

Houses from Within

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On a Friday and Saturday in May this year the annual Houses from Within event took place in Tel Aviv. 133 places opened the doors to the public and so did we in Immanuel Church. People usually visit our church because they want to see its stained-glass windows and listen to organ music, so on Friday we gave presentations of the church every hour with organ pieces as part of program.

The very first guest that arrived stopped on the doorstep and asked a question that in many ways is so typical for the platform of outreach that we have in Immanuel Church: Are you Christians or Messianic Jews. I had a pretty good idea about what was behind that question so I answered that Immanuel Church is a Christian Church. And he entered.

Over and over again it is our experience that it is exactly because we are a traditional Christian church with tower, apse and organ that people visit us. We are in every way a strange element in the Israeli-Jewish community, which is why we don't pose a threat to their Jewish identity from within like our brothers and sisters in the Messianic congregations. They, however, have a platform to reach their own people that we will never get, because we so clearly signify an 'otherness' by being so 'churchy'.

Having said that we are nevertheless a fellowship of both Jesus-believing Jews and non-Jews, and the one who usually guides our visitors is a Messianic Jew from Uruguay. Around 500 people visited us on Friday.

We have around 150 primarily local guests every week during our Open Church program and my impression of the profile of a typical visitor is an intellectual Tel Avivian conscious about his Jewish identity, ethnically and culturally, but the religious practice varies widely, if any religious practice at all. Some present themselves as atheists; some believe there is a God, which is specifically the God of the Jews, since they are the people of God, but they don't have a specific religious lifestyle. Finally, we also have visitors who frequently go to the synagogue.

With that profile in mind I preached on Psalm 117 on Saturday, when we had three short open services. *Praise the Lord all you nations; extol him, all you peoples. For great is his love towards us; the Lord's faithfulness endures forever.*

Praise the Lord, all you peoples: First: If there is a God then everybody everywhere from every people owe him their worship, simply because of the fact that he is God. Second: It does not make sense to say that you believe in God without worshipping; that is to make a fool of both oneself and God.

For great is his love towards us; the Lord's faithfulness endures forever. God loves us even though we don't love him. God is faithful towards us, even though we are not faithful towards him. Since Adam & Eve we have loved the illusion of absolute personal freedom above God. But absolute freedom is an illusion. There are types of freedom we simply don't have. I'll never have the

freedom of driving an Audi TT sportswagon. My legs are too long; I simply don't fit in; neither can I afford it. And there are kinds of freedom we willingly give up on in order to get something else. My 4 kids remind me of that every day.

True freedom is only found when we get in touch with truth itself. And all people make claims about what the truth is. Either if they say that there is a God or there isn't. Or if they say that no one knows so no one should make truth claims, that is also a truth claim – an absolute claim about the truth. Everyone makes truth claims; it is an existential necessity.

If everybody makes truth claims it makes sense that the only liberating thing is to live in line with the truth. False truth claims are by definition deceiving. Only the right truth claim will set a person free. The Bible claims that the truth is not just an idea, but a person – Jesus Christ. He came to win us back the freedom we had, but lost. He did that, the Son of God, the only One who is absolutely independent and free, he won us our freedom by losing his own on the cross. The cross is what lifted the curse; the cross is what tore the curtain and provided a restored relationship with God, whom we were made to live with. This is how God loves us, and isn't that exactly what love is - to give up on one's personal freedom for the loved one? But if it is to become a love *relationship* both parties need to surrender to the other. God did that. Have we done it?

800 people stopped by our little church during that Saturday. So many that it fills us with joy and excitement, but also so many that it is especially on a day like that that we take courage and joy from the fact it is the Holy Spirit's business to break through to people and not ours.

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