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What is Church Life?

By Dudley Hall



Part 1

A pastor of a large denominational church had announced on Sunday evening that there would be a meeting of the board in his office after the service. When he arrived he found several people from the congregation that he did not even recognize. When he said to them, "I don't believe that I remember you being a part of the board", the response was "if you can get anymore 'bored' than we are, we would like to see it." For "Church Life" to be the actual expressed life of Jesus, it must be exciting and supernatural.

The Problem of "CHURCH LIFE"

The problem with the phrase "Church Life" is that it normally carries with it connotations of boredom. The phrase itself is not a marketable phrase. Very few people will pick up a book entitled "Church Life." When the pastor announces that he is going to preach on "Church Life", nobody gets too excited. We have identified "Church Life" with the crystallization of our culture, comforts and traditions of the past. It seems that we have been doomed to take an alive work of God, categorize it, analyze it and reduce it to a lifeless form. Therefore, for most of us, "Church Life" consists of many meetings but very few times of excitement and stimulation.

In the past, it seems that as soon as a work of God was recognized as such, men and women began to analyze it, categorize it and declare what was "of God", and what was "in excess" and wound up reducing "Church Life" to some kind of predictable form. We have many denominations that have come from the moving of the fresh wind of the Spirit at different times in our history. When the move is over, however, "Church Life" seems to be reduced to people who meet but don't relate, sing but don't praise, and preach but don't prophesy.

Meeting Vs Relating

A zealous Baptist brother was speaking to a friend of his who was a member of another denominational church. This brother incredulously asked him, "Why aren't you a Baptist?" The man responded, "I'm not physically able."

Aggressiveness in meetings is something we tend to ascribe only to the Baptists. But it seems that every church turns their "Church Life" into meetings, and they all happen down at the church house. Evidence of New Testament "Church Life" is not so much "meeting" but "relating". It seems that many times we come to a meeting and, even if we have no clear direction from God about the decisions to be made, feel that a decision *must* be made because we had a meeting. I'm finding that it is much better to relate to one another, and when a clear decision comes, it will be recognized by those who are responsible to make the decision and it can be implemented.

Recently, I had a wonderful experience with the Elders at our church. We spent two days together

walking, hunting, and having fellowship with each other. The difference in this approach and a normal meeting is that when you sit around the meeting-table with an agenda over a specific issue, it seems the pressure is on to talk even when you have nothing to say and to decide even when the decision is not clear. The true purpose for meeting is to relate to one another's hearts and to bless one another. That way, the conversation comes naturally, and decisions that need to be made will be surfaced by the Spirit of God who dwells in us. It was a refreshing experience to walk through the fields with no pressure to say anything unless there was something to say. We found ourselves walking sometimes for an hour or more without saying a word, and then drifting together as we walked and discussed issues that surfaced in our hearts. Now these issues had life and we were not only able to bless one another, but to hear the voice of God.

Singing Vs Praising

The next problem with our concept of "Church Life" is that we sing but we don't praise. Music has always had a vital part in "Church Life". When God moves, there is not only beauty and life in what He does but there is also harmony. It's something that God has built into His life. When we take the music that was a result of the life of God and reduce it to a form, we simply become "singers" of the songs rather than "praisers" of the God who gave the songs.

Preaching Vs Prophesying

The next problem is that we preach but we don't prophesy. Many pastors wonder why there is no life in their church. Many are confused because they "preach the Bible" every Sunday but their numbers are dwindling and there is no supernatural, exciting life happening. The simple definition of prophesying would help us understand the difference in preaching and prophesying. Prophecy is "a Spirit-filled proclamation of who Christ is and what that means to this situation." Prophecy can be a personal word to an individual, a corporate word to a congregation or a national or international word to even larger groups of people. But, if it is true prophecy, it will center around who Christ is and what that means to the current situation.

The Essence of Christ

Meeting without relating, singing without praising, preaching without prophesying: it is not right for us to accept this preconceived form as "Church Life". "Church Life" in essence is the very life of Jesus expressed through His body on the earth. **"Church Life" today is to be no less exciting nor less supernatural than the life that Jesus expressed through His physical body when He was here on the earth.** It was His "life" that He gave to us. It was His "life" that the Holy Spirit breathed into the Church on the day of Pentecost. It is His "life" that we can expect to experience and express as we live on the earth. Why then do we settle for such poor substitutes of the life of Christ? If life is a gift, why have we not received it and used it?

Perhaps part of the answer can come from our understanding of the fall of man. God had put within man the ability to organize, categorize, and rule. When man fell, that ability was perverted and it seems that man inevitably takes what is life and reduces it to organized, categorized, analyzed death. When Jesus was on the earth, He was the *very* Word of God and life of God expressed through a physical body. His greatest problem, however, was with those who had taken the word of God from the past, analyzed it, organized it, categorized it, and refused to let life in. What they had was understandable, comfortable, traditional and controllable. Jesus, on the other hand, was exciting, supernatural, and out of their control.

An interesting period of time in Jesus' life is recorded in Matthew chapter 9. A synagogue official had a daughter who was sick and ultimately died. He came to Jesus for help. On His way to help, Jesus encountered a woman who had an issue of blood and He ministered to her. Then, immediately upon leaving her, He healed some blind men as well as a man who was dumb because of demons. At

the end of the chapter the Scripture says that Jesus had compassion on all these multitudes because they were like sheep having no shepherd. What is interesting is that they had many church officials but no shepherds. When Jesus said, "Pray to the Lord of the harvest that He would send out workers," He was asking for shepherds.

The Role of a Shepherd

One of the reasons that we have so much death and destruction among the people of God today is that we have been content to have church officials but not shepherds. We have reduced the role of a shepherd to a "C.E.O.", an administrator or a ruler. We have forced pastors into roles that they neither want nor are able to perform, therefore burn-out is a constant companion to many who are in "full-time Christian vocation." During these days, God is raising up people who have the shepherd's heart.

A shepherd is not necessarily a ruler. Shepherds are people who care for sheep. The wonderful thing about being a shepherd in God's Kingdom is that we are shepherds under the Great Shepherd. It is not our ultimate responsibility to hide the sheep, feed the sheep, or protect the sheep. It is our responsibility under the Great Shepherd to facilitate all of these things. Jesus said that His sheep hear His voice.

That means that all of the sheep can hear the Great Shepherd's voice--this releases the shepherds from the pressure of having to be the ultimate decider of truth and error. Jesus is a faithful Shepherd; therefore, He is going to protect His sheep. We simply need to be obedient to Him and say what He says and do what He does. As we recognize Him as the Great Shepherd, being an under-shepherd becomes a wonderful challenge and blessing.

God is calling for thousands of ordinary folks to be shepherds, whose goal in life will be to turn other sheep into shepherds themselves. The quality of our "Church Life" will be greatly enriched when we have fewer officials and more shepherds.

The Role of the Church

One of the tendencies we have when we look at the poor state of "Church Life" is to become critical and condemning. Obviously, it never does any good to curse the darkness. Rather, we should discover the life and the light. But it is not wrong to ask questions when things are not working well. A Westinghouse executive, when asked how to determine the success of an organization, simply said, "When we want to know if we are successful we ask only two questions. What is our product and are we producing it?" Though the church is technically an organism, and not an organization, that is still not a bad question for any of us to ask: what is the product of the Church, and are we producing it? Since God's Church is an agency of redemption, then the product of the Church would be to produce fully redeemed people. It really wouldn't hurt if the church re-established that purpose periodically - to produce a fully redeemed people who realize that they were brought out of depravity themselves because God saw value in them. And now, because they themselves have been brought out, they have the capacity to redeem others.

Remember the Kingdom parable that Jesus told about the man who found a treasure hidden in a field? It was of such great value that he went and did whatever was necessary to buy the field in order to get the treasure. That is exactly what God did for us. He saw fallen man in the field, which is the world, and saw such great value in him--even though he was dead, perverted and bound in his sins - that He sent His only Son to pay the price necessary to buy man out of that pitiful plight. He brought man out, made him His child, and released him to become all that he could be. We are God's treasure--even though we may find that hard to believe.

When we are redeemed we are able to look at everything that the Devil has perverted in this world

and see the intrinsic value that God placed there. For too long the church has given up on things that the devil has perverted and has relegated them to "this old world." I am tired of giving things to the Devil that don't belong to him. It is not right for the Devil to have the arts, music, the dance, theater, drama, the media, the press, etc. Everything that is on this earth was created by God and was stamped good by Him. The Devil has perverted it, but those with a redemptive perspective can see the intrinsic value and can buy back those things by the authority and power that has been given them through Jesus' name. We have the capacity to look into the face of the drug addict, the homosexual, the broken, the depressed, or the mental patient and redeem that which has been previously destroyed.

One of the things that will help us is understanding that redemption is a process. Because the church is an organism rather than an organization, it has life. Things that have life grow in several different ways. They grow internally in interdependence as each man does its own work. They grow quantitatively as they get bigger, and they grow in maturity as they learn how to fit into the grand scheme of things.

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