

Six Waves Moving through the Church

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I live sixty second's walk away from the mighty River Thames. It is a magnificent wonder with a seven metre tidal flow. At Hammersmith the Thames can look full and almost ready to flood then four hours later seem like a broad ditch you could walk across. Millions of litres sweep in and out every day creating new conditions with each passing moment. The river is never static even though it can appear to be still. Stand on Hammersmith Bridge and you can see the speed of the incoming and exiting water sweeping below your feet. Rowers have a great time on the Thames but this river is not to be toyed with. It is not water to swim in - fall in and it may kill you. What are the tidal flows and undertows sweeping over and through the church? What is happening in, on and around the British and North American church?

There are a series of waves working through, around and over the church which need skilled negotiation if we are going to surf our way to future. Here are some of the bigger waves that come in no particular order of priority. However, the first three are mostly negative and the next three are mostly positive but you need to watch the tide.

Wave One: We are seeing an increase in cleverness and decrease in wisdom. On one side the church is cleverer than she has ever been but she may be less discerning than at any time in history. We have more information than ever but seem to be forgetting how to live wisely and well.

We are better than we have ever been at using technology and all the power that it brings. We have bright, shining websites, superb strategic plans and brilliant communicators yet wisdom is another thing. The increase in cleverness coupled with a decrease in wisdom reveals our collective amnesia. We have forgotten or are in the process of forgetting the ways of our church mothers and fathers in a rush to be relevant and brilliant. This wave has the potential to cut us off from our history leaving us orphaned and unable to feed off the nutrients of our history stretching all the way back thousands of years. Relevance, cleverness and brilliance are to be welcomed and are desperately needed but they have to emerge from the soil of wisdom and discernment if we are to handle them well. This 'cleverness wave' is subtle as it looks so harmless and helpful at initial glance but it is seductive and can be a killer if ignored.

Wave Two: There is an increased desire for the 'quick fix' and decreased desire for the slow rhythmic walk with Jesus through the Spiritual Disciplines. We can be pumped up in a brief spiritual sprint but settling in for the marathon of social and spiritual heavy lifting in one location is another thing. There are exceptions to this but this wave is on the rise. God does some of His work very quickly, but each breakthrough has to be incorporated into the slow walk.

This wave is to do with our disorientation regarding time. We are forgetting how it works and how God works it. The idea behind this wave is that the only thing that matters is the next moment or the moment after that. We have a desire to grow fast and therefore speed is critical. We want to have the benefit of experience without having had the experience. It is as though we think we can download spiritual software from some movement, conference or teacher and then we can use it for spiritual overdrive. The longing for the 'quick fix' is usually the sin of impatience masquerading as faith and commitment. Deep wounds have to heal from the inside out and that can take a while. Great meals require quality ingredients, a skilled chef and understanding of time. If you try and speed God up – or slow him down - it usually goes wrong and you end up being sidelined for a period so you learn to move at His pace and not your own. The great irony with this wave is that once you get into the slow rhythmic walk of the Spiritual Disciplines it becomes remarkable how fast God moves things along.

Wave Three: There is an increase in distraction and decrease in attentiveness. Flickering screens, 24 hour rolling news and a twitching culture is having its effect on our individual and communal ability to focus on what we should be doing and doing it. Many are unable to focus because they are physically, emotionally and spiritually exhausted through incessant skating on the thin ice of distraction.

This wave is about washing away our ability to rest. Our inability to rest is producing a low grade torture where we are awake but constantly unable to focus or complete. We rarely hear, 'This is my Son (or daughter) whom I love, in him I am well pleased,' because we are driven on to the next distraction. There is no energy left to celebrate completion. I have a picture of Clint Eastwood above my desk with a quote from the film *A Few Dollars More*, 'If there's going to be any shooting, I've gotta get my rest'. Clint shows us the way. There is a relationship between distraction, rest and attentiveness. If we are constantly distracted and rarely rest it is very difficult to be attentive to the people and things that matter. The effect of this 'distraction wave' is the blurring of vision and purpose. God wants us to feel, see or do something but we can't quite get it because a thousand other voices distract, eating away at our attentiveness like Piranha fish on flesh.

Wave Four: There is a decreased emphasis on formality and an increased focus on relationships. This has been going on for a while and looks set to continue because more and more of us live our lives alone. One of the effects of this is that people are mentor-hungry. Interestingly, in the middle of this wave is an increasing desire for the structure of spirit-filled or spirit-inspired liturgy.

We are increasingly defined as either producers or consumers. We are all being trained to see each other as a function, as 'doers'. The functional question is usually asked on meeting someone for the first time, 'what do you do'? But this functional question will not do for us humans. We need to know more, we need to relate. The most important question is not 'what do you do?' but 'who do you love?' Admittedly, you can't ask that question on first

meeting but it could transform a dull dinner party into a brilliant evening if you had the courage to ask it. In a world of goal setting, marketing and consumerism this wave is indicating our need to lovingly relate to people and to God. We have been made in the image of God who is one, yet three, so we are constantly hungry for love and relationship. It is the Holy Spirit who woos us into this.

Wave Five: There is a decrease in judgementalism and an increase in tolerance. People are able to hear some new emphasis or teaching, process it and then absorb it into their particular scheme for living. We seem more than happy to learn from other trends, movements or ecclesial tribes around the globe, filleting out what we consider to be bad and eating up the rest. People have a wide vision of what constitutes the church.

Thankfully, it is getting more and more difficult to run a cult or be sectarian. With vast amounts of information available at our finger tips every leader's statement can be weighed, challenged, disputed, ignored, considered ridiculous or proved wrong in a few minutes. We are now able to hold the world in our hands through our phones and listen to a multitude of voices from around the world twenty four hours a day. We may well be connected to our local church but be more influenced by voices in China or California than our own leaders. These are great opportunities but considerable dangers lurk. If we are not careful we just construct a world of our own making. We think we are becoming like Jesus but end up a self-made Frankenstein matching the wrong head to the wrong neck and having to tie them together with some bolts we just found in the garage.

Wave Six: There is a decreased emphasis on doctrine and an increased emphasis on feeling. We don't know the Bible very well but our therapists of various kinds are busy. Wonderfully, people are more able to acknowledge their emotions but ignorance of scripture always causes problems. People have an insufficient story in their hearts, no place where they can hang their emotions and pray for them appropriately.

One of the myths strongly held by a section of the church is that doctrinal enlightenment will bring about personal transformation. The idea is that if I know a Bible text or principle all will be well and I will grow. This wave is letting us know that the human heart is bigger, more complex and more wonderful than this. We certainly grow with rational understanding but to be all we can be our imaginations, feelings, bodies and relationships all need to be involved in our life with God. We need to know the story of God as displayed in scripture and we need that story to fire up our imaginations regarding how we live our own story.

All of these waves meet, merge and cause other waves and ripples to be created. What are the underlying conditions which seem to be creating these waves? The two contradictory forces of fear and love are surging below the surface. Some in the church are fearful and therefore both paralysed and caged, eventually collapsing into consumerism or something similar as an alternative to facing real life. But, there are many more experiencing an

unprecedented outpouring of God's love showing itself in generosity, patience, courage and outrageous hope.

How should we address these conditions? We need to develop the habits that help us pay attention to God. Our habits and imagination are closely linked. What we practise and imagine we will become. Practice does not make perfect, it makes permanent. We need to practise love for God, the church and the world in the middle of self-forgetfulness. Our homes and work places are the primary places where these habits and practices need to be textured into our lives.

Now what could those habits actually be? I am off for a walk along the river.

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