

# The Current Move of God: 8 Characteristics

By Frank Viola

I'm looking forward to 2009. I believe it's going to be an important year for the church of Jesus Christ.

In August, I was privileged to be one of the speakers at a conference for Christians who gather outside the institutional church. Some of the other speakers were Tony & Felicity Dale, Paul Young, Wolfgang Simpson, John White, and Jon Zens.

In one of the leadership sessions, I gave a very short talk in which I stated that I'm not someone who goes around saying that there's a new move of God happening in our day. In fact, for the last two years I've heard many others say this, but I've suspended judgment. I then announced that I'm now forced to say that I am convinced that we are in the *beginnings* of a new move of God.

Please note that I believe that God is up to *many* things. And He's using all sorts of movements, "conversations," etc. In various ways to bring His people to His final and ultimate goal.

In this article, however, I'll be focusing on one particular move of God that has taken place in two different phases, or *currents*, thus far. Both of these currents have occurred outside the organized church in the West.

The first current occurred in the late 60s and early 70s. By 1979, it had all but died.

The second current began in the late 80s and early 90s.

This brings me to the reason why I'm excited about 2009.

It's because we are just now *beginning* to see a third current of God's move in the United States (and other Western

countries) where Christians are leaving the institutional church structure (in record numbers) and discovering the living, breathing, headship of Jesus Christ in an organic, collective way without a clergy.

The landscape is changing rapidly. God is raising up new voices and new expressions of the church which look *very* different from the traditional expression.

According to my travels, my observations, and my correspondence, eight main features appear to be marking this third current. They are as follows:

1) *A genuine revelation and experience of an indwelling Lord.* Many Christians are being awakened to the fact that Jesus Christ dwells inside of them, and that He seeks to be everything to them. Some movements today emphasize the historical Jesus and seek to provoke Christians to try to imitate the Jesus of history. But in this third current, God's people are discovering that the historical Jesus has taken up residence within them. He is resurrected, glorified, enthroned and has become a life-giving Spirit. Consequently, we can actually *live by* His indwelling life. Not as a theory, a doctrine, a positional truth, but as a reality.

2) *A recapturing of a spiritual vocabulary to reflect a unique experience.* Ephesians Chapters 1-3 are littered with a vocabulary that few Christians use today. This vocabulary emanates from a mind. And that mind is characterized by the capacity to see the unseen and to declare as present

fact heavenly realities that exist outside the constraints of created time. Realities that are not just doctrinal or theological, but experiential. This vocabulary is being restored in this third current.

3) *Meeting together for a very high and noble purpose.* That purpose is to display the living Christ who indwells the church. The third current is being marked by church gatherings not as services, not as platforms for sermonizing, not as pastor-led or priest-led orders of worship, not as Bible studies, and not as liturgies but to make visible a living Christ by His every-member functioning Body where principalities and powers are put to shame. This aspect of church meetings, where every member is participating under the headship of Christ, is little understood today. But it's beginning to gain traction in this new current.

4) *An incredible Christ-centeredness in the thinking, life and vocabulary of God's people.* This new current is marked by the centrality of Christ. Jesus Christ is being put in His place. He is being given His rightful position of centrality, supremacy, and preeminence.

This Christ-centeredness is being reflected in conversation. (That's how the first believers got the name "Christian," by the way. They were always speaking about Christ.) This Christ-centeredness is being reflected in songs. This Christ-centeredness is being reflected in ministry.

*Our message is Christ.* It's not about how to be a better person, how to serve God more, how to do better and be good. It's instead marked by a revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ along with practical help on how to know Him deeply. Out of that flows everything else, including the church's mission.

5) *An experience of close-knit community.* This is becoming an experience, rather than a buzzword. Believers who know

church as community do not think merely as individuals. They do not think in terms of "me" or "I." Instead, they think and live in terms of "we" and "us." To their minds, there is no disconnect between getting saved and being part of the community of believers. This element is a restoration of the New Testament Christian mindset.

If you were a pagan in the first century, you knew that becoming a Christian meant being initiated into a shared-life community. It meant losing your raw individualism and your rugged independence. It meant becoming part of the people of God. Not as an abstract doctrine, but as a way of life. You became part of something larger than yourself a new culture in which you lived your life. For that reason, the early Christian movement was called "the Way" (Acts 19:9, 23; 24:14, 22). It wasn't a belief system; it was a way of life.

Let's face it. Western Christians have inherited an individualistic Christianity with an individualistic salvation and an individualistic walk with God. A Christian publisher recently told me that there are about 45,000 evangelical Christian titles in print and about 5,000 that are published every year. 95% or more of those books are addressed to you as an *individual* Christian. And the underlining point of those books is what *you* must do as an individual to be a better Christian.

But there is no such concept in the mind of God. Christianity has always been a corporate experience and a corporate reality. The individual Christian mind was born during the Reformation, driven into the ground during the Enlightenment, and set in concrete for the last several hundred years. But the New Testament knows no such mindset. This, I believe, is an important recovery.

6) *An understanding of the reality of being "in Christ."* Like the early

Christians, those in this third current are being pulled loose from a “works” mentality, liberated from a guilt complex, and set free from a sense of religious duty.

If you open up the New Testament letters, you will find that Paul always addresses the churches he planted (despite what they were going through) with the arresting phrase “holy ones.” He saw them holy “in Christ.” And the recipients of Paul's letters clearly understood what Paul was saying, because he didn't give much explanation for it.

I want to give you a testimony of how this mindset is being recaptured in this new current. Not long ago, a sister in a Christ-centered organic church stood up in a meeting and gave a testimony. She said, “I have been raised a Christian since I was a child. I've been meeting with you all for about a year now. I was listening to the Christian radio, as I sometimes do, and a song came on. The singer was singing about how unworthy she was and how she needed to try harder to please God. She sang that her righteousness was as filthy rags, and she needed to improve her spiritual walk. I paused and suddenly realized that I couldn't relate to that song anymore. I couldn't relate to it because I've been given new eyes to see myself in Christ. For many years I struggled with a sense of unworthiness, guilt, and condemnation. But that's all gone now. I don't have it anymore, and I feel so free in the Lord's love.”

When she shared this testimony, the room erupted and others began to testify along the same lines. It was an awesome experience. I believe this sister had laid hold of the same spiritual reality that the first Christians had laid hold of.

To add another illustration, a few years ago one organic church did an interesting experiment. They broke up into pairs and visited the various institutional churches

in town for two solid weeks. And they decided to analyze the sermons they heard.

When they came back to report, they made this striking observation: every sermon they heard had the same essential message. It was this: “What you are doing isn't enough to please God. You need to do more than you're doing. You need to read your Bible more, pray more, help people more, come to church more, etc. You need to do better than the best you can do.”

This is the script upon which most contemporary sermons are built. It is a gospel of duty pure and simple.

Interestingly, it was observed that these same churches give a very different message to the non-Christian. It sounds like this: “God loves you the way you are. It doesn't matter what you've done, His love is unconditional. Jesus died for you because He loves you without condition. You can't please God. Your good works are as filthy rags. But God will receive you as perfect if you come to Christ. So receive Him today.”

Ah . . . but once those same people receive Christ and “get saved,” the “bait and switch” gospel kicks in with a passion. Here's what it sounds like:

“Now that you're a Christian, here's what you must do to please God. You must try harder, you must do more, you must work harder, God won't be pleased with you if you don't do such and such, etc.”

A question that every Christian should ask when listening to a sermon or a message is this: “Am I hearing about the glories of Jesus Christ or am I being told what to do to be a better Christian?” The latter is a duty-based gospel—it's legalism in one form or another. It's eating from the wrong tree. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil is the luring counterfeit

for the tree of life. Note that the forbidden tree contains the *knowledge of good*.

According to the New Testament, good works are like fruit that falls off of a tree spontaneously as the result of life. In the same way, Christians naturally walk in good works with others as they learn to live by God's life.

In this connection, I have lost count of the letters I've received from pastors (some of whom are part of "cutting edge" movements) who confessed, "My gospel isn't working. For so long I have been serving the god of serving God, and I admit now that I really don't know Him nor do I know His love and acceptance in a genuine way."

A large number of these men have also expressed the fact that burned out with respect to ministry and confessed that they had come to the shocking realization that they were serving God in their own strength instead of by His life.

You and I cannot live the Christian life by ourselves. You can I cannot serve God in ourselves. Theological knowledge, doctrinal precision, and the intent to do good and help others is no substitute for living by Jesus Christ. Being a Christian is territory staked out only by Divinity. Only Christ lives the Christian life (John 15:5; Gal. 2:20). We learn to live by Christ and we learn to serve God *together in community*, not as an isolated Christian. This experience is beginning to take root among a growing number of Christians today.

7) *A rediscovery of God's eternal purpose.* It appears that the eternal purpose of God is the governing vision of this third current. I won't unravel that statement here (as I've spoken on it extensively elsewhere), except to say that this is probably one of the most exciting aspects of what's beginning today, for me at least. *The eternal purpose is deeply bound up with an experiential*

*understanding of the Trinity (the fellowship of the Godhead) and its relationship to the Christian life, the expression of the church, church planting and mission.*

8) *An inclusive, open spirit to all of God's people.* Unlike so many past movements, this third current is marked by an open attitude toward all of God's people. It rejects and even hates an exclusive, sectarian, elitist attitude and posture. While it has its own unique distinctiveness, it embraces and receives all whom God has received. Neither is this movement built around a human personality. While God is using a number of people to influence it, no human being is taking the center of attention. Those who are influencing it the most are pointing to the Lord Jesus Christ rather than to themselves.

In conclusion, we are only in the *beginning stages* of this third current. So there's not a whole lot that's established yet. The baby is breaking open the womb. But through her birth, we are seeing a recovery of what's been lost and a discarding of what's been picked up over the centuries.

As we approach 2009, pray with me that the Lord will gain much more for Himself with respect to these eight characteristics all of which tell us something about one of the ways in which the Spirit is blowing today.