

# BodyLife Past Article Archive

## Reveling in the Freedom to Follow

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BodyLife • July 2006

To be honest, most of the mornings I lived bogged down by the demands and agendas of religion, I woke up defeated. I'd look at the clock dreading what the day might hold and wondering how I could get everything just right so God could do incredible things around me. Don't hear that wrong. I loved God. I was as passionate for him as I am now, but I was also exhausted all the time. There were so many things to fix, so many people to see and so many meetings I had to prepare for.

I prayed hard each morning for God to bless this or save me from that. Most of the time my prayers didn't seem to make any difference. It was horrible. No matter how well I did on any given day, I always fell short of my own expectations. On my best days I broke even, on most days I felt incredibly frustrated, either by my own failings or, conversely, how inactive God seemed to be. But I didn't know there was any other way.

When I think back to those days now, they seem like a distant nightmare after waking up fully. It seems only a distant memory. Now I awaken every morning in the excitement of an unfolding adventure in the life of Jesus. (You have to keep in mind I'm a morning person!) Now my first thoughts in the morning are thoughts of wonder and excitement. I can't wait to get to the day and see how this one unfolds. (I realize some of you don't even wake up mentally until well after noon, so that's when you might feel it.) And, as I lay my head down at night, I am not only overwhelmingly grateful for what God allowed me to experience that day, but also already looking forward to the one coming.

Some of you may chalk that up to the exciting life of a traveling author, as if this must be loads of fun. But honestly, that's not what excites me, and my days are rarely easy or pain-free. The reason I'm excited to wake up each day is because I can't wait to see who God might put in my path, or how he will sort out some unresolved thing in my life or someone I know around me.

Could this be what Jesus meant when he promised us the fullness of his life? He wasn't talking about the ease of circumstance, or the fulfillment of our dreams, but the absolute adventure of walking through each day with him as his purpose slowly but surely unfolds in the circumstances and relationships around us. He is there in our simplest joys and in our most crushing circumstances, always inviting us closer, always transforming us so that we can live more freely in him. If this isn't at least a piece of that abundant life, it is more like it than anything I've known to date.

## Why Don't We Want People to Follow?

The most incredible invitation Jesus made in his life among us was for each of us to simply follow him. For too much of my life, however, I thought following him meant that I subscribed to the principles and rituals of Christianity. Sure I had moments of knowing him even there, but they always faded away in the busyness of religious activity, which did more to wear me out than show me how to live in him.

As I read the New Testament, I'm blessed by how much the apostles reminded the early followers that they were not offering them a religion to observe, but inviting them into a living relationship with Jesus that would allow them to know his Father and participate in his unfolding grace in the world. "Our fellowship is with him!" "Believe what you hear." "Follow me as I follow Christ."

How is it that we have traded that adventure for services, doctrines and principles that promise a reality they can't deliver? I regularly meet people who have been faithful elders, pastors, and participants in good religious institutions who grope around as if God does not speak to them and as if he is not able to transform them. They have no idea how to enjoy a relationship with a Father and his Son that gives them hope and direction in their darkest days and teaches them how live in his power instead of their own efforts. I'm thinking we didn't make the best trade there.

If nothing else, that alone should make us question the religious activities and meetings that eat up so much of our lives and yet don't equip us to live in the reality of the friendship he offered us. No wonder religion gets boring. The New Testament is replete with the invitation to follow him, not follow the dictates of a religious program. I even look back now and see how I discouraged people from trying to follow him. Sure they would make mistakes in learning to do so, but because I wanted to save them from those mistakes, I taught them to listen to me instead of continuing through the process of learning to listen to him. I didn't mean to. I thought I was teaching them to follow him, but in the end, they only learned to listen to me. And that worked only as long as they liked what I said. When they didn't, they just found someone else to tell them what they wanted to hear.

## **One Flock, One Shepherd**

How much clearer could Jesus have been in John 10? He knows each of his sheep by name and leads them with his voice. That doesn't seem too complicated. He connects with us; we follow him. That doesn't seem like rocket science or something only a few gifted professionals could achieve. He went on to say that his sheep would know his voice so well that they wouldn't follow a stranger. Is that ever true!

His sheep really do hear his voice; it's just that they've been taught not to trust it. When they hear the voice of a stranger, it sounds wrong to them even if they can't put their finger on exactly why. But that's when they often get talked into ignoring what they know to be true inside. They are accused of independence, arrogance and rebellion to make sure they get back in line and don't cause any trouble. Who are you to think you can know God? Do you have the training we have, or the anointing? Do you

read Greek? Are you going to argue with the 'wisdom passed down through the ages'?

As well meaning as some of that might be, it's effect is to destroy people's trust in Jesus as the one who wants to lead them, teach them, protect them and free them to live powerfully in his life. Leadership in the early church helped people learn how to walk with the living Jesus, not subvert that relationship by inserting themselves in its place. Doing so not only undermines spiritual growth, but also divides the body over the differing views of those who think they are leading his flock.

I love it when people tell me that something I read or said touched them deeply, not because it was new to them, but because it gave voice to something the Spirit had already been showing them for some time before. They were just afraid to believe it was true with all the religious voices telling them otherwise. The language of real fellowship will always make us more aware of his voice and less influenced by our desire to please people, especially leaders.

That's why Jesus said we could be one flock with one shepherd. As long as we continue to have millions of people inserting themselves as the ones to follow, this family will continue to be fragmented. But that has been changing in recent years as an increasing number of people are simultaneously and spontaneously seeing through Christianity as the religion it has become and are learning again simply how to follow Jesus again, even when it goes against the grain of other people's religious expectations of them.

I've been blessed to meet thousands of these people all over the world. They seem to be on the same adventure I'm on and when we connect our fellowship is immediate, deep and filled with life. And even though many of these people don't fit into the traditional structures we've inherited in our day, they are not the independent or rebellious as others have described them. In fact, those learning to follow the Lamb have a deep desire for authentic fellowship with others and a desire to see the church emerge in our day as a true reflection of God's glory in the world.

### **Spiritual Couch Potatoes?**

Much has been written in national magazines over the last year about the growing disillusionment many are experiencing with institutionalized religion. They are reassessing their fruitfulness of the time, energy and finances that it takes to maintain buildings and sustain a staff that primarily runs programs for the faithful. Some are doing their best to help renew tired institutions, others are embracing new relational models hopeful that they will offer a better result, and many others are looking beyond all of that to find a dynamic life in Jesus and relationships with others that no model could ever contain.

Some have even belittled those they call the 'out-of-church' crowd calling them independent, spiritual couch potatoes. They say that without accountability to gifted leaders to keep them from error and to coordinate their efforts the church of Jesus Christ will end up weak and ineffective. Really? What does

that say about Jesus' ability (or should we say inability?) to raise up a flock after his own heart and release them to live and work together however he might desire? And why would we want to listen to those who have no trust in Jesus' ability to change our lives?

These people have not seen the body of Christ that I have seen taking shape all over the world. Growing in dependence on Jesus rather than following programs crafted by a human leader, they are being powerfully transformed by his life and are making incredible impact in the world around them. And while the individual actions may not warrant magazine coverage, the sum total of the simple obedience of those believers is allowing God's kingdom to be known in the world.

### **The Submitted Flock**

Thomas Friedman, the New York Times political columnist wrote a book a few years ago, called *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. In it he describes a fundamental shift in power from the political leaders of nation-states to what he called the electronic herd - the millions of individual investors who wake up every morning, turn on their computers and trade in stocks and currencies for their own financial gain.

They move millions if not billions of dollars each day to those places that the electronic herd trusts the most in returning a profit. Friedman asserted that this trend was so profound that power had already begun to shift away from governments and political leaders. In time nations will no longer be able to successfully manipulate their currency or economies, because when the electronic herd gets wind of it they will flee overnight to better investments.

I read that book years ago and found it shocking that people acting in their own self-interest could have such an impact on world events. Their power was derived from the sum total of their actions, not from any coordination between them, and yet they are economically restructuring our world. Lately that book has come back to mind as a parable of what is happening spiritually in the Father's family. Jesus is raising up his own submitted flock - a people not making decisions every day in their own economic self-interest, but those who will simply respond to the Shepherd one action at a time, one person at a time, and in each situation as it comes.

Can you imagine the power of millions of individual believers from all over the world simply following the inclinations that Jesus would allow to grow in their hearts? I get a glimpse of that reality every day just by the folks I know. I hear incredible stories of lives being changed. I see Jesus' hand as he connects people when he has a task for them to do together. I see a people more focused on doing what Jesus asks of them rather than building large programs or ministries to try to catch the attention of the world. They will go wherever he asks them to, link arms with other believers he invites to the same task and do it all without the need for power, self-glory or vocational provision. This is the picture Scripture paints, and those who aspire to work with him in this venture will not seek to replace him in people's lives, but equip them to

live it too.

I sit here today overwhelmed by what Jesus is doing in our world and almost laugh, thinking, of course it would be this way. He said it would. He would be the shepherd and all would follow him with his law written in their hearts. He never wanted us to follow the programs of men but learn to live in a growing trust in his ability to coordinate his body and love the world through us.

## **A People Like No Other**

I realize some reading this article will be threatened by now that I would dare to encourage believers to follow Jesus as he leads them, rather than falling in line with one of the various institutions that claim to be preparing Christ's body for the last days. They fear that if people are not obligated to join up, they will wither away in their own selfishness.

I understand why some people would feel that way. I know many who claim to be following Jesus and are only indulging their own self-interest. Instead of increasingly demonstrating his grace and truth, they turn out to be arrogant, isolated, and so filled with their own agenda they suffocate anyone near them. These are not those who are growing to know him, however. They are those who have reacted to religion by falling back into their own selfishness. God can rescue them, too, when they get weary of living that way.

But the fact that people can abuse the truth does not negate that truth. I'm not writing to those who want to use these words as an excuse to do whatever they feel like doing. I'm writing these words to encourage those who passionately want to know Jesus and be transformed by his life. Those people are finding that their freedom from religious activity is stirring them to a deeper passion for him and he grows more real in them with each passing day. And they also have an irresistible desire to connect with others who share that passion. They may not find them easily, but in time Jesus will connect them to others.

I see a vast group of people around the world learning to depend on him more each day. I am recognizing at least seven attributes that are increasing in them as they learn how to follow the Lamb wherever he goes:

- ***They live by the reality of love not by principles*** (John 13:34-35). As they respond to others with the same reality of love they have found in him for themselves, they know how to treat others around them in away that conveys the life of God to broken people and fellow travelers.
- ***They live with a growing trust in Father's purpose and power, not out of fear*** (Romans 8). The more they live in the reality of God's love the more obvious it becomes to them that God can be trusted with everything, and this freedom allows them to move through the world not looking out for their own good, but living by whatever Father gives them.
- ***They live at the Father's pleasure not in the tyranny of fulfilling their own agendas***

(I Peter 4:1-2). Increasing trust means they no longer have to labor under the tyranny of what they think might be best. All they need to do is follow him, knowing that he will fulfill his purpose in them best when they are not trying to do it themselves.

- ***They trust in his power, not their own efforts*** (Philippians 3:1-14). Those who follow Jesus have given up any confidence they had in their own wisdom or their own ability to transform themselves or impact the world. The resultant humility allows them to speak the truth in love without being rude or pushing others to embrace their point of view.
- ***They live in the moment not in the anxiety of their imagined futures*** (Matthew 6/Luke 12). They know it is far easier to hear his voice in the moment and follow his lead when they are at rest on the inside. Most of our anxieties come from an imagined future in which God is not present. Having seen God time and again do the unexpected, they are confident that their whole lives are in his hands they do not worry about a future they cannot see. They know the best way for them to be where God wants them six months from now, is by following him today and see what doors he opens.
- ***They live in authentic expressions of community not in isolated independence or in prefabricated programs*** (I Corinthians 12-14). Their freedom in Jesus allow them to connect in relationships free of pretence and manipulation and find connecting with others of like passion to be an irresistible joy that encourages and inspires them to live more deeply in him.
- ***They live generously and graciously in the world, not seeking to exploit others with their own agenda*** (Mark 10:42-45). As they have learned to let God provide for them, they no longer need to use others, either to get what they want or to protect themselves from others. With a heart to help others openly God can make himself known through them in some fascinating ways and by doing so allow others to come to know who he is.

## **Live Free!**

Like a field of wildflowers coming into their season, this submitted flock is blooming with God's glory in the world. Every person can be part of it. Simply draw near to him continually and ask him to reveal himself to you. Take each situation you're in and ask him to show you what it would mean for you to follow him in it. Then watch and listen over time as he makes his way clear to you.

If you know some other brothers and sisters near you who are learning to live this life as well, ask them to help you. Learn from them without making them a substitute for the walk Jesus wants to share with you.

Believe the growing convictions he puts on your heart and follow them as best you see them, being gracious to others as he shapes his image in you. Don't worry about the mistakes you'll make and don't fall into the trap of thinking that any teaching or model of church life will ever replace his voice leading you.

That's why I'm not on any bandwagon with those who claim they have God's proven model for church life. When our focus is on following a model, even a good one, rather than following him, we'll still miss out on how he is knitting this family together. If you're pursuing house church, cell church or purpose-driven church instead of following him, you will miss those he might ask you to walk beside who are in more traditional congregations or in no formalized group at all.

The glory of life in him is not found in finding the best model to implement, the right principles to follow or even the most powerful rituals to observe. It is about knowing him as our older brother and friend, living in that relationship with His Father, and following him wherever you see him leading you.

Without that freedom, we'll just be a group of Christians caught up in the boring and powerless religious activities that never bring life to us, much less help us touch the world around us. With the freedom to follow him with joy, Jesus can do anything he wants to do in us on any given day.

Isn't that something worth waking up to?

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