

# BodyLife Past Article Archive

## Going to the Root

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BodyLife • June 1996

Talk about intimacy with God for very long, and the conversation almost always turns to how that is lived out in church life. Most people seem to recognize that the means by which we often "do church" does not always help foster that relationship and often provides significant distractions to it.

Look at all the books written and all the seminars held in the last 30 years about church renewal, yet what has really changed? A variety of structures have been offered, each claiming to be God's last, best answer. But even those lapse back into the same pattern of Sunday services with kids spirited away to their own peer group, up-front led worship, and a sermon that may entertain briefly, but can not be recalled two days later.

Add to that the confusion that comes when people in the church force their way on others, and it's no wonder that most people really question what 'church life' should look like. During a recent trip to New England this topic came up continually. For all the time and energy we put into our church structures, wouldn't you think they would be more effective at doing the most important thing helping us know Jesus better?

But not everyone finds them so. A couple of years ago, I would have claimed to have more answers than I would today. Now I have far more questions, but through the sometimes painful circumstances of our church involvement the past few years Sara and I have come to see how simply powerful the life of the church can be, without the need for extensive structure.

In the last year we have had significant contact with believers all over the world who have moved out of traditionally-structured churches to seek a more effective and authentic body life. Many meet in homes, building the life of the body around Jesus-centered relationships and daily discovering what it means to pursue God and care for each other. Their meetings are rarely slick and attractive. They are designed to equip and encourage through active participation, honest examination and simple love. They say they have stopped just going to church and are now learning to be the church.

I am not offering that here as the answer, convinced that no structure guarantees renewal. But I am finding increasing merit in their priorities that can even be a blessing to people who attend more traditional church structures. Those are best summarized in a book by Christian Smith called, *Going to the Root* (Herald Press: Scottsdale, PA). He offers nine proposals for radical church renewal. I want to share them with you for your own reflection and encouragement this summer:

## 1. Build Intentional Community

"Radical church renewal begins with a new vision of Christian relationships in the body of Christ. It affirms that the church should look, and feel, not like a club or interest group, but a loving, extended family. What is necessary for people to live like this? People must truly know each other, share with each other who they really are."

In short, discipleship and personal care in the body of Christ were never meant to come through a paid staff or cumbersome programs. Jesus gave his ministry to people who would live out their lives in close, personal friendships.

Let me give you a word of warning about this chapter, however. It seeks to build that community through accountability and commitment, two words that are not linked to body life at all in the New Testament and are often misused to exercise control over people. While I love his goal here, his methodology will only set us up for disappointed expectations. Love and freedom is how Jesus called us to embrace body life for it was in relationship not institution that Jesus vested his life.

That said, the author gives two key pieces of advice: "Christian community is an alien, alternative reality that must be purposefully pursued and cultivated" and "It is a living dynamic experience that is nurtured, not a prepackaged program that is instituted."

## 2. Do Church Without Clergy

Don't panic! I know a lot of hot-buttons just went off. The author doesn't advocate throwing pastors overboard, simply makes the case that we do not need them in the way they've come to dominate church life today. "Going to the root helps us see that our clergy system is not demanded by the New Testament. It is often counterproductive. And it can obstruct healthy, biblical church life. Is it possible that one of the best things that could happen to the church would be for the clergy to resign and take secular jobs? The problem with the clergy is not the people, but the profession itself. The New Testament is clear that ministry in the church is the work of the entire body of believers, not of a single minister or pastoral team."

From both sides the fact of clergy in the body of Christ today produces two classes of people: leaders and followers. This is unhealthy from two angles. On the one hand we expect pastors to be the body of Christ for every one, and who can stand up to that weight? On the other, it promotes passivity on the part of believers, waiting for the leaders to sort things out without going to the Head and following his desires.

The profession always seems to lead clergy to be more program managers than mentors, making decisions for people believing themselves to have a superior perspective, rather than linking people close enough to Jesus, that he can live out his will through them.

### **3. Decentralize Leadership and Decisions**

"Never in the New Testament is one believer, even a church leader, said to have spiritual authority over another.... (We don't find) a model of leadership that is hierarchical, authoritarian or focused on filling offices. What we find is a very organic, bottom-up model of leadership.... (Spiritual authority) is given to leaders by believers around them because of the exemplary, trustworthy character of their lives.

The author goes on to say that whatever leadership emerges exists only to mentor others to hear and follow the the Lord. They should function in plurality without one leader dominating the others. But for decision-making, he encourages those believers affected by the decision to engage in a process of consensus-building. "When dominating leaders make decisions and call the flock to follow, the seeds of apathy and immaturity are sown." Of course this works more realistically in groups less than 50 than it does in large impersonal groups. For that to happen we will have to learn how to handle growth by multiplying groups not expanding them until they can longer function relationally.

### **4. Open Up Worship Services**

"Structurally, the worship services of many churches are preplanned, clergy-centered and performance-oriented (that often)undermine our best intentions In the most extended New Testament teaching on church gatherings ( I Cor 11-14), Paul repeatedly states that the overarching goal of meeting together is mutual edificationbuilding and strengthening the believing community."

How can that happen if we don't move away from our pre-planned meetings, and invite the honest, open participation of all God's people who gather? This doesn't lead to an efficient service, but it does allow the body to be the body.

Here the author encourages us away from up-front led worship, which puts the focus on a few and breeds passivity in the rest. Instead people can have the freedom to lead out in prayer, give thanks, read Scripture, encourage, and even ask questions from the teaching so that the body can be built up by its honest interaction in the presence of the Lord.

### **5. Get Over The Edifice Complex**

"Perhaps the most obvious monument to the church's im-mobility and inflexibility are its church buildings. Buildings are massive, stationary structures, imposing physical symbols of fixity and rigidity." Here the author most clearly suggests the home church model, "The early Christians could have followed the familiar model of the Jewish temple or synagogue and created specifically Chris-tian buildings to meet and worship in. They did not. Appa-rently they believed their homes were the best context for gathering.... Homes are a place of family, which is what the early believers were to each other."

Of course the edifice complex can be just as apparent in avoiding buildings, and it could be said that

persecution may have contributed to the early church staying in homes. But we still have to ask what do we gain (or lose) by confining God's work to a building that more often than not confines the life of the body, at great expense to build and maintain.

## **6. Cultivate a Spirituality of Daily Life**

How do we relate to a living God in our everyday existence? Too often we only see that in terms of meeting legalistic, guilt-inducing expectations in the do's and don'ts of our behavior. This method never produces God's transformation. Radical renewal invites us to cultivate a relationship with God, that fills every corner of our lives with his presence where we realize it's not what we do for God that matters, but what we let him do in us.

## **7. Practice Lifestyle Evangelism**

"The Bible makes it clear that the central and irreplaceable medium for communicating the gospel is the quality of believers' lives together. The lives of people who genuinely love each other, for all their warts and false starts, will be a truer explanation of the good news than the most precisely pitched evangelistic message." Amen.

## **8. Work for Social Justice**

"Doing biblical justice, therefore, means taking positive actions that create and preserve flourishing human community in fidelity to God's covenant which is to realize a just social order." This chapter was not easy to understand, but it demonstrates that God's heart is for justice, especially in alleviating the suffering of the oppressed and needy. How we accomplish that might differ greatly, but we can acknowledge that our service in places like that is close to God's heart and the true nature of religion.

## **9. Do Grass-Roots Ecumenism**

"Radical church renewal rejects the unnecessary divisions that separate and isolate Christians from each other. It calls believers to work for the unity of the Spirit. But to be meaningful and effective, this work must become the bottom-up, grass roots work of the people of God." Don't confine your relationships only to believers who make up whatever group you worship with. God's work in our world is so much larger, and we can see that when we make an effort to seek relationships beyond our own group.

I doubt I've done these justice by trying to summarize in so short a space, but aren't these fascinating? They have each challenged me to take a fresh look at what it means for me to be a part of the church.

Certainly I'm not encouraging everyone to leave their traditional church structures and jump into house churches. Many of these proposals are possible through home groups and other relationships that can be

a part of more traditional structures. What this book did for me, and what I hope this overview does for you, is to help me find meaningful body life wherever God plants me.

If you have been lulled into passivity, expecting your church to spoon feed it to you, I hope this calls you back to action. I also hope it encourages you to find significant friendships with other believers, where you grow together through open and honest conversation, serve each other gladly, and challenge each other to walk in the fullness of his life.

But I also want it to encourage many who read this newsletter who are no longer part of those traditional structures. They are finding God's life more effective in meaningful exchanges of relationships with other believers in their own homes. I don't want them to labor under the guilt of an obligation to a Sunday morning format that Scripture never made compulsory. There are many ways for the body of Christ to gather and celebrate.

Let me close by paraphrasing a comment I read off the internet. It ties together so well with past issues of BodyLife:

"Beloved, if we preach 'the church' in all of its technical correctness, we will never find it, but if we embrace the power of the cross we will see the church spring up around us in all its glory. When the cross is in its rightful place in the lives of the believing community, the church as God has ordained it will organically flow from that."

Then God himself can truly be more important than any church structure. In being free from the need to go to church to fulfill some kind of obligation, we can recover the simple joy of living as his church in the world.

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