

Subject: New Wineskins, please!

Dear Saints

Prophetically, the Lord is saying expressly in these days that the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ will be undergoing radical changes within the next decade.

I personally believe that the Lord is sovereignly preparing his Church for the end times. Radical changes for the Church will be absolutely essential in order to fulfill the end-time prophecies, as well as to prepare her for the end-time battles.

This forthcoming weekend the intercessors and pray-ers of our region will be at a camp, and praying about a number of things. As a preparation for the camp (for those who will be attending), as well as for those faithful ones at home who will be praying with us, we have decided to publish the first chapter of the book below.

"The 'Out-of-Church' Christians" was written by researcher Andrew Strom of New Zealand, who had kindly given his permission for us to publish it on this network. Please visit his web-site at <http://www.streetrevival.com/>. His e-mail is prophetic@revivalschool.com. You can also subscribe to their newsletter by sending an empty e-mail to anzac-subscribe@welovegod.org.

It had been estimated that in the US alone, more than 12 million (12 000 000) Christians, who had "given up on the church, but not on God" can be found. These people are not church-goers any more, although they love the Lord dearly. And what should be noted about these statistics, is that reseachers had found that a staggering 93% of these people were formerly part of Church Leadership!

Also in South Africa, this phenomenon is taking on huge proportions. We do not have statistics available, but ministry experience of myself and several other whom I had consulted, points in the very same direction. Andrew Strom had taken a hard look at this phenomenon, and discusses this in his book, which we will publish on this network, chapter by chapter. So enjoy this serial message! [A similar book, with specific reference to the South African situation, had been written in Afrikaans by Annes Nel: Op soek na God ... buite die kerk? (Lux Verbi, 2003).]

If the Lord speaks to you on this issue, please contact me asap by simply hitting the "Reply" button on your browser.

Enjoy!

Eben Swart

CHAPTER ONE A WORLD-WIDE PHENOMENON

For me, this whole "snowball effect" began with a Radio show and an email. In March 2003 I was invited onto the Rhema Christian network in New Zealand to discuss the growing phenomenon of "Out-of-church Christians". I had been invited onto the show because in one of my books I had recounted my own 'wilderness' experience and the fact that many Christians seem to be opting out of today's church system. This was a phenomenon that I knew something about, but even then I had little idea of the size or scope of what was occurring.

The same week that I was on the Radio show, I published an article on the same topic on our international Email List. The result was an absolute deluge of responses from all over the world. Below is the email I sent out. I had no idea that it would set-off such a chain-reaction.

EMAIL - RE: "OUT OF CHURCH" CHRISTIANS

-Andrew Strom. [4 April 2003].

I am writing on a rather unusual topic today. On Monday night (31 March) I was invited onto a Christian Radio show in New Zealand to discuss the growing numbers of "Out-of-church" Christians in the West - people who have left the churches for various reasons but still claim a strong Christian faith. It was a very interesting night, and the phones ran hot.

This "Out-of-church" phenomenon has now grown so large that books are being written about it. In fact, several years ago I heard an estimate that there are TENS OF THOUSANDS of such Christians just in our largest city (-Auckland) alone. And I believe it is the same right across the Western nations. I have personally come into contact with literally hundreds of such people. The surprising thing is that they are often the most committed kind of Christians - praying, insightful, deep-thinking. Yet they have grown tired of "playing the game" inside our church system and have opted out. Often their involvement goes back many years. In fact, they had commonly been leaders of various kinds. But now they have left. Why? The church obviously finds this a very difficult thing to explain or deal with. The usual accusations are often trotted out: "So-and-so has been hurt and has a root of bitterness". Or they are in "rebellion". Or they are "not a team player". Or they are "backsliding".

But if you talk to these people you will often find that they have been sitting in church for years and years, and they simply cannot stand to sit and watch the same old game being played any more. The LACK OF GOD is what gets to them - even in our most "Spirit-filled" churches. WHERE IS GOD IN ALL OF OUR ACTIVITY? Surely this is not the way it is supposed to be?

New fads and programs come and go, but the mediocrity and LACK OF GOD just seem to go on forever. And so quietly, sometimes without anyone even noticing, they slowly slip out the doors - never to return. Some have even told me that they felt God "calling them out". Others simply felt they couldn't stay there anymore. The state of the church weighed upon them more than words could say.

Very often they did the rounds of other churches, hoping against hope that they would find a place that felt "right" in any way. (-Though most of them are not "church-hoppers" by nature). But the places they visited never seemed any more "right" than the place they had left. And after a while it just seemed easier to stay at home with God.

As I said earlier, most of these people have not given up on Christianity at all. It is today's church system that they have given up on. And we are talking about large numbers here. Thousands are already opting out. And many feel like they are "waiting" for something.

Some of these people have started up home-fellowships. Or they meet with other couples on a casual basis. But many meet with nobody at all, and they consider themselves in a 'Wilderness' place - alone with God. (-Very common).

I was asked several weeks ago by a pastor whether I agreed that what is happening could be a 'move of God'. That is a pretty radical thought. Many leaders would think the opposite. Because anything that leads people out of "their church" can't be of God, can it?

Hmmm. All I know is this: The concept of going through a 'Wilderness' just before entering the 'Promised Land' is totally Scriptural. In fact, it is right through the Bible. Even Jesus went through such a wilderness time.

But it is not possible to stay "alone" forever. Some day, if these people are going to be part of a new move of God's Spirit, they are going to have to come out of their wilderness and become part of the "BODY" that Jesus brings together - the 'new wineskin' that will come with this new move of God. Otherwise they could miss out. That is the great danger. I'm sure there are many on this List with comments or testimonies relating to this topic. I would love to hear from you. It really is becoming a significant issue in the church. God bless you, my friends.

For weeks after I published the above article, I was inundated with emails. It seemed to be going round and round on the Internet because many responses were from people that were not even part of our own List. Such a huge number of heart-felt stories from people who still loved Jesus but had left the churches (-forever, in many cases). What an eye-opener! It confirmed to me that this issue is so much larger than many of us have realized. I don't think a lot of Christian leaders have any clue how many believers are simply opting out of "organized religion" today.

Throughout this book you will read many of these stories, sent to me from all over the world. To give you an understanding of just how "global" this phenomenon is, here is a small sampling just to get you started:

From: Ian (-Scotland):

We are a group of 4 Christians who meet in our respective homes. We were formerly leaders in our local fellowship, but for various reasons found ourselves outside of the established church. And like yourselves we have found the we are not alone. We have met with dozens of Christians around Scotland who are in the same boat. Most were leaders in their fellowships. We were with a group last night of two families with about 8 or 9 meeting in a home.

Your estimate about the number of people in this position does feel about right. I have been in contact with one man in London who has a mailing list of four thousand. I have heard that estimates would put the total as being greater than those that are still in 'Church'. But due to the nature of being 'out of church', it will be very difficult to quantify.

From: Pastor Jim C. (-USA):

In my estimation, in regard to the numbers involved per capita, New Zealand has the sniffles and America has full blown pneumonia.

From: Mary (-USA)

You would be VERY surprised at the number of VERY high-level, gifted and mature Christian leaders who are NOT attending regular church here in Southern California. My husband and I hosted a care group about 7 years ago with 15 couples. Only 3 of them still attend church.

From: Thomas (-USA):

I and my family are some of the, I believe, millions who have left the church system or have been called out by God into the "wilderness." As the Lord explained our calling out He said it would be a time of purging and teaching us to stand in Him alone so that we could stand properly when we are brought back with the many. We still fellowship and share the Word with others. We still, at His direction, do the works of the Church: meeting the needs of others and sharing His truth. We are just not part of the system and I don't believe we will ever be called to rejoin a religious system, but a living fruit-producing Body.

From: Mike (-Vineyard Church, UK):

Just read your piece on 'Out of Church Christians'. Amazing - I've been getting an increasing sense that this is what is going on around us here in the UK. So many fine Christians living effectively outside the Body... and I've always felt that anyone who amputated themselves like this would die and rot, like a severed finger - yet these guys don't, or haven't yet, anyway. The loss to the church is one thing, and the danger to them another - and yet there is this wilderness thing. Look at King David, how he had to spend all those years running in the desert before his anointing could take effect, as it were...

From: Donnalea (-South Africa):

This phenomenon has reached our country too. I'm sure that many out-of-church South African Christians have already contacted you. Although I am still in fellowship, I have really been going through a tough time getting myself to church every Sunday. I love the Lord with all my heart, but Christians and modern day Christianity or "churchianity" get on my nerves. I too am tired of all the programmes and never once seeing or feeling that God is in control. I desperately want to know God again and to really know His will. I am in fellowship during the week with people who have left church completely and as with this general phenomenon, are true Christians really seeking God's will.

From: Tony (-South Africa):

I read your article on "Out of church Christians" with much interest, and yes, it is a worldwide phenomenon. I have personally spoken to many Christians from abroad, many of them business men (it seems like the business community were almost the first to identify it). And yes, what started off as a trickle, well, now the flood gates are open and many have either left, or are in the process of leaving.

From: Jouko (-Finland):

You just described my situation in your article "Out of church" Christians. There are many in that position in Finland, too. I don't know what will be the future solution for this dilemma.

From: Liz (-Zimbabwe):

Have just received your article from a friend and was most interested to discover that it is not only our country which is experiencing this "phenomenon" (if I may use that expression!) There are many of us who have felt "called out of the church" and group together for home cells where there are about 12 folks together. Then once a month we meet up with others, but have a very strong prayer network and are in contact daily with each other, as needs are great here in Zimbabwe.

From: Mark (-USA):

I am still in church leadership and music ministry in a traditional church setting, but many very anointed & prophetically gifted friends of mine have had their fill of "playing church" and have "opted out" of organized religion. One is running a ministry (camp/retreat) for pastors in CO, another is raising sheep in KS, a third is creating an online network for churches, but none go to the traditional 'sermon/music/prayer/pulpit & pew' places we call "churches". I feel in my heart that this mass of hungry and Christ following people is God's own way of setting the stage for a huge reformational change.

From: Randy (-USA):

I read an explanation of why the phenomenon is growing - the out-of-church Christians. They say that we are lone rangers, backsliders, not team players, have bitter root judgements.... This can't be further from the truth. When we have been attending church, we find- No God - No Power- No Gospel- Bad Agendas- Poor Leadership- Bad teaching- Bad programs- No Christ- No Healing- No miracles. Just a struggle for personal power and control. I can't tell you how many times I have been treated like I am not going to Heaven because I am not attending church. So, the sad part is, where do we take our gifts, our tithes, and our love - but out to the streets. We know many who have left the church, who are committed as prayer warriors, intercessors, missionaries, and worshippers. Wanting to share their gifts from God. This movement is growing - so it will over-take the church. What you are seeing is just the tip of the iceberg.

From: Pat (-Canada):

I've been an out of church believer for over 7 years. I'm also a non-denominational ordained minister. I've visited a variety of churches over the years (and spoken at many of them) as the Lord led, but to be honest I frequently find it very hard to visit them. It's as if all I can hear are sobbing people and the rattling of chains all around me, yet everyone is smiling and singing of how God has freed them and filled them with joy. Often I feel like crying while believers around me are smiling and laughing with apparent joy... yet in reality they seem to touch very few with the love of God... even in their own churches. Canada has as many, if not more true believers who are also un-churched as New Zealand has.

From: Sam (-ex-Vineyard pastor, Canada):

I live in a community of 330,000 people and the OUT OF CHURCH Christian population has grown from 6,000 to over 10,000 since the summer of 1999...

From: Sue (-Australia):

I personally know a lot of strong Christian committed ex-church leaders, sold out for God, who God is using outside the local church. Some are in home groups, some just get together regularly for fellowship. As for me, most of my fellowship is with my friends in NZ and Australia by telephone and email.

From: Jenny (-New Zealand):

I work alongside people who have left churches as my job, under the umbrella name of Spirited Exchanges. I facilitate a couple of groups for people to process what has gone on for them in churches and to struggle with the faith and church issues... I would agree with you - the accusations of 'backslider' and others are quite inaccurate and unhelpful. From what I have seen they are actually asking the hard questions in order to deepen, continue in and better integrate their faith. I too, wonder if there is a move of God in this - people being called to something deeper, out of the game-playing and conformist faith stage...

From: Scott (-Japan-based email):

As a person who has been involved with ministry and with churches heavily for over 20 years (right from when I was 15), I can understand why people just leave. In the old days, we would give messages about that kind of person and say that they were lacking in commitment, and how you have to be planted in the one place, and how everything God wants to do he does through the local church, etc.

So people who dropped out of church were always seen as having not much to offer.

But, there are tons of them out there. I have chatted recently and am surprised that a lot of people who do want fellowship, and love God, don't go to a church regularly.

From: Anne (-USA):

In America, in certain cities, the out of church Christians are probably higher in number than the in-church Christians. It is a phenomenal occurrence... I feel as a missionary evangelist that there are so many church programs with little or none of the Presence of the Lord in the churches and that is the reason people leave them. There is little prayer and what prayer there is is void of passion and power and fire.

From: Peggy (-USA):

*My husband and I have been Christians for 30 years, home group leaders for much of that time; my husband has also been a worship leader for most of that time. However, now we are among the "out of church" that your message describes, although we do continue to meet and pray with other believers who feel the same longing for something more real than we have experienced for longer than we care to remember. The cry of our hearts is *not* to live on our memories of incredible intimacy with God in years past, but to discover Him anew and in deeper ways than ever before. We are desperate for Him. In light of that hunger, the emptiness of our church experience, a church we'd attended for 17 years, was more than we could bear.*

The Author again:

The above are just a smattering of the hundreds of emails I received on this subject from all over the world. Several days after I published the original article a Webmaster from France wrote saying he had translated it into French and put it on a French web-site. After that I started getting all kinds of emails in French - none of which I could read! Which just goes to show that this "Out-of-church" thing is a huge issue right across the Western world. Everywhere, it seems, people are hungering and thirsting for the REALITY of God, but sadly no longer finding it in our churches. What on earth is going on?