

## BodyLife Past Article Archive

### Shared Dependence: Living in the Relational Church - Part 9

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BodyLife • April 2003

In the last decade I've met thousands of believers all over the world and watched carefully as they seek to live out Christian fellowship in a variety of groupings - from twos and threes in spontaneous fellowship to centuries old congregations and just about everything in between. In many places I have been delighted to find God's people sharing his reality together as they grow to know him. In others, I've watched in sadness as they struggle to replicate some form of New Testament body life, but despite their diligent efforts they continually end up disappointed and frustrated.

Because I want everyone to know the joy of living in Christ's life, I'm always trying to sort out what makes the difference. Why do some groups enjoy the Lord's fullness together and others miss out? Some would say the presence of Jesus makes all the difference, and while that would be at least partly true, I find him present everywhere, even among the most captive people, inviting them closer to him.

Others might say that it's because some meet the way God has told them to and others follow the traditions of men. That would be partly true as well, but I've noticed on occasion that the people employing the most biblical principles of church life have the most dysfunctional relationships and people as naive as spiritual toddlers are having a great time basking in the joy of God's work.

No, in the end it isn't knowledge, maturity, the right principles or even effort and commitment. People who live out God's life in the healthiest settings have learned the beauty of shared dependence. And by that I don't mean they have learned to depend on a leader, each other or a specific church structure, but that they are learning together how to depend on the Father and thus participate in his work among them.

#### Do We Need Fellowship?

Through most of my life I have heard people talk about church life with the language of need. "A good Christian is supposed to attend services whenever the body meets." "You need to 'come to church' or you will fall into error." What is so bad about body life that the only way we're motivated to participate is because we have to. All this talk of obligation and commitment makes me wonder if the driving force behind 'church attendance' today is nothing more than misery loves company. Let's face it, sitting through the same service every week can get a bit boring. Even the most incredible speakers I've heard grow tiresome week after week and repetitious year after year.

Body life was meant to reflect the joy of Father's family, not be a painful obligation for his children. I know that may be hard to believe for those who have only experienced church life as redundant meetings,

controlling leaders or relationships filled with gossip, condemnation and manipulation. Real body life, however, doesn't look like any of those things.

When the New Testament talks about body life it doesn't use the language of need or obligation. It doesn't compel believers to engage God's family because we have to, but invites them to share in an unparalleled demonstration of God's glory. Your own individual relationship with him will at best allow you to taste only a tiny facet of God's person and wisdom. Paul compared it to a partial glimpse as though we are looking at a darkened mirror (I Cor. 13:12). At best we will only see a part. But when we combine our part with the many other parts that are expressed by other members of his family, we get a more complete picture of God and his working. That's why Paul described the church as the fullness of Christ (Eph. 1:23).

When you are loved beyond your wildest dreams, challenged to greater heights of glory, encouraged by his strength in others and enlightened by their insights, no one will have to be forced to participate. But only God can produce that kind of life together. If we look for it in each other instead of in him we'll only find ourselves living a cheap substitute for the reality God offers us.

### **It's Him We Need**

In reality we don't need each other. We need him! Body life that doesn't begin with that simple premise is destined to miss the mark. As valuable and enriching as authentic body life is, if we make it a substitute for God's daily presence working in each of us it will become an obstacle in the journey instead of a blessing to it.

We can't let the two get confused. Scripture is clear here. He alone is our strength and shield. He alone is our refuge. He wants to teach each one of us how to live totally dependent upon him. Our relationships with each other must encourage that process not supplant it.

Recently I saw a photo of a newly discovered cave whose existence was only recently announced in the media. One chamber in this cave is large enough to contain the Superdome with plenty of room to spare. The only way out is to climb a rope which has been lowered through a hole in its ceiling. In the photo the team was climbing the rope to get back to the surface.

That photo held in tension the camaraderie of the journey without misplacing their dependence. Each of them was dependent on that rope to get out of that chamber. As valuable as their encouragement, experience and instruction might have been to the others, each person still needed to trust that rope enough to climb to the surface. None of them, even with the best intentions, could substitute for that rope. No one could crawl out for someone else and they could climb all over each other for years and still never find their way out to the surface.

In the same way our relationships with each other can only grow in health when we're not trying to get

from each other what only God can provide. Like the rope for the climbers, God wants us to depend on him alone and encourage others in the process of learning to do that.

### **Take No Substitute**

Body life naturally results from people learning to live in daily dependence on the presence of the Father. That passion is an essential ingredient to people discovering effective body life together. It is tempting to think that if Jesus makes himself known in the body that we depend on him by depending on each other. Admittedly it is a subtle shift, but a potentially fatal one, at least spiritually, if it gets our eyes off of Jesus and on other people or on any system for replicating church.

Once the rope climbers let go of the rope, even to grab for each other, disaster results. We are people on a journey to greater relationship with him and greater trust in him. We can help each other go further together than most will go alone but we must never forget where we're going. Body life flourishes where people are learning to depend on God for everything, and their relationships support that growth.

Unfortunately most of what passes for body life today, however unwittingly, offers substitutes for that dependence from taking hold in our hearts. Tradition can easily become the attempt to replicate something God did in the past, and most programs seek to secure God's hand in the future. Both keep us from responding to the God who works in the present, leading us to trust him more. Read Matthew 6 and learn what Jesus is saying about each of us living in the absolute security of the fact that God will take care of us and lead us into his life. This is something we each must sort out in our own relationship with him.

I know learning to trust him alone can be scary. It may seem easier in the short term to put our dependence in leaders, other believers or a way of doing church, but it will only lead to perpetual frustration and hurt when others quite innocently fail our expectations or even more belligerently betray our trust. The pain that results is evidence enough of our misplaced dependency.

While we can encourage each other in the process we must take care not to subvert it by trying to rely on each other instead of on him. When people lose the passion to cultivate a growing dependence on the Father, the best they can produce by human effort is an illusion of body life.

### **Overestimating Our Abilities**

It was one of those answers that surprised me as soon as I heard myself say it and that doesn't happen too often for someone who generally thinks three sentences ahead of the one that is currently coming out of his mouth. For the past hour and a half I had been sitting in a former Tulsa nightclub with a group of hungry believers talking about this incredible journey of knowing the Father and walking in the reality of his presence. Then someone asked, "What do you think is the biggest barrier to people living in the

fullness of God's life?"

"I'm beginning to think the greatest barrier is the overestimation of our own capabilities." My answer surprised me. I don't know that I've ever expressed that concern in answer to a similar question. I had to pause and think for a moment whether or not that was my final answer.

The more I thought about it, however, I saw that God was illuminating something he had been working on in my life. I used to think diligent effort applied to the right process could accomplish anything. But over the years the failure of my best efforts had finally convinced me that unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain (Ps. 127:1). The joy of this life is found in trusting him and following his leading out of a daily relationship of growing trust.

The longer we talked that night about the pressure we put on ourselves and others to replicate this amazing thing we call the life of the Spirit, the more convinced I became that overestimating our own capabilities complicates our walk instead of freeing us. It leads to feeling trapped in our failures and taking pride in successes. It makes us manipulate others to do what we think is best and encourages everyone to get their eyes on people rather than on Jesus. It leads to misplaced effort and wasted energy, because we will only know how to do our work when we understand how God works. People who trust their own capabilities will never discover the reality of life in God and the joy of sharing that life with others.

### **Not Even A Little Bit**

The life of God had turned Paul's whole world upside-down - from a committed religionist who boasted in his abilities and prided himself in his accomplishments to one who put absolutely no confidence in the flesh. (See Phil. 3:1-11). How would you like to have been in fellowship with Paul before God got a hold of his life? It would have been insufferable. He thought himself always right, closer to God than anyone else and he had the right to kill you if you didn't see it his way. Of course today we use accusation and gossip far more often than actual stones, but it aims at the same result.

Imagine how different it was after Jesus had captured Paul with his penetrating love. He drew Paul to himself and changed him from one who was confident in his own abilities, into one who knew that only Jesus could accomplish anything that would endure. He's the one that draws people to the truth. He's the one that changes lives. He's the one that connects his body in ways that further the purpose of his kingdom.

Paul could then see that his own best efforts were nothing but sewage, worthless in the unfolding of God's glory in himself or in others. He found the righteousness that human effort produces to be repulsive and simply delighted himself in the righteousness that his growing trust in God produced.

Since he had no confidence in his own flesh, he didn't put pressure on others to perform with theirs. He knew that everything in this kingdom had to flow from God's working, and we can only respond to him, not produce his life on our own. This includes body life. If we are going to learn to share his life in meaningful relationships with other believers our dependency has to be in him. We cannot accomplish it even by following what we deem to be biblical patterns of church life. While they can help us recognize the way God works they will not of themselves let us share in the glory of his life. Only the Head of the church can build his church. We can only construct illusions of it.

## **Sharing Dependence on Him**

I spent some time recently with a group of people aspiring to facilitate a home group in each of their homes. I put a scenario in front of them. What if six months from now two of the groups are exploding at the seams with excited people, two of them are just coasting along and the other two are totally dead and boring. What would we know about the facilitators of those groups and what would we do about it?

Popular wisdom would tell us that those groups that look vital are led by good leaders and those that are struggling are led by weaker ones. But that's not how God sees it. Some groups may look vital only because their leaders are better at fabricating an illusion of body life. Their lively personalities or giftings draw a following, but whether or not it reflects the true sharing of life by believers is another matter. Likewise, those groups that may be struggling may have excellent facilitators, but they are trying to accomplish something God is not doing.

Jesus said that he only did the things he saw his Father doing. Unfortunately the way many do church life today, we look for what the Father doesn't seem to be doing and go there to try and make something happen. The results shouldn't surprise us. Human effort cannot produce God's fruit, but surrendered hearts can participate in all God has prepared for them.

By saying we shouldn't place our dependence in each other, I am not excusing us from being trustworthy, dependable brothers or sisters. The deepest experiences of body life happen where people are free enough from their own agenda and brokenness to be faithful in times of trouble, genuine to the core and true to their word even if it costs them. But if you allow yourself to grow dependent on them you'll short-change your own relationship with Jesus. In fact people who know Jesus best wouldn't dream of letting you do that. They'll encourage you to keep your dependency firmly on him, because he is the only way to life!

Here's the truth: Genuine, authentic body life is a gift God gives not something we can orchestrate by human effort even by following Biblical principles. Instead of trying to create it, we would be better served to ask him to show us each day how he is placing us among his body, who is he relating us to and how can we encourage them to rely on Him more freely?

Your work is to simply follow him there. When you do he will place you among the body just as he desires

and you will know the joy of sharing a growing dependency on him with other members of his body.

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