

Living Loved Articles

The Church Jesus is Building

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Living Loved • January 2011

"What do you think the church is going to look like ten years from now?" I get asked that question almost everywhere I go. People assume that my travels and correspondence give me a wider view of God's work in the world. And while it may be a bit broader than some, in the grand scheme of things, I interact with a very small slice of Jesus' followers and even that is a very specific subset drawn by the content of my books and websites.

Nonetheless I find it a fascinating question mostly for what it says about us. Our religious training has put our focus in the wrong place, asking the wrong questions, and leaving people feeling adrift when they have no need to be. No one can answer it with any degree of certainty and the question itself assumes a standardized answer that ignores Jesus' immense creativity in the world across differing cultures and local realities.

The question does admit, however, that we are in a time of transition, where the old congregational forms based on centuries of worn-out methodologies and compromised hierarchies no longer work. People are leaving their congregations in droves. Certainly many of those have abandoned God either believing he isn't real, or not worth knowing if he's the demanding busybody religion often presents him to be. But a significant number are leaving because their congregations were having a negative influence on their desire to know God and find real community. The reasons are numerous--empty rituals, irrelevant programs, messages provoking guilt or demanding performance, misplaced priorities, authoritarian leadership, superficial relationships, or simply the inability to honest friendships sharing a journey of spiritual growth.

It's easy to point fingers at those leaving. But even if you love the traditional congregation, you might want to look beyond it and ask why do we spend so much energy propping up a system that alienates so many wonderful people, instead of concluding that the people must not be wonderful because it no longer works for them.

Scattered?

For those who have given up on the congregation they were a part of, what do you do now? If you found your identity in a task you did for God or group you used to belong to, finding yourself outside of it can be incredibly disorienting. Even if your mind knows better, your emotions are still tied to the approval you received by being visible and active in a local fellowship. The same people who used to love and applaud

you, now look down on you for "forsaking the assembly" and question your relationship with God.

Many feel like scattered sheep battling the guilt of their inactivity rather than using the time to deepen their own relationship with the Shepherd. Some seek another group of like-minded believers or try to start one of their own. If they do, they find themselves relapsing into that same feeling of superiority that comes from being in a group that is more committed to Biblical principals than the one you left, or at least thinks they are. But soon you realize that even a house church or an organic group can be as empty, or as abusive, as the congregation you left.

All the while, the question that nags you is, "What should the church look like?" The underlying premise is that if you just knew what it is supposed to look like you would know where to look or how to form one. That's why so many end up in the unending struggle to find the right church model to copy. In doing so they never realize that their own pursuit is keeping them from the very reality they desire.

If your connection to Jesus is growing, you are not scattered at all. You are simply finding that the voices of religious performance no longer hold the same weight and you are no longer getting the same validation you became accustomed to. Your passion to live inside his affection is drawing you to a greater gathering of believers tha you cannot yet see. Don't be afraid. You are not alone. Jesus is building a people in the earth who can live as his body in these days. You won't miss out. You are simply transitioning from religious obligation to a relational reality, and no one I've met on this journey has ever regretted the cost to do so.

So while I am not able to answer the question directly, I want us to look at how we can embrace the church Jesus is building in the world. I won't pretend my observations are complete or authoritative. They are simply the way I see it at this vantage point of my journey. Admittedly these thoughts have also been shaped by insights I've gained over the past fifteen years by tasting real community at home and in distant countries, and sitting at the tables of brothers and sisters around the world who have wrestled with these same questions, many of whom have lived outside the distractions of religious performance longer than me.

He Is Shaping A Bride

Jesus is building his church with the same passion that he has demonstrated through the ages. It may be hard for some to see, because they have used the term "church" to describe buildings and institutions, and thus have failed to recognize the church as she really is. Even if you attend a so-called church meeting, the church is not the meeting you attend or the organization that sponsors it; it is the network of Jesus-centered friendships that you enjoy in those institutions and beyond them.

He builds that church by first shaping people who can walk with him. I am thrilled with the stories I hear

of people who are breaking out of religious molds and learning to live in the reality of the Father's affection. This draws them out of religious performance and obligation, which relies on human effort and ingenuity. They are learning to follow him instead of finding security in a specific group, doctrine, tradition, or ritual.

The words of Isaiah may even be more timely for the religious contrivances we have designed today:

"Who talked you into the pursuit of this nonsense, forgetting you ever knew me? Because I don't yell and make a scene do you think I don't exist? I'll go over, detail by detail, all your 'righteous' attempts at religion, and expose the absurdity of it all.... They're smoke, nothing but smoke." - Isaiah 57:11-13, The Message.

There's no doubt Jesus is exposing the absurdity of our religious self-effort. None of our activities matter if they are not drawing us into a meaningful relationship with him, where each one learns to hear his voice and follow him. As well intentioned as it may be, our work for him may be the greatest obstacle to actually knowing him. The New Testament is clear: the only thing more dangerous than unrighteousness is self-righteousness.

And let's not blame the institutions. Religion is not something we get from them; it is what those institutions provide to satisfy our fleshly inclinations. I know many who have left religious systems but are still living in religious ways of thinking. And I also know those who attend a local congregation, but they are not caught in the performance trap. Instead they are learning to love God and the people around them. They may have to ignore the guilt-inducing messages, or the manipulative tactics of those who seek to lead, but because they are free on the inside they can still be there to love beyond it all.

The church Jesus is shaping is one not driven to performance by fear, shame, or guilt. She doesn't respond to obligation or ritual or the absence of them. She is learning to live at the pleasure of the Head and that makes her radiant with his glory wherever she appears on the planet.

Living at Home

Our old religious inclinations tell us that what we need for a vibrant spiritual life is "out there" somewhere. Find the right group, movement, author, plan, or revival or you're going to miss out on what God is doing in the last days. That simply isn't true. Jesus told us not to buy into the notion that the kingdom of God was somewhere else. "The kingdom is within you!"

We all know how to live in our fears or anxieties. We know how to conform to the world's demands or religion's dictates. What Jesus wants us to teach us is to live at home in his Father, the same way Jesus lived in him. This is not a theology to subscribe to, but a way to live all day, every day. Living in Christ has absolutely nothing to do with where you are on Sunday morning at 10:00 and everything to do with

following him through each day. Jesus did not come to create sacred space for us in religious services, or even in our daily quiet times. He made all of life sacred by coming to live in us and becoming a part of every thing we do.

This is not as complicated as many fear. The reason people have trouble discovering this reality is because they don't believe it is as simple as it really is. Living in communion with him is what he shapes in a willing heart as we learn to relax in his love. Right where you are he can show you how to live at home in the Father, confident in his love, and at peace even in times of trouble

The loneliness some feel when they find themselves outside religious systems is really not a cry for more people; it is a drawing to God that we have tried to fill with other people. If you are not at rest in God's love for you, no amount of human contact will fill that void; it can only mask it. Let your loneliness draw you into a greater depth of relationship with him and then a new way of relating to others emerges.

Resist the Urge

It's often been said that the greatest enemy of the best is the good. It often is. The greatest distraction to being a part of what God is doing in the world is to be focused on human efforts, especially what we try to do for him. Nothing disrupts God's work around us more than when the arm of flesh asserts itself to try to do for God what we think God cannot do for himself.

When we feel unattached, unproductive, or insignificant this growing urge will prod us to "at least do something," as if misguided activity is preferable to a quiet, listening heart. If that doesn't spring from our own flesh, then it will from someone's near us. Many of our fellowship groups, Bible studies, and outreach efforts have begun with the perceived guilt that we are not doing enough for God. More time-consuming and irrelevant religious activities have been generated from that distorted impulse than any other. Authors manipulate it to sell books, and would-be leaders exploit it to get us to embrace their programs and contribute to their income.

The fruitfulness of God rises out of rest not anxiety, out of the gentle nudge of his Spirit not the vision of a charismatic leader. In truth, God is not asking us to do anything for him. He's already doing the best stuff in the world and as we learn to live inside of him he will invite us to be part of what he's already doing. One of the things I notice about the life of Jesus is that he rarely created the environment, or planned meetings for other people. He simply joined them in the environments in which he found them.

When we get so involved with our own planning we easily miss the moments Jesus puts right in front of us. They are always far simpler and yet more magnificent than what we conjure up. At the beginning they never look as flashy as our plans or appear to be as far reaching. Usually he's just inviting us to love someone. We have no idea how simple acts of obedience can snowball into consequences we never

considered.

As long as you have any confidence in your flesh's ability to work for God, you will confuse the urge to be productive with the nudging of the Spirit. And the more capable you are in your own efforts and intellect the greater danger you're in of substituting the arm of the flesh for the breath of the Spirit.

Being part of his church happens by simply loving the people God puts before you each day.

A Different Kind of Gathering

God's voice isn't in the passion to create new church movements, nor is it in the cry for revolution. Those appeal to our own self-need for significance by belonging to the most cutting-edge group. God's invitation comes from within--that deep drawing into the Shepherd's care, and learning to love as he loves, to think as he thinks.

What the church will become in ten years isn't going to be unveiled in the next ecumenical conclave in Geneva or Hong Kong, nor in the latest how-to book on church life. What the church becomes in the next ten years will be the fruit of millions of simple decisions made each day by people like you who are learning to live loved by the Father. There is no model to copy, no method to implement.

The early church focused on Jesus and its life was merely the visible expression of how people who are alive in Jesus treat each other. It was not perfect, but it was full of life because their life was in him, not each other. The church was the joyful network of relationships that living in him spawned and its visibility in the world came simply from doing together those things he put on their hearts.

The church of Jesus gathers like a family, not with orchestrated meetings, but a celebration of relationship and sharing with each other. With the Father's love as the source of church life, not it's objective, a new range of possibilities as to how the church might gather will become clear. I already see God connecting in unique ways brothers and sisters across this world who live unencumbered by religious performance and seek simply to love as they have been loved. They are less concerned with getting church right than they are seeing Jesus reveal himself. Connections happen easily among such people as a friend of one quickly becomes a friend of others, and the body grows!

What will happen as that continues to spread? I don't know and don't need to know. I do expect, however, that this church will take more more visible expression over the next ten years than we can conceive. The forms that takes will uniquely fit the locale and the season of God's working, but in the end may not be all that different from ones we have already known. I'm sure it will involve meals together with lots of laughter and at times tears, insightful sharing, caring about each other, and listening to God together.

In the end, what forms that takes is far less significant than having authentic, caring friendships that put

Jesus first. What we can do is learn to live in him and open our hearts to the connections he wants to make with us.

Live Connected

Being part of his church happens by simply loving the people God puts before you each day. Be intentional about cultivating friendships, especially with new people. Some will be temporary; others will connect at a far deeper level. In our human nature we mostly gravitate to people we already know who make us happy. Those relationships, however, are still focused on our needs whether it is to combat our loneliness or find an audience for our gifts, and won't lead us to the authentic friendships that radiate Jesus.

When you know you are loved by God, you own't have to use others to get what you want. Then watch what happens out of those relationships. You won't have to look far and wide for people of like mind. You won't need to find a group that believes what you do. Just take an interest in the people around you and let the results of that caring bear fruit over time. Some relationships may not go far at all. Others may be only a fruitful moment while others will become deep and enduring friendships.

Simply loving those around us will open whatever other doors Jesus needs to build his church. I am convinced that everything God wants done in the world can happen as the simple extension of growing friendships. That will provide fellowship enough, outreach enough, and work enough to let God's life flow to the world. He said so himself. If we will simply love others like he loves us the whole world will come to know him. (John 13:34-35) Because we don't believe that the world can be touched through simple, loving relationship we keep creating machines that we hope can do it for us.

I am often accused of being anti-structure. I'm not. I'm against structure as a substitute for relationship. I'm all for structure that facilitates whatever God asks us to do together. There is a huge difference. Over the past few years I've been part of some international efforts that have had widespread impact just because some friends cooperated together and God has continued to open some amazing doors.

Out of friendship we've been able to send over \$100,000.00 overseas to help with relief in Kenya without overhead costs or administrative fees. I'm grateful for that, but I am also well aware that the best way the gospel spreads in the earth is by each one of us just loving the next person God puts in front of us.

If you don't know how to do that, ask for help from others who do. But be careful of those who try to herd you into their program or draw you into their vision. I'll probably share more about this in the next issue, but real elders in the family don't gather people to their vision, but help equip and free others to the vision God has for them.

And above all, relax. Building the church is Jesus' assignment, ours is to learn to live loved by the Father

and then to love others in the same way. When we focus on our task, it is far easier for him to do his!

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