: ‘I need not gather at all.’

One example may be church leaders who insist on a particular facet of the Gospel based on their ‘leading’, often in response to what they did not like in their previous church/movement. That can result in two ills: the malformation of the saints due to a skewed Gospel and also an unwitting rejection of members who don’t/can’t line up with the particular emphasis of the visionary leader. A colleague of mine with some identity conflicts had no choice but to leave an effective evangelistic movement because her pastor assured her that the church would not invest in the healing of her or anyone else’s soul.

Related but worse are pastors who fall into serious error and, having created a system of impotent eldership in which they are virtually unchecked, perpetuate their errors. That includes (but is no way limited to) churches which bless sexual immoralities, including LGBT+ liberties; that may also relate to a strain of ‘hyper-grace’ churches that refuse to give formation to members as to avoid ‘legalism.’

More dangerous still are ‘Spirit-led’ leaders who add ‘thus saith the Lord’ to their disagreements with persons. Rather than sort out conflicts rationally and relationally, these shepherds resolve conflict by the sheep either putting up or shutting up. A tragic subset here is shepherds who cloak lust in ‘love’ and use spiritual power to seduce. These wolves make rabid the sheep and deserve the millstone Jesus reserves for them (LK 17: 1, 2).

Lastly, I notice some losses and limits to churches founded on young-adult vitality: that post high-school season in which persons are most inclined to establish an identity founded upon Jesus Christ. Many of these gatherings are glorious! Yet one does not stay a young adult forever, and

when that season passes, these ones may grow out of 'church' altogether and determine nothing else will do, especially the relatively stodgy churches of their pre-revival youth. Older ones who invest here may find themselves beside the point. A quiet servant I know worked tirelessly at such a 'young' church for 20 years then began to realize that no-one there cared much about her. She left and no-one noticed. She struggles to engage with any church now.

That is the problem and the opportunity. We need the body. We need healing when our churches let us down. And we have choice. We can forgive her, we must forgive her, or a part of ourselves dies. We are the body, and to be at odds with any part of her is to be divided in ourselves.

This Lent, I implore you to forgive that part of the body that wounded you. Jesus took the hit at Calvary for nothing less. If you extend the mercy you have received to that part (it does not mean you agree with it!), you do your part to heal yourself and His beautiful, broken bride. I then urge you to exercise your freedom to discern where you are to take your place once more. We cannot say we love Him without standing with them. Again.

'Jesus, in accord with Your Word, we confess that we have become like 'those who have given up meeting together.' Rather, we ask for mercy to extend to our church wounding and the power once more to 'consider how we might provoke one another onto love and good deeds...and all the more as we see the Day approaching' (Heb. 10: 24, 25), the Day of Your return for one glorious Church.'