

BodyLife Past Article Archive

Living in the Relational Church - Part 1

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"So, after 2,000 years, how do you think he's doing?"

I can't resist asking that question whenever I'm studying Matthew 16 with a group of believers. There we find the only recorded instructions Jesus gave to his disciples about the church. "I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." He didn't ask them to do it. He didn't give them a blueprint of an organization. He simply said he would build his church and it would be strong enough to withstand any assault by darkness.

So it only seems natural to assess how he's doing. If he's been at it for almost 2,000 years, what do we have to show for it? I've asked that of all kinds of people, even at pastoral conventions. When I do, you can feel the tension in the room. People shift awkwardly, a few chuckle nervously. They know better than to say he hasn't done well, but they also know the church is fragmented by division, scandalized by immorality, vilified for its arrogance, exposed by its misplaced priorities and far from replicating the ministry Jesus modeled for us in the Gospels.

We either have to conclude that Jesus hasn't done an exceptional job, or consider that there is a vast difference between what he calls church and what we do.

I used to be disillusioned by what I thought was God's church. Seeing his people lost in priorities that were far from his own and doing things in ways that seemed to benefit the institution more than extend God's kingdom in our lives or the world, I lamented the sorry state of the church.

Not anymore! In recent years I've come to realize that our religious institutions are not the church God sees. What God calls 'church' are all the people who know his Son as their Lord and leader. They are scattered over the whole world, growing to know him better and to demonstrate his character in the world. This is the bride God is preparing for his own Son. I've seen parts of her all over the world. Far from being weak, divided and corrupted, the church of Jesus Christ is growing in beauty, strength and power everyday. How is Jesus doing at building his church? Incredible! His people exist in every nook and cranny of the world, and they are finding ways to relate to each other that glorify his name, not cause people to disparage it.

What God Calls Church

To see it, however, you have to look past the institutions and buildings we call church and find those

people who are living in him. Please don't misunderstand that statement. I am not speaking against those institutions as evil, only encouraging you not to confuse them with church. Yes, many people frequent them who are part of God's church and are growing to know him better. That's not at question, but to see God's work in the world, you have to look beyond the groups that call themselves church and see the bigger picture--all those God is calling to himself throughout your city and the world.

If not, we'll confuse our religious systems with the church and miss the great thing God is doing in preparing himself a bride. We must be careful to call church what God calls church, or we'll end up saying things that don't make any sense.

For instance, I was with a young couple recently. A few months before, they had simply had enough. Tired of the backbiting, bored by being a spectator on Sunday mornings, wearied of being manipulated to do more for God, and burned-out on too many responsibilities, already they told me they had left the church.

"How could you do that" I asked. "The church is not something you can leave, unless you've left Jesus."

Of course they hadn't and they only meant that they had left organized religion in hopes of finding a more authentic expression of his life than the group they were in. But that is a very different thing than leaving the church. Let us be careful with our terms. When religious organizations co-opt the term, 'church', it is easy for us to get confused, thinking that's what they really are. But they are not. They might be gatherings of people who are part of the church, but in and of themselves they are not the church.

The church of Jesus Christ could never be contained in any organization, and in fact, the way he works makes it impossible to fit in the most skillfully constructed structures.

Lone Rangers Need Not Apply

I know you've probably heard people say such things proved to be lone-rangers, never seeming to thrive in the life of Jesus. But that is a long ways from who God's people really are. Just as institutions can't be the church by declaring it so, neither can individuals.

Who is the church in the world? Is it not those who live the same confession Peter offered "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."? You are part of the church as you live under the Head, following him as your Lord and leader. You can't be the church by following someone else who is doing that, you have to do it yourself.

And following him will not lead you to independence. How can it? God is a community and wherever he is known, real community will emerge among his people. Father, Son and Spirit have dwelt in true community for all eternity, knowing the sheer joy and wonder of sharing life, love and glory with themselves. You can't touch his love and not find it drawing you toward others God puts in your path.

As brothers and sisters begin to connect with each other in real fellowship, they will soon discover that what they know about God is always in part, as if through a darkened window. But in fellowship among believers who are growing to know him better, there is a fullness of wisdom and revelation. That's why Paul said in Ephesians 1 that the church is "the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."

Imagine any singular group of people fulfilling that incredible promise! The reason why our view of God is often limited, is because institutions are only able to pull people together who see the same thing in the same way. Their view through the darkened glass never gets any clearer, they only grow more convinced that what they see is more accurate than what anyone else sees.

God's kind of community, however springs up among people who are pursuing a vibrant friendship with the Living God. For I've thought the life of God flows to people through our so-called church structures. But it isn't so. Life does not exist in the church, it is only in Jesus.

Those who gather then to get fed or pumped up to get through another week miss what relational church is all about. We can only find life in him and once we find it there, our connection with other believers allows us to share that life together. 'Church' cannot ever be a substitute for knowing him. We can't follow him by conforming to the religious system in which we find ourselves and why would we want to. He's offered each of us the joy of knowing him every day.

Institutional Dynamics

That's why a growing personal relationship is critical to relational Christianity. It can only begin as people are equipped to know the living God and follow him. Having a growing relationship with him, will teach you how to relate to other believers. It doesn't flow the other way around, and years of trying to make it do so have only disillusioned those who really want to know God better every day.

Gene Edwards was right when he says the model for church life is found in Jesus' relationship with his disciples. He never taught them how to have a 'service' or how to construct an organizational flow chart. He didn't tell them that church life was about attending a meeting, conforming to a group ethic, or regimenting people's lives by the most well-intentioned program.

Instead, he taught them how to relate to God as Father and each other as brothers and sisters. The language he used with them (and indeed the language Paul uses in his letters) was not the language of institutions, but the language of family.

Because most of what we call 'church' today operates on institutional dynamics, many believers today have no idea what God has designed church life to be. Institutions must focus on creeds, programs and procedures that attempt to get people to conform to the 'way we do things here.' Usually a group of top-heavy leadership draw the most attention and people are encouraged to submit unquestioningly to

their insights and counsel.

Institutional dynamics encourage people to promote an image, and does not free them to be real. Gossip and one-upsmanship games abound as people try to find their place often at another's expense. The same things you see in the corporate world are the basis of life as an institution. And if you ever leave an institution, you will often be ignored. Many people who have left religious institutions have commented that they felt like they ceased to exist even for people whom they had considered close friends.

Family Dynamics

Life as a family, however, is built on an entirely different set of methods and goals. In a healthy family people are not cooperating to achieve an end, they are simply learning to relate to each other in love. In a healthy family diversity is not only allowed, it's cherished. People don't relate to each other through lines of authority, but by functional gifting. If someone's car started to make strange noises on the way over, they feel no compulsion to ask the older brother to attend to it. They will already know who in the family has the most 'car-sense' and seek their help.

Healthy families don't press people to conform, but let people grow together at their own pace. They have the freedom to disagree without separating into multiple families. They share together in each other's journey, serving with their gifts, offering insights and abilities where they are helpful, and supporting each other no matter what they go through.

Many believers today are finding fresh encouragement in the 'one anothering' Scriptures that the New Testament encourages believers to do for each other. They are discovering that teaching, counseling, serving, offering hospitality, sharing confessions, praying for needs, admonishing the selfish, and all the rest are not things we hire a staff to provide for us, but what the body was meant to do for each other. As we live in Jesus together he passes out gifts among the entire body, that each can give and each receive from God through others. That's why some have said that there is more 'church' going on in the parking lots on Sunday morning than is allowed to happen in the morning service.

If you've ever experienced real spontaneous, fellowship among a group of believers, you don't need me to tell you how rich it is. The joy of journeying together, of not having to pretend, of having people support you in your weakness and affirm you in your gifts is reward enough. And yes, a lot of that can go on among believers who gather in institutional environments, but it isn't always there.

The important thing is that you recognize family dynamics when you see them and embrace them wholeheartedly. Conversely recognize hurtful, institutional dynamics which have nothing to do with God's kingdom and take your distance from them guiltlessly.

As much as Paul encouraged believers to get together in ways that encourage your life in God, he also told

them to be free to walk away from environments that become destructive to that life. If you sense him leading you away from such a group, don't be condemned either by them or yourself. You will not be leaving the church at all, he may only be preparing you to find it in a more authentic way than you ever dreamed.

Finding Body Life

So where do you go to find relational church life? Why? to Jesus, of course! That may sound simplistic, but where else can you go? Trust Jesus to provide the fellowship he wants you to have. Remember, his church is built on those who are learning to trust him.

You might discover the freedom to live relational church right where you are. Don't worry about whether or not everyone else shares your same perspective, simply look for opportunities to share life with people hungry to know him more fully.

You may find, however, that some institutional structures actually devour those who hunger to follow God freely and he might call you out. Many people leave one broken institution, only to dive into another or start a new one on their own. Let me encourage you to slow down and don't do anything until he clearly speaks to you.

Watch for the people he begins to connect your life with, some may be lifetime friends, others new acquaintances. Don't hurry to start anything, learn to recognize what he is doing in your area to provide meaningful connections between believers that are hungry to know him--his honesty, his grace and his life! He has people who will share the journey with you and encourage your growth without manipulating you to conform to their expectations.

Where you find that in your own locality may differ greatly from how someone else finds it in theirs. It might be in a Sunday morning gathering, with a neighbor up the street, in a home groups or with people God spontaneously brings across your path. However it comes, you'll find that church life could never be a once- or twice-a-week event. It happens every day as we live our lives in him and share that with others.

As you've read in these pages before, there are lots of ways Jesus calls his believers to share his life together. In our next issue we'll look at what it means not "to forsake the assembling of yourselves together?" and detail some of the ways God invites people to share his life together.

I know it can be discouraging, looking for a depth of body life that it seems too few hunger for today. But Jesus would not have stirred your passion for it, if he didn't have a way to meet it. It just may not come in the way you're expecting it. So don't focus so hard on any one thing, that you miss the other doors he opens for you. Tell him how much you hunger to know an authentic body life that matches what he shared with his disciples. Ask him to connect you with people who share a passion to live in the dynamics of

family.

Then enjoy whatever connections he begins to make. Don't force it into your mold, or feel the need to make a group out of it. Just learn what it is to relate to brothers and sisters, even in groups of twos and threes, that lets Jesus be at the center. Love others in the same way God loves you and you'll see the church Jesus is building all around you and all over the world.

It will astound you!

After all, he's been doing that for 2,000 years. He's actually amazingly good at it!

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