

## **BodyLife Past Article Archive**

### **The Church That Jesus Builds: Living in the Relational Church - Part 10**

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"You want to know what I've learned this weekend?" the man said as he drove me to a Midwest airport early one morning. We'd just spent an incredible weekend together with a house church he'd helped foster and another group of believers who joined us when they heard I was in town. The latter were deeply conflicted about their current involvement with a congregation that sounded abusive. "I've been selling the wrong thing!" he continued.

"What's that?" I asked oblivious to what we were talking about.

"I've been selling house church," he said shaking his head with a sigh, "instead of Jesus." Obviously he wasn't talking about 'selling' anything, but I love his discovery. Almost everywhere I go people are preoccupied with finding the right way to do church. It seems our hunger for church outstrips our hunger for Jesus.

In one house church meeting a few years ago I heard a woman share a dream she had the night before about a bride endlessly primping in the mirror and admiring her own beauty. She fussed with her hair, make-up and dress making sure everything was perfect. Meanwhile she saw the groom standing at the altar checking his watch and wondering why his bride had not come. What a sad and lonely picture of too many believers in our day. We are so focused on ourselves and what the church should look like that we've forgotten our joy is in the bridegroom - Jesus himself!

If there's anything I've learned over the last decade visiting expressions of the body of Christ all over the world, it is that those preoccupied with doing church rarely get to experience body life to its full, while those who are preoccupied with Jesus find church life that is vibrant and awesome.

### **Search for the Church**

In the last 40 years hundreds of books have been written about church renewal. I have watched countless people move from mainline to charismatic to mega-church to prayer-based to power-centered to cell church to seeker-sensitive to renewal to purpose-driven to house church to emerging church and the list just keeps getting longer. Some have even gone back to liturgical services, finding solace in its aesthetic beauty and safety. As one man confessed, "I just wanted to meet with Christians where I didn't have to worry about someone flopping on the floor like a beached fish."

These movements last only briefly spearheaded by a gifted speaker who draws a large following and then

claims he has at last found the Biblical way to do church. After the euphoria of the alleged 'new wineskin' wears off in 3 to 5 years, people find themselves frustrated with the results and have to look again for another expression of church that fulfills the cry of their heart.

I understand the hunger. The Scriptures paint a compelling picture of God's church - brothers and sisters growing in their relationship with Jesus and each other in a way that transformed them. They loved each other, grew together in God's wisdom, shared their possessions together freely, and saw him reveal himself in extraordinary ways to them and their culture.

Was it perfect? Of course not and Scripture graciously made that clear as well. They struggled through failures and sin. They had to deal with those who tried to exercise control over others and brothers and sisters who preferred the comfort of false teaching to the challenge of the true. But throughout God kept making his way and truth known. They were filled with awe and God's grace multiplied among them in demonstrable ways.

Who wouldn't want that? But those expressions of church life have been rare and brief in our day. What passes for church today makes us spectators rather than participants, manipulates people's shame rather than setting them free from it, prefers the rigidity of obligation to the power of love, is more contemptuous of the world than more relevant in it, and rewards cooperative pawns in someone else's program rather than growing disciples of Jesus himself. No wonder so many people are disillusioned with it. Yet the search goes on, like birds drawn on an inexplicable migration, to a land they've never seen.

## **Beyond House Church**

What compounds this search is that all that calls itself the church is not really the church. After 2000 years of Christian history, the term is used for institutions that provide a Christian experience through rituals, clergy and tradition. Some of the best of these actually provide an environment where people can come to know Jesus, grow in Biblical truths and connect in real fellowship so that in and around these institutions some people find expressions of church life.

However, there are increasing numbers of people who find that expression incredibly limited. Some have spilled out of abusive systems where the control of insecure leaders and the priorities of the institution overran any legitimate spiritual life. Still others grew unsettled with the time and money invested in building and institutional politics and found that those who get to the top of such groups often have little of Father's character and even less of his passion.

I am continually amazed by the number of people I run into who have left those institutions who were once respected leaders in it - pastors, elders, teachers, deacons and board members. Some left rather than submit to ungodly demands made of them, but others did so because they grew convinced that the

institution didn't fulfill their hunger to live as the church. Loyalty was valued over honesty, arrogance over tenderness, entertainment over spiritual growth and the survival of the institution over loving people.

One denominational official confronted his own organization, "A growing number of people are leaving the institutional church for a new reason. They are not leaving because they have lost their faith. They are leaving the church to preserve their faith." People are waking up to a new reality, and finding the way they have learned to "do church" in the past doesn't serve their hunger to know Jesus more intimately and to share that life with others more effectively.

Many of these initially turned to house church, hoping its more Biblical dynamics would provide the Promised Land they hungered for. But they soon find it a mixed bag as well. Their excitement at the relational dynamics of a smaller group fades when they discover there are still people who wanted to control it from within or mold it into new networks from without. They find relationships awkward as people are more focused on a method than on following Jesus. They often face the same religious demands for conformity and commitment and they find the same our-group-is-better superiority that separates them from other Christians and from the world by breeding contempt for unbelievers, rather than compassion.

Now increasing numbers find themselves beyond house church still wondering where they can find authentic church life, or even if it exists at all.

## **An Undeniable Hunger**

A sad reality is that many who break free of systems of religious obligation sometimes find themselves using freedom as an excuse to fulfill long-restrained appetites in the things of the world. They don't always fall into great sin, but their spiritual hunger is swallowed up by their search for pleasure. I cringe when it happens, but I know for many it will only be a phase. Having worked so long and so hard for God with so little enduring fruit in relationship with him or with others, their frustration often spills out in careless personal indulgence.

For those who have been touched by Jesus, this season won't satisfy and out of it a new passion for a real connection with Jesus emerges. Beyond their disappointments, beyond the failure of others, their hunger to find real life among God's people surfaces again and again. I am amazed at the resiliency of this hunger to find life in Father's family. Even those who have been abused or frustrated in their attempts to find it in the past, still find that undeniable hunger rising even beyond their resolve to go it alone. Once you've tasted genuine fellowship where dear friendships inspired your journey and opened up new vistas into God's nature, you won't be satisfied by anything less. Most have experienced some taste of that in the early days of a new fellowship, in an informal Bible study or with a close friend.

Certain there must be a consistent way for believers to share this incredible journey they read voraciously anything they can find on the church, search the Internet to see if anyone else has found it and keep going to any group in their area that sounds promising. While some find answers and connections others find themselves with passions ignited that leave them feeling increasingly isolated when they can find no one locally to share it with.

Perhaps we're finally waking up to the fact that Jesus didn't tell us to build his church. He said he would do that. He told us to abide in him, love others as he loves us, proclaim the gospel and help others learn to follow him. If we are focused on those things instead of trying to do his work, I've no doubt we'll see the church springing up all around us.

The church that Jesus is building continues to grow the world over and you are no small part of that. Even if you feel alone in your journey, he is creating a passion in your heart for a purpose you may not yet see. I suspect in the next few years we will see Jesus bring his body together in ways we cannot even fathom now. I see two trends in our culture that excite me. First, an increasing number of believers are growing disillusioned with the rituals of organized religion. Second, an increasing number of nonbelievers are contemplating spiritual issues and hungering for authentic relationships. It will be interesting to see how these realities converge in the days ahead.

## **Recognizing His Church**

Though I don't expect to see a perfect expression of the body of Christ on the planet before Jesus returns, that doesn't keep me from beholding her glory nonetheless. I have witnessed again and again all over the world the miracle of people sharing the life of Jesus together in growing compassion, wisdom, care and freedom. I've watched God connect people who had a profound impact on each other's lives and had great joy in doing so.

I am reticent to define what Jesus' church looks like, because I am convinced people know it when they touch it. Church is not a place to go or an organization of any kind. It is the network of relationships we share with other believers where Jesus is the only focus (Colossians 1:18) and we are free to grow in him (Ephesians 1:21; 4:18-20). You'll recognize the life of Jesus' church where people have the freedom to be honest without being attacked (John 4:24 - See sidebar Being Real), where they can disagree without being less loved (Romans 13), where they can be encouraged to their best without being manipulated by someone else's agenda (I Corinthians 14), where guilt is lifted off each other instead of heaped on (Romans 8:1-4), where they lovingly care for each other's practical and spiritual needs (Philippians 2:4), where they are set free from obligation to live in love (Galatians 5) and where God's purpose in us comes into sharper focus (John 17, Ephesians 1). In short it is a family in the best sense of the word, brothers and sisters growing together under Father. People like this will find ways to gather regularly in various arrangements as God leads, but their relationships are the focus, not their meetings. Where you find

people like that you've found the body of Christ. Of course these may happen around existing institutions, though no institution can ultimately contain it. They also happen outside institutions in the normal course of our lives as Jesus sets us in his body just as he desires (I Corinthians 1:18).

### **Where Can I Find That?**

Relational community is not rocket science. The more we try to organize it the more we will siphon the life right out of it. When I was in junior high school I watched my parents move from being nominal church attendees to passionate believers. Caught up in the early days of the Charismatic renewal of the mid-1960s they began to discover just how real Jesus wanted to be in their lives and found many of their friends shared that hunger. Without any of the hassles of an institution they met house-to-house, shared meals and resources, and even invited in more mature believers to help them make sense of what God was doing in them.

The congregation they all attended on Sunday mornings soon grew threatened by their newfound fervor and soon forced them out. Excited, they moved their Friday night 'prayer meetings' to Sunday mornings to 'start their own church.' I remember even as a young man being amazed at how quickly their joy, enthusiasm and spontaneity faded away in the demands of getting organized, planning Sunday services, and staffing children's ministries. Soon they were bickering over how things should be done and how money should be spent, rather than growing in Jesus.

I've seen that happen so many times since. Thinking we can make church life better by organizing it, we almost always unwittingly sacrifice it to the institutional needs that bear so little fruit. Church life is the natural fruit of people growing in Jesus and in friendships with people near them. It isn't always easy to find people with that kind of passion, but Father has some interesting ways to connect them.

### **What You Can Do**

You certainly cannot make church happen by your own effort but neither will it come banging on your door while you watch TV. There are some things you can think through that will help you see how God might be connecting you to other believers:

***First, live the journey.*** You don't find life in Jesus by finding the right group; you are connected with the family out of your relationship to the Head, Jesus. Isn't it sad that people who have 'attended church' for 20, 30 or 40 years, have no idea how to listen to Jesus and do what he wants. We have so equipped them to live by principles that they have never learned to follow his voice. Learn to live in him. Discover how secure you are in his love and how much you can trust his work in you. Read the Scriptures so you will learn to think like he thinks and recognize his voice. If you know a few others who want to grow in this too, share that journey together.

***Second, cultivate relationships.*** As you grow secure in Father's love you will find yourself loving others in the same way, and not just Christians but people in the world, too. You'll come to recognize that God works primarily through relationships. So join him in building relationships however God gives them to you. He might lead you to a group of folks already gathering or to some individual relationships among your neighbors or co-workers. He might call you to get involved with others in what are commonly called 'parachurch' ministries, such as a rescue mission, prison or youth outreach, or prayer gathering, or he might lead you to open your home for a Bible study or fellowship group. God knows how to connect you with folks he wants you to know. Be prepared to give some time to those relationships by doing things together - sharing a meal, helping on a household project, or going out together. Too few people actually initiate these kinds of encounters and yet they are critical to growing friendships.

***Third, share the journey.*** Who has God put around you that you can open up your life to? It may be one person or a handful. They may live across town or work across the hall. Find a way to share God's life together. Admittedly this will be awkward at first because we're not used to these kinds of conversations, but this is a joy worth learning. Share insights from Scripture or things you're learning, pray together about situations you're encountering and what God is doing in you and learn to listen to him together as you encourage his work in others. As your friendships grow you'll find yourself increasingly free to be more open, honest and confessional about your struggles and be able to garner the wisdom and strength God has given to others.

***Fourth, learn to lay down your life.*** Community doesn't happen where everyone grabs for what they want, but where they follow Jesus' example of laying down their lives for others. As long as we only look out for ourselves we will pass like ships in the night, and even if we meet every week we'll end up feeling alone. Laying down your life for others will open the doors to real community.

***Fifth, explore relational community.*** As your relationships grow you might find some people or families who feel called to walk together for a season. There is no better expression of body life than brothers and sisters who want to share God's life with some regularity and intentionality. Don't try to 'start a church', just grow in what it means to care for each other through the real circumstances of life. Include entire families. Get together regularly, but also cultivate those relationships beyond the meetings. Share your resources, gifts and time as Jesus leads you. Look for ways God might give you away to others in the community, individually or collectively to reveal him in our world or bless other believers with help in growing spiritually and support each other in that process. Be careful not to limit your relationships just to those in the group and don't try to make your community permanent. Enjoy what God gives you in each season and be open to moving on to other relationships when Jesus so leads.

### **And If You Want Help...**

Learning to live as the church Jesus is building will challenge long-held paradigms. Most of us have been

taught to be passive learners. If we need something, someone else will tell us what it is. Growth in this kingdom doesn't happen that way. Those who find life are not afraid to knock, to ask, or to seek.

If you're struggling to know how to live deeply in Christ, connect with other Christians, or have a group that can't sort out how to share this journey together, it is often helpful to sort things out with a brother or sister that might be a bit further down the road in some areas. Don't be afraid to ask for help. At every stage of my journey, God has always put someone nearby to help confirm things I'm seeing and to help me think outside the limitations of my own previous experience. But I sought out those relationships. They didn't come to me.

There are also gifts God has distributed through the body (Ephesians 4:11-13) to help equip people to live this journey. You won't recognize them by their titles since the real ones won't use them, or by their popularity since most fly under the radar, or even by their writings since most don't write. God will link you to those he desires through relationship. You'll recognize in their demeanor Father's nature. You'll hear in their words his voice. And time with them will draw you to Father and free you to trust him more. They will leave you focused on him not on trying to implement some method or set of principles. They help people unload their guilt and shame and never exploit it even in an attempt to get them to do the right thing. They have patience with those who struggle and are not defensive when people challenge them with honest questions. They don't see themselves as experts above you, but as brothers or sisters alongside and will never pressure you or try to make you dependent on them. Their joy comes in your greater reliance on Father's work in you.

It may require you to think outside the box, but learning to live in the church Jesus is building is worth every moment of the journey. He does want you to know the joy of walking alongside other brothers and sisters and finding them a powerful addition to the life you're finding in him. Try not to lose your heart for that, even if it only looks like a distant mirage. I assure it is real enough and part of God's plan to bring all things together under one head!

## **SIDEBAR:**

### **Being Real**

The following paragraph was adapted from "Will the Real You Please Stand Up!" a Lifestream Audio Collection, by a sister from Texas:

It's OK to question what I need to question, ask what I need to ask and struggle where I struggle. I've learned that I am not rewarded for pretending to be better than I am, but that experiencing the life of God means that I am loved through the ups and downs, hurts and joys, and doubts as well as triumphs. Instead of exploiting people's shame or need for approval to try and make them better Christians, I

encourage people to go to God for healing and restoration from shame so they can experience for themselves the love of God.

Instead of loading others up with a list of `shoulds', I tell people that God is working by "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" and his greatest desire is to communicate with them. I talk about learning "how to" listen to God and follow what he puts on their heart even if that means they make a mistake doing so. Instead of trying to change people I urge them to get to know Christ as life because it's so much fun (and far more effective) watching him change them. Instead of manipulating others to do what I think would benefit me and my definition of God's will for them.

I'll share as much of your journey as I can to help lighten your load. If you're in pain or in despair, I'll be there for you as Father sorts things out. I don't know that I'll always have what you need, but I will at least be there with you so you won't have to go it alone.

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