

# God's Way of Renewal

## A Message from Hosea

Among evangelical and charismatic Christians there is currently much talk about revival. Prophecies are doing the rounds which declare that an unprecedented revival is “about to engulf us”, accompanied by signs and wonders on a hitherto unknown scale. Such a revival, it is claimed, will sweep away denominational divisions, authoritarian church structures and will promote deep repentance. Predictions like these are eagerly received and cause excited anticipation. People imagine crowded churches (their own brand especially of course) and wonderful times with mass conversions and social change.

But, we have to ask, is such a scenario credible in the light of the Scriptural revelation of the ways of God, and of the current spiritual condition in our land? Repeated reading of the Old Testament prophets, and long and prayerful meditation on their messages as they relate to our contemporary state, lead me to believe that, contrary to these popular prophecies, revival is not about to overtake us, and that such prophecies of imminent revival are raising false and unjustified hopes.

The message of the prophet Hosea, particularly in the first three chapters, came very sharply into focus for me as I was seeking the mind of the Lord on these matters. The purpose of this writing is to share some insights into the meaning and message of these three chapters for us today.

### DIAGNOSIS -- HARLOTRY

As a medical student my teachers instilled into me that accurate diagnosis was a first essential before instituting any treatment. Hosea's first word from God is a diagnosis of the sickness of Israel. God revealed to His servant the true nature of the trouble with His people. ***“The land commits great harlotry by forsaking the Lord”*** (Hosea 1:2) For “harlotry” other translations have, “adultery”, “prostitution” or “unfaithfulness”. The essence of this harlotry is that the Lord has been displaced from His central and supremely unique place. No longer is “the knowledge of God” the priority goal, but the people pursue other gods and other goals. May it not be true that such a diagnosis is again being pronounced over the church today? The centre today tends to be man and his needs. Self-fulfilment, achieving one's potential and psychological health are being promoted rather than the knowledge of God and holiness of life. A look around the popular titles in Christian bookshops or at topics advertised for church services will quickly confirm what I say.

Then too, see how the world's methods, its popular psychology, its current bandwagons are all absorbed and even fostered within the churches. Promotional techniques in advertising and fund-raising copied from the world; music distinguishable only by its lyrics (when they can be heard!) from the music of the world; the world's feminist agenda adopted; and here in New Zealand indiscriminating biculturalism bringing a syncretism of animist beliefs and worship of the one true God; acceptance of sexual mores clearly condemned in the Scriptures;

all these are evidence of harlotry such as that which the Lord inspired Hosea to denounce.

## The Consequences of Harlotry

Throughout the prophecy of Hosea the consequences and out workings of such harlotry are further exposed.

1) **Children are begotten of such harlotry.** “*Children of harlotry*” (Hosea 2:4) “*They have dealt faithlessly with the Lord; for they have borne alien children.*” (5:7) Even so, in the church harlotry, such as has been described, spawns its offspring.

2) **The world rewards the church for its harlotry.** Hosea says in verse 1 of chapter 9, “*You have loved a harlot’s hire.*” The hire of harlotry may be some temporary popularity and acceptance by the world. Churches pursuing these “other lovers” may be rewarded by seeming success in attracting more people to their services.

3) **Once harlotry invades the church a “spirit of harlotry” takes control** This spirit leads people astray. “*A spirit of harlotry has led them astray, and they have left their God to play the harlot.*” (4:12) It prevents true repentance: “*Their deeds do not permit them to return to their God, for the spirit of harlotry is within them, and they know not the Lord.*” The people come, in the end, to “cherish harlotry” (4:10b) Furthermore, this spiritual harlotry is accompanied by physical immorality as well. “*I will not punish your daughters when they play the harlot, nor your brides when they commit adultery; for the men themselves go aside with harlots, and sacrifice with cult prostitutes, and a people without understanding shall come to ruin.*” (4:14) What shame and reproach has been brought on many churches and on the name of the Lord in recent times by just such immorality even among prominent church leaders.

Looking at the church scene in New Zealand today it is hard to dispute God’s diagnosis; “*The land commits great harlotry.*” (1:2)

## God’s Judgment on Harlotry

Hosea 3:3-9

The names given to the three children of Hosea’s unfaithful wife all had prophetic significance of the inevitable judgment of God on harlotry amongst His people.

Of Jezreel, God says, “*I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel.*” (1:4b)

Of Lo-ruhamah, “*I will no more have pity on the house of Israel to forgive them at all.*” (1:6)

Of Lo-ammi “*You are not my people and I am not your God.*” (1:9)

This is the just and deserved judgment of God declared on His harlot people. If the diagnosis was inescapable, so also are the consequences of harlotry. Judgment awaits the harlot churches, just as it was looming for Israel. Imminent judgment is much more to be feared than imminent revival is to be expected. This sounds like total darkness without hope, doesn’t it? But, into this gloomy prospect there shines the

light of another and more glorious outcome, God's heart-desire and His promise concerning the restoration of His people.

## **God's Promise of Restoration**

(Hosea 1:10-11)

Yes, there is to be a restoration, and that a glorious one, in which multitudes will be blessed and brought into the fold of God's true household. People previously alienated will know a relationship to the Living God as sons. The people of God will be united under one Head, and great glory will be given to the "God who sows." (Jezreel) Such is the grace and mercy of God ! To a people who do not deserve it there is given a precious promise of renewal.

## **God's Pathway to Renewal**

(Hosea 2.)

The initial, hidden and insignificant seed of restoration consists of individuals renewed in their relationship to God by repentance and inward transformation. This seed, planted by "The God who sows" are those referred to in chapter 2:1 as those who are God's people and who have obtained pity from Him. I believe that this initial work of the Lord is under way in people who are separated in heart from the harlot system. ***Silently, and with no trumpeting publicity, God is renewing individuals and placing in their hearts the desire for a pure virgin Church to be presented to her one Husband, Christ Jesus.***

To such pioneers of the renewal God entrusts a two-pronged message for the harlot churches. This message is first of all a call to repentance, "*Plead with you mother... that she put away harlotry from her face.*" (2:2b) and secondly, the message is to plead with Israel (the harlot church) to recognise that, in her present state, she is not the wife of the Lord, and that He is not her husband. (2:2a) This statement hit me with hammer-like force. I submit to you that it is a word of God today to the fragmented and divided institutional and denominational churches. This amalgam of religious organisations is not the Bride of Christ. Her constitution is not organisational. The World Council of Churches is not the Bride, nor is the Evangelical Alliance! The heap of disjointed bones of modern Christendom is not the Bride. No, ***the Lord is not the Husband of any institution or religious organisation.*** Please do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that nobody in the organised systems belongs to the Bride. Thousands in churches do belong. But, what I am saying is, that ***it is not membership of an organisation that makes you part of the Bride, but rather a living relationship with the Lord Jesus.*** The message God wants to be heard is, "Wake up! Recognise the true nature of My Church, the Bride of My Son, that it is very different from what you have known as and call "church" ***The Bride is one living corporate person, and not a compound of religious organisations.***

Sadly, there is little evidence that the churches in New Zealand are ready or willing to listen to either part of this twin message, and where the message is rejected and not received, God has to set in train a long and painful process before renewal and restoration can come about. This process is laid before us in Hosea 2:6-23.

## The Long Hard Road to Renewal

In this process there are two distinct aspects. There is a negative side, and a positive side. There is first a plucking up, a breaking down, a destroying and an overthrowing, and only then, a building and a planting. (Jeremiah 1:10)

**The Negative** is set forth in chapter 2:6-13. There is to be hedging up of the way and a raising of insuperable walls of difficulty and frustration. The previous apparent success and prosperity purchased with the harlot's hire is to be ruthlessly destroyed. Barrenness, emptiness and nakedness are to be the experience of the sorely chastened church.

Next, the current religious system in all its manifestations and activities is to be brought to an end. Here is the translation of 2:11 in the Good News Bible: *"I will put an end to all her festivities, her annual and monthly festivals and her Sabbath celebrations -- all her religious meetings."* Meditate on these solemn words of the Lord in relation to church as you have known it and tremble. Do not imagine that it cannot happen. It has already happened in certain countries in this century. Albania and China come immediately to mind. Of course the churches do not want to hear this message. They want revival within the present religious status quo, and any prophet proclaiming such a Hosea-type message will doubtless attract the same reaction as he did. *"The prophet is a fool, the man of the spirit is mad, because of your iniquity and great hatred. The prophet is the watchman of Ephraim, the people of God, yet a fowler's snare is on all his paths and hatred in the house of his God."* (Hosea 9:7b-8)

Let me repeat; before there can be revival in New Zealand or elsewhere, there will have to be either a radical repentance and turning from harlotry, or God will have to bring about something like the circumstances described in these verses of Hosea's prophecy which we have just considered. Because there is little sign of any readiness for the former, it would appear that the latter is a more likely scenario -- a stripping, a time of emptiness and fruitlessness, an end to self-satisfied, self-congratulatory religiosity -- a trip into a barren wilderness. Nor is Hosea the only prophet to foresee such happenings. The message is common to nearly all the prophets.

**The positive** side of the process is now described in chapter 2:14-23. All this devastation and stripping down has behind it a purpose of wonderful grace. The valley of troubling is to become a door of hope. (2:15) When all the religious props have been pulled out, when *"everything and everyone that people depend on are taken away"* (Isaiah 3:1-3 Good News Bible), then God will move to establish a new relationship with His people. Into this wilderness experience He will come in love and compassion to woo them to an exclusive relationship with Himself. He will pledge Himself to them in that wonderful threefold betrothal of verses 19-20, *"I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness."* The result of this will be a people who *"know the Lord"*, who are united to Him. This people, sown in the land, will bring forth fruit for Him. Wonderful!

## A Picture of God's Process of Renewal

Hosea 3.

1) **Redemption.** Chapter three begins with the former prosperous and successful harlot now reduced to a state of abject poverty and misery as a slave. The parallel to this is the state of the church described in chapter two, when she has been stripped and reduced to destitution and fruitlessness. Into this situation the husband comes to redeem his former wife. So low has she sunk that he is able to purchase her for half the price usually paid for a slave. Here is God's initiative of grace. He moves in with compassion and jealousy for His name and sets in train the first steps towards a full restoration.

2) **The Interim of Renewal.** (3:3-4) *"You must dwell as mine for many days; you shall not play the harlot, or belong to another man; so will I also be to you." For the children of Israel shall dwell many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or teraphim.*" Before full restoration can be effected there has to be a period of inward separation from the former way of life and a rebuilding of the exclusive and intimate marriage relationship. Here the parallel is to chapter 2:14-23. Something like this has been the experience of many of us who have been moved in spirit to separate from organised Christendom. While the physical break may have been quite sudden, *the inward separation from the old religious and church-centred ways takes time, and may even be quite a painful process.* Alongside this spiritual surgery there is a gradual building up of a new depth of personal relationship with the Lord. This interim period is often not an easy time. To come through it requires patience and trustfulness. It cannot be hurried.

An old Puritan commentator on Hosea, Jeremiah Burroughes, has a most fascinating comment on these two verses. Here is what he says, "A little before God's time to raise up the most glorious church that has ever existed the greatest confusion is likely to arise. God will reduce all to a chaos first, as He did in the first creation, and then will bring out of it a glorious building." As I look around and see the increasing confusion in the church scene today -- the many winds of doctrine, the clamour of contradictory teachings, the multiplied divisions etc., these words give me a glimmer of hope, that out of the chaos there may arise something which is truly the creation of God. But all this is very different from many of the current prophecies of instant revival.

3) **The Glorious "Afterwards"** (3:5) *"Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God and David their king; and they shall come in fear to the Lord, and to His goodness in the latter days."* Here is a picture of the renewal accomplished in a people who have been through a very radical repentance and restoration. Now their one overmastering passion is for a deeper and more real personal relationship with the Lord, their God, and a ready and glad submission to the Lordship of Jesus. They walk in awe and reverential fear before the Lord and draw all their resources from the inexhaustible abundance of His goodness. That is true revival indeed!

It is my conviction that the prophetic insights of Hosea are of vital relevance to our

present situation. The same message is clearly and unequivocally set forth by others of the prophets. Not one of these prophets was popular in his day. Most were hounded and persecuted by the religious and ecclesiastical leaders of the time, and were declaring things quite opposite to the graduates of the schools of prophets. Theirs was very much a minority voice. But time and history have blown away the comfortable predictions of the false prophets, while the message of these lonely servants of God endures. We would all do well to heed the counsel of the Apostle Paul to the Thessalonians (2Thess.2:2) "Not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited, either by spirit or word.... to the effect that the day of the Lord has come." Rather let us hold up our own lives and contemporary circumstances to the light of the revealed ways of God, determined to put away all harlotry from us. And *"Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord."* (Hosea 6:3). To those who know Him, *"His going forth is sure as the dawn; He will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth."* (Hosea6:3b). And that is revival!

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