
Subject: Chapter 2: The 'Out-of-Church Christians.

Dear Saints

Below please find Chapter 2 of "The 'Out-of-Church' Christians by Andrew Strom.

Enjoy!

Eben Swart

CHAPTER TWO

MY OWN "WILDERNESS" EXPERIENCE

One of the reasons I was originally invited onto that Radio show was because in theory I was someone who could see "both sides" of this issue. I am a Christian speaker who holds meetings and speaks in churches, but I am also someone who has spent seven years completely "out of church" - in the wilderness, up until 1993. And to this day I have many friends and acquaintances who are out there still. So I understand this phenomenon well. My own 'wilderness' experience has been a very important part of my life-story. It had an enormous impact on me. I have never been ashamed of this experience, and it has long been available for people to read about on my web-sites and in one of my books. The following version is basically lifted straight off one of our web-pages. Hopefully by reading it you will come to understand some of the 'phases' I went through during my wilderness journey. It has certainly stirred up a lot of comment over the years.

"MY WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE" - Andrew Strom

I had been brought up in a Christian environment all my life. My father was a Spirit-filled Baptist preacher before I was born, and was also a researcher and writer on Revival (-it runs in the family!) So when I myself became a Spirit-filled Christian at the age of 17, I was fascinated with Revival and prayer right from the beginning. I also came under a very powerful 'prophetic' anointing, though I had little understanding of it at the time. (What was "wrong" with me? - Why was I so distressed and devastated at the condition of the church when others seemed so comfortable with the status quo?) Fortunately I had all my Revival books which told me I was not alone, but merely one of many concerned Christians, right down through the ages. But I certainly felt very much alone a great deal of the time. (Apart from God of course - He was always there).

I became involved in a couple of churches - the main one being a fairly "hard-line" Pentecostal group. And because of my very brash youthful zeal in witnessing I did alright there, though I seemed to be always in some kind of trouble with the leadership. I just couldn't shut my mouth at the crucial time - I so longed to see the church in a true Revival state, and I was pretty brazen about my opinions (I certainly lacked for wisdom in those days!) I was also very "hard-line" legalistic myself in many ways. But God was training me and using me, almost in spite of myself.

But then it happened. Finally, after many run-ins and minor disputes, I came across what I felt were some pretty fundamental differences in doctrine between this church and me, and I finally left for good, after chafing for quite some time. But instead of going looking for another church, my wife and I banded together with some friends and tried to start our own group. But whereas before God's blessing had been with us, now it clearly was not, and nothing much came of what we were doing. God had some BIG lessons in store.

This was the beginning of a period of literally SEVEN YEARS totally outside the church system (from age twenty to twenty-seven) for myself and my family. (By this time I was married to a wonderful Christian wife and we were to have six lovely children).

All through this period of wilderness, testing and spiritual trials, one thing I never gave up on was my nightly prayer-times with God. These were as blessed as ever, but often they were the only 'spiritual' thing I had going on in my life. Everything else seemed closed, empty, dead. This went on for year after year after year. I KNEW we were not to go back to church, yet nothing was happening. But if I visited a church, nothing was there for us either. All was desolation, and in the end I (who had once been the proudest, loudest, most hard-line arrogant witnessing machine) was so spiritually "crushed" that I could hardly bear to talk about spiritual things with anyone. Some may say that all of this was of the devil. Not so. GOD had led me out into the wilderness for a purpose, and He would lead me in from it in His good time. I was being humbled and broken, and every ounce of proud 'religious' life was being crushed out of me, that God might one day shine through.

During this time we slowly became aware of a network of "out-of-church" Christians right through New Zealand (and no doubt in many other countries also), who had all come out of various churches (-some had even been leaders). We would occasionally visit them on a casual basis, and we found that there were almost out-of-church "doctrines" amongst this group, which we came to imbibe ourselves. Much of this "doctrine" was more negative than positive. It often involved long litanies of everything that was wrong with the church system and it's leaders (a very soft and convenient target), often involving somewhat "mocking" sarcasm, and relief that we, the 'real' Christians were now out of it all. I fully partook in all of this with great relish, having my own chip on my shoulder, and my own resentments to nurse. And of course, the great "answer" that we smugly believed in, was to leave the churches altogether. We became quite suspicious of 'churchy' Christians who were still in the system - even if they were praying people who obviously walked close to God. How arrogant we were, once again! But after awhile even this began to pall, and I became so 'crushed' eventually that even mockery of the 'system' gave me little joy any more. All was vanity, all was nothingness. When would God ever move?

We got involved with Christian music (-my wife and I are both musicians), but we were just banging our head against a brick wall during this whole period. God had us in 'prison', and we were going NOWHERE until we learned what He had to teach us. I had been praying for years, "God use me, God fill me more and more with your Spirit, God bring Revival", and here I was sitting in a spiritual 'dungeon' - and there was nothing I could do about it. Spiritually speaking, it was like being in a kind of "crushing machine". I was almost in despair at times. But this is what you will get if you ask God to 'break you and use you'. Don't be surprised if He takes you at your word!

My first band had become almost an "idol" to me by this stage (I was 26 years old) - as ministries often do. But one day, something dramatic went wrong that meant we would have to cancel a concert, and suddenly I KNEW - I just KNEW that this whole thing was not of God - it was me striving, striving, striving to "MAKE IT HAPPEN". And I knew in that instant that it was all over. This was my last holdout - the only spiritual ministry I had left, and it was not of God. The band was finished. We played our last couple of concerts and that was it. THERE WAS NOTHING ELSE. NOTHING BUT GOD.

And instead of striving and 'ministry-idolatry', I began to once again spend hours just basking in the presence of God, tears streaming down my face, just glorying in His presence - worshipping and communing with Him. And I began to come under a prophetic anointing the like of which I had never known, even at the beginning. I was 27 years old, and I had been in the Wilderness for seven years.

Suddenly God seemed to remove the old cloak of heaviness and replace it with a garment of praise. And He kept telling me the same thing over and over again: "REVIVAL IS COMING. REVIVAL IS COMING." (Sometimes I would literally leap for joy at the reality of this word). During one intense three-day period, God showed me how I could attack and destroy in Jesus' name, many of the strongholds of pride, rebellion, religion, etc, that had had a hold in my life for many years. And this is literally what I did. Glory to God! I tell you, I was transformed.

And God also began to introduce me to many praying and prophetic people (mostly 'in-church', though some were "out" - I didn't care what format or 'boxes' they

fellowshipped in any more - their relationship with God was what mattered). Many of these people confirmed what God had been showing me about the coming Revival. And I also heard my first 'prophetic' tapes from overseas, which were amazing confirmation. Suddenly I was not alone! All those things God had been showing me down the years - He was showing others too! Suddenly, I began to feel I needed to write it all down, so others could share in what God was saying. (I hadn't been writing for years). No longer was I crushed and despairing in the Wilderness. I was mightily free in Jesus. But something important in me (in fact, a lot of things) had changed through this Wilderness journey. I was not the same person in many ways. (In fact many people could not believe the changes). God had crushed me and brought me to life again - His way. And many of the "rough edges" were gone forever. I was now far more reliant on Him - for everything. These were very crucial changes, and indeed, I think now, how could God ever have used me the way I was??

I am now 37 years old. My wife and I have been happily married now for seventeen years, and we have six wonderful children. We eventually became quite involved in a local Spirit-filled Salvation Army church, then a Baptist fellowship. But I am convinced, like many of you, that the best (and the most challenging) is yet to come, and that glorious Revival lies just around the corner.

There are two points arising from all this that I would like to make. The first is that I believe God took me out of the church system mostly because of the faults in ME - more than in the church. (Though it is obvious that today's church does have serious problems, of course). He wanted to get me away into a desolate place and get rid of my arrogance, my pride, my brashness, my "hard-line" legalistic view of things. He also later dealt with my "superior", smug attitude towards 'churchy' Christians and systems, etc. He wanted to break me and humble me (at my request) because only then could He truly use me. What a devastating process! But how skilfully managed by God. He desires not to destroy us, but to save us from ourselves. How dark our hearts are, and how much we need to be broken and re-made in the image of His holy Son.

I believe that many prophetic people (like myself in those days) do have problems with "rebellion". They seem to rub leaders the wrong way almost by design sometimes. And then they develop a "persecution complex" or slink off wallowing in self-pity. I have done all this and more. Rebellion is the most insidious sin, and when you begin to see how much it dominates our world, and how ingrained it is in us, it is a real eye-opener. This has been an absolute revelation to me in recent years. How deceitfully wicked is the heart of man!

On the other hand, I empathise with prophets speaking an unpopular word that comes from God's own heart, and being rejected. What a devastating experience for a prophet. I have been in these situations also. But I have found that it is only when you have dealt with Rebellion that you can truly trust yourself to speak God's word to a leader. Rebellion can greatly affect the words we bring to leaders, and yet many prophets seem to hardly know they have a problem in this area. I can look back now and I wince at the influence of Rebellion over my words and actions in the past. But God does cleanse and heal.

The other thing about Prophetic people and "out-of-church" types is the 'individualism' that can easily set in, and make them of little use to God in any real way, because they just cannot truly relate to a 'Body'. It is simply not possible to have a Body made up of individualists. It just does not work. A true Body has LEADERS. It has members who are "KNITTED TOGETHER". I am often amazed when I come across 'out-of-church' type material which encourages rampant individualism (ie. coming out of church and "doing your own thing in God") and then goes on to talk about the wonderful Revival that is coming. I tell you, unless you can KNIT INTO THE BODY and relate well to leaders, and all the other 'Body' things, YOU WILL NEVER HAVE A PART IN THE COMING REVIVAL. It is just a pipe-dream. Some say they will relate well to the coming leaders, though they have trouble with all of today's leaders. Let me tell you: God is dealing with Rebellion now. If you can't sit under authority today, you will be a pain in the neck to tomorrow's leaders too. Deal with your rebellion now, or miss out. It's that simple.

My second point is that the Wilderness IS a valid place to be for people who are being broken, trained and molded by God. Many of God's heroes, big and small, down the ages, have been personally dealt with by God in the Wilderness. And I believe that many of those whom God has been preparing to have a part in His new move have been taken through the Wilderness by God in our day. The Wilderness is not the answer in itself. It is a waypoint. If you get stuck in the Wilderness, like the children of Israel did, you are in trouble. If you like the look of the Wilderness more than the Promised Land, you are in BIG trouble. The Wilderness swallowed most of the children of Israel whole. They did not use it as preparation, like they were supposed to. They went to the place of testing and failed the test. But historically, the Wilderness has been a very important place of brokenness and training, where God has prepared men and women before using them in some way.

So I ask those who are "in church" not to belittle what is happening in the lives of some whom God has 'called out' for a time, just as I would ask that they not belittle you. There is much truth in the concept of God using the Wilderness not so much to get people "out of the system", but rather to "get the system out of people". We have got to un-learn many of our old 'Christendom' habits for this coming Revival, so as not to repeat them. The coming Revival cannot be caught up in conventional "churchianity" as we know it. For this would ruin it, as it has ruined many Revivals down the ages. Thus, 'un-learning' is one very important reason why I believe God has taken so many people out of Christendom for awhile, into the Wilderness. It is preparation for the coming Revival, which will be very different from now (but also very practical - just like the early church).

My hope in writing this has been to challenge both groups - those within and those without the system, to prepare in whatever way God would have you, for what He is about to do. And to promote understanding of the different paths that He has been leading His people on.

Watch this space for the next episode!

Eben Swart