

SHAKING IN THE CHURCH

Amos 9:8-12, Hebrews 12:25-29 (NASB)

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We live in a day when the church in America is shaking. Vast movements of people in and out of the church are afoot. We feel shaking in our own local church and wonder: *What is going on?* and *How can we stop it?!?* I feel this intensely as a pastor.

Every change in local church ministry seems to bring a realignment of people coming and going—even small changes. Our local church has gone through many changes over the past few years. Before I came in 2009 three full-time pastors felt the call of God to make a transition to new ministries in one year, kicking us into a time of change at College Church, in ministry of music, and at the senior pastoral level. We also had part-time worship leaders who came to help us and then transitioned to something else when we called a full-time Pastor of Worship.

Furthermore, we underwent a carefully-assessed reorganization of our administrative staff which was difficult on many levels. During this past year I noticed that Sunday morning attendance looked like it was going up, then it looked like it was going down, and then it ended the year about three percent ahead. Sunday evening service, on the other hand, went down sixteen percent.

There is shaking in the church. Ministries shift. We have gained friends and lost friends. Why does it have to be this way? Can't someone just make it stop?

THE LORD SHAKES HIS PEOPLE

The prophet Amos sent us an insight from the eighth century B.C. by way of application from the history of Israel. During the time of the divided kingdom the worship of Israel was in an abominable state. The northern kingdom had open syncretism, a blend of the worst pagan worship with the supposed worship of the Lord. Even in the southern kingdom there were obscene statues of pagan idols set right up in the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem.

Amos' job was to thunder the displeasure of Almighty God at this state of affairs. What would God do with such a mess? We read Amos' words: "**Behold, the eyes of the Lord GOD are on the sinful kingdom, /And I will destroy it from the face of the earth; /Nevertheless, I will not totally destroy the house of Jacob, /Declares the LORD. 'For behold, I am commanding, /And I will shake the house of Israel among all nations /As grain is shaken in a sieve, /But not a kernel will fall to the ground. /All the sinners of My people will die by the sword, /Those who say, 'The calamity will not overtake or confront us''''**" (Amos 9:8-10).

Why is the church shaking? Because every once and a while the Lord shakes his church. There are many secondary causes which draw our attention. We attempt to fix these in order to get the shaking to stop. But the time comes to recognize that God himself has reasons to shake us! Four key reasons are given by Amos for the Lord to shake Israel. I think you will see that although these are specifically for Israel, the purposes of God for faith in his people span every dispensation. Why does God shake his

people?

First, he shakes his people in order to bring judgment on sin and sinners before the final judgment. As Amos so intensely warned: "**Behold, the eyes of the Lord GOD are on the sinful kingdom, /And I will destroy it from the face of the earth.**" His name here is literally "the Lord Yahweh," and he repeats it to let Israel know that of all the gods they have set before their eyes, this one is lord of them all and is bringing judgment on all false worship. Amos tells us just how angry God is about idolatry in 9:1: "**I saw the Lord standing beside the altar, and He said, /Smite the capitals so that the thresholds will shake, /And break them on the heads of them all! /Then I will slay the rest of them with the sword; /They will not have a fugitive who will flee, /Or a refugee who will escape**" (Amos 9:1). This came to pass in the destruction of Israel and her removal to Babylonia.

Notice that the Lord is standing right next to the altar in his own house as he brings this judgment. In the household of God, meaning in the gathered body of those professing faith, are nevertheless those who are still unbelievers and sinners. They may look and sound like believers, but they have never genuinely repented of their sins and believed in Christ.

I remember a man from a church I pastored in another state whose parents were faithful longstanding members. This man and his wife attended regularly for some years, especially her, and I always had trouble reading him. He seemed dead to spiritual things in spite of going through the motions. When I preached his face was a blank. When people wept their way through powerful testimonies he did not react at all. I asked him to sing on one of our worship teams as a way to involve him and to give me a chance to disciple him. After a long period of sporadic attendance he suddenly decided that he was no longer coming to church, and we lost the family with their children.

I can't tell you how sad this made me as their pastor. I always hoped to find the key that would awaken him to Christ. His wife and parents felt helpless in the face of this problem. Years later God engineered a dramatic public revelation that he was committing adultery all those years with one of his wife's close friends, and now everyone in town knows. A family with three children is irreparably broken. He now lives in an apartment by himself after twenty years of marriage. The Lord shakes his church to bring judgment upon those who are not believing.

The same shaking of judgment is also designed by the Lord to push believers to acknowledge and repent of unconfessed sin. Peter the Apostle warned his church that "**...It is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?**" (1 Pet. 4:15-17). Judgment on the corporate body has a chastening effect on the individual believers in that body. What we do with that chastening effect is up to us.

Secondly, the Lord shakes his church in order to sift the false from the true. As Amos prophesied: "**I will shake the house of Israel among all nations /As grain is shaken in a sieve, /But not a kernel will fall to the ground.**" This passage may be a reference to the sifting of grain to separate the kernels from the chaff, or it may be about the sifting of sand to remove the stones for construction purposes. This is because the Hebrew word for kernel can also mean "pebble." If it means kernel, then we should picture crushed grain being thrown up in the air in a wide basket and the chaff being blown away by the wind. If it is the sifting of sand or soil the fine material goes through the

shallow basket and the pebbles remain to be discarded.

We learn from Amos that the Lord takes action to bring a separation in his people between those who trust him and those who do not, between those who seek to walk in holiness and those who merely seek to look like they are. This will be completed at the final judgment, but there are departures from the body in the here and now due to the sifting of the Lord.

Notice that when the Lord sifts his church we all shake together. There is no danger of true believers accidentally being ejected from his church, but the false ones are scandalized by the shaking and fall away. As much as we wish it were not so, we all bounce up and down together. That answers the question we all have periodically: *Why am I shaking?* Sifting shakes all alike.

The energy of sifting also impacts those with a true faith who have mixed their reason for connection with a local body with anything other than Jesus. As the body shakes all of the bonds which connect us are stressed, and some people disconnect as a result.

Why are you connected to the body of Christ? Is it because you like the style and feel of the church? Is it because you get to have a certain ministry? Is it because your friends or family are here? Maybe it is because you work for the church. Or is it because the church reflects your political views? Even theological perspectives, when they are matters of personal taste, can be classified as reasons to connect with a local church which are not about Jesus in a direct sense. Connections which are based even partly upon these kinds of things are weakened and in danger of coming unglued during times of shaking.

Surely we have seen plenty of this over the years! I will not recite the list of reasons I have heard for people leaving a church, but most of them make no sense unless the connection was defective from the beginning. The speeches I hear are in this format: *I'm leaving a body of people who love me and in which I find my true identity in God, where I have laughed and cried, where I have served and worshiped because...* fill in the blank with things which are not sufficient to justify the breach. The Apostle Paul wrote: "**...Be...diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace**" (Eph. 4:3). This is not a cause for recrimination but for wisdom. God shakes his church for his own reasons, and one of them is to bring separation and change.

The third reason the Lord shakes his church is to bring restoration and health to the group. It may be tough on us as individuals, but the true body of Christ grows stronger in times of trial. The prophet Amos said: "**In that day I will raise up the fallen booth of David, /And wall up its breaches; /I will also raise up its ruins /And rebuild it as in the days of old**" (Amos 9:11). This is one of the hundreds of promises of God to Israel that he would take the nation through a time of purification, but would do this to bring restoration. It is one of the many as yet unfulfilled prophecies about Israel, and one reason why we believe that there will be a one-thousand year period after the church age when they will all be fulfilled.

We can see this restoring purpose in the word of the Lord to the church of Thyatira in the book of Revelation. Speaking of the false prophetess Jezebel he said: "**Behold, I will throw her on a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds. And I will kill her children with pestilence, and all the churches will know that I am He**

who searches the minds and hearts; and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds" (Rev. 2:22-23). The Lord promises to bring tribulation, which means pressure, upon the local church to judge those who are unbelieving and sinners, to frighten believers into a proper sense of awe of God, and to recompense each one perfectly. As challenging as this sounds, the group of believers becomes truer and stronger as a result.

Charles Spurgeon gave the example of a beautiful oak tree. How majestic is an oak with its spreading branches and crown! But how did it get that way? The reality is that the ground beneath the tree is littered with the remains of branches broken off by the wind and storms of many years. The only common denominator between those dead branches is that they were unable to withstand the shaking of the storms which the Lord chose to send. So it is in Christ's church. We often have no good explanation as to why people fall away, but the result is a body of believers who know why they are connected: one Lord, one faith, one hope, one baptism.

Fourthly and finally, the Lord shakes his church to refocus the local body on his mission. As Amos wrote of Israel, the Lord shakes his people, cleans out the dead, and restores strength and health to the group **"That they may possess the remnant of Edom /And all the nations who are called by My name,' Declares the LORD who does this"** (Amos 9:12). Please observe that even in the eighth century B.C. the plan of God to have all nations call upon his name was revealed. God's plan for doing that, of course, has always been to unite the peoples of the world by redemption in Christ.

The church throughout history has struggled to stay on mission with Christ to spread the gospel to the lost, the least, and the last. One specific element of restoration through shaking and sifting is the refocusing of our mission as a local entity. Are we on the same mission as our Lord, or has it become our goal to have a "nice" church? We are nowhere promised a nice church experience by the Christ who consorted with sinners and had nowhere to lay his head. And know this: no pastor can stop the Almighty from shaking his church!

And how his shepherd's heart burns for those who are still outside his sheepfold! The Good Shepherd has no "Plan B" if his church is not inclined to reach out to lost sheep. So he shakes and sifts us until we either get with the mission or fall apart completely.

THE ULTIMATE GOAL OF SHAKING

A passage from the book of Hebrews clarifies the Lord's ultimate purpose for shaking, both in the long and short terms: **"See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven. And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, 'YET ONCE MORE I WILL SHAKE NOT ONLY THE EARTH, BUT ALSO THE HEAVEN.' This expression, 'Yet once more,' denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe"** (Heb. 12:25-28).

The Big Shakeout will come to a conclusion when every last sinful, contaminated, temporary thing is shaken out of his church and the eternal state is inaugurated. This should give us pause when

our hearts are invested too much in earthly, human, and created things. These words obviously point to something which will happen in the end, but we see the Lord's motive in shaking us here in the church age. He is moving us toward the living and unshakable God-things, and moving us away from our captivation with the things of this dead and broken world.

The world is shaking hard and may be on the verge of a self-induced cataclysm. Our nation is shaking in many ways. The American church is shaking as nominal Christians stream out of nominal churches never to return, as doctrinal foundations erode, and practical Christian living becomes the exception rather than the norm. So we should not be surprised that we shake as a local church as well. How should we respond to that?

First, if you are not yet a believer in Jesus Christ you are in danger of being shaken out of the church and getting caught in a maelstrom of life which will take you away from him. Today is your day of opportunity. We will not make you wear a born-again beanie or tell any part of your story you do not want to tell. Your business is not with us but with Jesus Christ who is calling your name.

Secondly, if you feel the shaking as a believer your first thought should be: Is there some secret, unconfessed sin that the Lord is pushing me to acknowledge? Confess whatever God reveals to you and then choose repentance and pray for the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome sin.

Thirdly, be sure to check the quality of your connection to the local church. There are many reasons why we pick a particular church. But let us know with utmost certainty that there is no holding power in earthly and human reasons. The power of connection is found in Jesus Christ. Pray this prayer: "Lord, I'm here because of you."

A fourth response when we feel shaking in the church is to push for church health. If the world were not fallen we would not have to constantly be building up broken walls. But it is, and Christ's church must always be renewing and reforming until he returns to take us all home.

Fifth and finally, let us take shaking in the church as a reminder to stay on mission with Christ. Have we become distracted from this heart passion of God? Unless we have concrete ways to help real people come to Christ and become connected to the local church, we are falling down on our responsibility.

Shaking is a fact of life. But think of the privilege we have as believers to go through shaking with no fear. We cannot accidentally fall out of the hand of the Lord! As the writer to the Hebrews put it: **"Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe."** My prayer is that we will do that in the coming year. I invite you to join me in making it happen.