

Hurricane Warning

God is so serious about holiness that He will expose religious corruption.

When Hurricane Katrina shattered New Orleans almost two years ago, the disaster triggered the most massive human migration in American history. About half the city's residents have since moved away, almost half the area's health care facilities are shut down and 70 schools remain closed.

One big storm redefined an entire city. The faint smell of garbage still lingers in the humid air, months and months after crews worked nonstop to haul away 22 million tons of abandoned cars, ruined refrigerators, tree limbs, roof shingles, moldy sheet rock, rancid food, mud-soaked clothes and toxic chemicals.

If you drive by the old Faith Church facility near downtown today, you'll learn that relief ministries use the damaged building to supply food to Katrina victims. The congregation, now much smaller because of displaced members, meets in a shopping mall several miles away.

Katrina redefined ministry for Faith Church and many other churches in the storm-ravaged city. Priorities have changed. Life will never be the same.

When I ponder Katrina's sobering aftermath I can't help but draw some unsettling spiritual implications for all of us. I am by no means a doomsday prophet, but I believe a strong storm is headed our way. It will redefine church as we know it.

When the Ted Haggard scandal made headlines last year I had a sense that this was only the first domino to fall. Many respected voices in the Christian community have warned us since then to prepare for an imminent spiritual wake-up call.

They've challenged our leaders to deal with sin in their own lives and to get rid of the arrogance, greed and shallow carnality that characterizes so much of American Christianity. They've told us that God is so serious about holiness that He will expose religious corruption.

When God visits us to bring His winds of revival, those winds will also destroy man-made religious structures. It's time for all of us to find shelter. Here's how I believe we must prepare:

1. Reinforce our foundations. I fear that some of us have veered from the basics of faith to follow the latest spiritual fads. We charismatics tend to chase after anything trendy. In some churches today people are delving into exotic teachings and coining new terms including "spiritual fathering," "apostolic alignment," "armor bearers" and "heave offerings." Any new believer who wanders into our meetings will need a translator to understand this spooky vocabulary.

There's a place for such things (and a biblical basis for some of them) yet it's possible that the trendy can overshadow the important. If the devil cannot deceive us outright, he will tempt us to get out of balance so that we lose our primary passion for Jesus. Let's keep the main thing the main thing.

2. Get rid of the junk. The smelly garbage in the church today is going to fly when the winds of God hit us broadside. We must remember that revival is not just about the impact of church growth and new converts; it is also about gut-wrenching

repentance and judgment. You can't have Acts 2 without Acts 5. The exciting fire of Pentecost is also the fearful fire of holiness.

An alarm has sounded. Those in ministry who have not heeded the warning have little time left. I am pleading with you: Get your house in order. Destroy your materialistic idols. Stop all sexual compromise. Stop defrauding people and misusing God's money.

3. Hide in God. I love the new worship bands on the scene today, but recently I've been having some unusual times of intimacy with God while singing from an old Baptist hymnal I owned as a child. Today when I open that book and begin to sing the words to "Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross," "Jesus Paid It All" or "'Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus," I get choked up and can't finish.

I can't explain my reaction, but it's not due to religious nostalgia. I suspect my heart is aching for something of substance in an age of cheap imitations. Those lyrics, although they are old-fashioned, are still charged with power because they anchor us to the bedrock of simple devotion to Christ. As this storm approaches, I plan to cling to what matters most.

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