

The Brain-Dead Church

I'm using the definition of 'brain-dead' as “no response to stimulation and no indication of life”. Now let's define what I mean by 'Church'. I don't mean the New Testament definition, but the modern western definition of Church: i.e., the Institutional Church. Organized Religion, if you will. The structure that is defined by a Pastor-led, staff-managed group of people who call themselves Christians, usually meeting in a particular building that is called a church. These churches generally have a weekly meeting on Sunday. Activities are initiated and controlled by the pastor or church staff. There is endless variety in Churches, but this is essentially the way they operate, and this is the definition I'm going to work with.

What I mean by 'life' in this context is genuine, heartfelt responsiveness to the deeply felt spiritual needs of *all* of the people who voluntarily associate with a given church. Genuine responsiveness means the people who attend that church feel like their deepest spiritual concerns are being adequately addressed, the presence of Jesus Christ is evident in all activities of the church, and no one is being harmed spiritually or physically. No one can point to bad behavior on the part of pastor, staff, or congregants that compromises the work of Christ in that church. This is pretty much calling for perfection, but I think this is the kind of life that Jesus Christ demands and expects in any group of people who represent him.

I want to say that I think most pastors are genuinely good people, doing their level best to serve their congregations, and many of them are very good at what they do. Many are severely overworked. They are sincere in their efforts and work very hard at their jobs. Most church staffers are good people also, again, doing their best to serve God and maximize their contribution to the cause of Christ. I have nothing personal against any of these people, and I know a number of them. They are good people. I want to say here that if you are a pastor frustrated by overly influential members of the congregation who oppose biblical leadership, this is not about criticizing you. It is the functional structure of the modern church and the behavior that engenders that I am addressing.

Now let's take a look at the way the “church” is set up. I know this is a simplistic characterization, but I just don't have the space, time, or knowledge to deal with all variations of the church model that exist. The dominant church model of a pastor-led, staff-managed church is really a church within a church. The pastor and staff have meetings, they communicate with each other, they discuss plans and problems, they discipline egregiously sinful behavior (once in a great while), they brainstorm, and they basically perform all the functions of a church. They know each other fairly well. This doesn't happen for the congregation they manage. When a new program is implemented, the congregation is told about it, but only after the church staff has agreed on what they want to happen. The congregation is not consulted before the program is implemented. They are told about the program and asked to 'get on board', but they don't have any real input into what the church does other than showing up and giving money. Many people volunteer, but they still usually aren't consulted before the program is implemented. So we have the church staff functioning as a church in its own right, but the congregation is in the dark about what is being planned and their desires and needs, whatever they are, are really unimportant to what the church staff implements. Only if there is a big disagreement or lack of support for the staff's plans do the plans change.

The problem is this: we, as Christians, have been led to believe that the Institutional Church is the body of Christ, and it is not. The Bible defines the church, or a church, as an ekklesia--an assembly of believers. It makes no reference to the idea of a building being necessary to define a church, or of a pastor being necessary to lead it. The body of Christ is all those who profess Jesus Christ as Lord *and*

follow his precepts. Now, when you think of a church, what comes to mind? Is it not a building? Unless you have trained yourself to think in a way that is contrary to modern western culture, when you think of a church, you think of a particular building in a particular location, and all the people who associate themselves with that building. Along with that, you think of the pastor and the people who run that church. The senior pastor is the final authority in that church, and he defines what that church is all about. The elder board and the congregation likely have something to say about all that, but the pastor usually defines what the church is about. He has the bully pulpit.

Lots of people go to church, and if they don't like one church, they go to another, then another, until they find one they like. Or they just drop out. If someone wants to change what they think is a bad church, you might have a church split. There are individuals who would rather fight than change their opinion. It's a control issue. The whole notion of love and spiritual growth is lost in the melee. The fundamental point here is that people do not feel a deeply loving spiritual connection to all the people in the Institutional Church they attend. They may feel a connection to a few people in their church, but never all people in their church. Attending a church is frequently more a matter of personal convenience or benefits received rather than a spiritual matter. The structure of the modern church allows and encourages this.

Why is all this a problem? Because the driving issues are about how to manage the institution, not about loving one another. The church of Jesus Christ is shepherded by Jesus Christ, not a human pastor, and it is all about loving people. Out of thirteen references to "shepherd" in the NT, nine refer directly to Jesus Christ and four refer indirectly to Jesus Christ. *None* of them refer to a specific man, such as a pastor. The word 'pastor' is not found at all in the New Testament. Pastors (plural) are listed fourth out of a list of five giftings in Ephesians 4:11, after apostles, prophets, and evangelists. The New Testament does not put pastors in any kind of supervisory capacity over the body of Christ. Anything that distracts believers from loving people is not of God. Institutional churches are full of things of that nature, especially centralized control. They can't help it. There is a building to manage, staff to manage, cars to park, kids to herd, etc. When an Institutional Church grows to a relatively large size, policies become more important than people. This is largely because of the litigious nature of modern American society. The church can be sued out of existence if someone associated with it does the wrong thing. The pastor and staff are literally unable to address all of the spiritual needs in their congregation. They simply cannot love everyone. The job is too big to manage, so they are forced to develop policies that make it easier to manage the institution, and the people end up supporting the institution, not being the church themselves. And they wonder why they feel empty. So spiritual growth and loving people takes a back seat to managing the institution. The justification given for this is that the (institutional) church needs to survive in order to serve the people. The institution becomes more important than the people who support it.

Any pastor you question will insist that he is more concerned about spiritual growth in his congregation than managing the institution, but cut the budget in half and see what he concerns himself with. Or bring on a lawsuit. The institution must be saved. So spiritual growth is the most important thing until the institution is threatened, then all of a sudden the institution becomes the most important thing. That means the institution is always the most important thing.

Since the pastor and staff are unable to address all the spiritual needs of their congregation, they limit their tasks to preaching, teaching, and managing programs. The pastor preaches or teaches, does some counseling, and manages the church staff. That is a full-time job. He is physically unable to do more. Even at that, he has to delegate a considerable amount of work to the staff. And the staff end up managing programs or information. They create programs to accomplish approved tasks, and they

recruit members of the congregation to help with the programs. Inherent in this model are limits. There is a limit to how much time and energy any human being can give to a task. Anything beyond that limit drops away. Because of time constraints, pastors and staff limit their tasks to manageable chunks of activity. These limits define what the pastor and staff are capable of. Personal involvement with every member of the congregation is utterly impossible, so it is not even considered.

This is where the institution becomes brain-dead. Since a Biblical church is an assembly of believers who know and love each other under the ultimate authority and leadership of Jesus Christ, a centrally-managed institution under the ultimate authority and leadership of a fallible man, or group of men, cannot possibly be a legitimate Biblical church, nor can it address all the needs represented there.

Let me share an illustration of the spiritual bankruptcy of the Institutional Church. I read Julia Duin's book "Quitting Church", and in it she relates an instance where a pastor found a husband for his daughter and bragged about his success from the pulpit. After he bragged about it, young women who attended that church started leaving. The pastor was obviously concerned about his own daughter, but the other young women in the church weren't his concern, despite their desire for a husband, which his daughter shared. I shared this story one day with some friends at church with the pastor listening in. Everyone at the table understood the issue. The pastor's response was "I don't get it." He could understand a father's desire to help his daughter, but the fact that there were single women in that church with the same deeply felt desire for a husband as the pastor's daughter didn't even show up on his radar screen. This is what I mean by brain-dead. I don't want to be harsh on this pastor, but the fact is, he was not even considering those other young women. He does not have the capacity to deal with a need of this depth or magnitude, therefore he doesn't even consider it as part of his job. If I bring up the idea of helping young people with this issue, pastors respond as if a snake were dropped into their lap. Not only do they not want to address the spiritual need of these young women, they avoid it like the Black Plague.

Duin also shares a story about a young man who approached an elder with a request for prayer to help him find a wife. He was rebuked for being selfish. After a few more instances of sincerely seeking help with finding a mate and again being rebuked, he gave up. He was in his fifties and still single when Ms Duin wrote her book. This is what I call brain-dead. A total lack of understanding the issue at hand, and not only that, but a positive resistance to helping these people meet that deeply felt spiritual need of finding a mate. They did not feel loved by their church. In these churches, there is no serious ministry to singles that addresses the need to find a mate, and there is no meaningful response to requests for it. Is this loving one another? The institution is brain-dead. Finding a mate is not about selfishness; it is about fulfilling God's design for mankind, and should be very high on the list of priorities for any church that honors Jesus Christ. It is not just a family matter. It is absolutely critical to the growth and success of the body of Christ.

There are other examples, one of the main ones being the tendency to develop programs. A program is a centrally controlled activity that is defined by rules and governed by someone who is in charge of the program. If someone doesn't follow the rules or obey the person in charge, they are out of the program, regardless of how well they are loving people. Participants really don't have much say, if any, in how the program is run. They go along or leave. This is all about rules and programs, not about relationships or love. A few people can run an institution or a program, but they simply cannot address the spiritual needs of dozens, hundreds, or thousands of people.

What does a better job of representing Christ? Having a 'successful' evangelism program that lets the program organizers throw a bunch of numbers on the wall about how many got saved or one or two

people addressing someone's complex, but deeply felt, spiritual questions in a spirit of love? I think the latter, which doesn't need a program to make it happen. Sure, an evangelism program can provide a venue for that to happen, but it's the spirit-led personal interaction that makes it work, if it works at all. When the program rules override the personal interaction, the program becomes spiritually counterproductive. Jesus didn't start a bunch of programs. He didn't spend time organizing people into programs for evangelism, healing, or anything else. He directly addressed needs that were presented to him, and he taught his disciples to do the same. His was a one to one ministry, either he himself addressing needs, or his disciples addressing needs on a one to one basis. He did not create or appeal to rules for ministry. He dealt with each person he ministered to one on one. Sure, he preached, but preaching is a group event. When needs were addressed, it was one on one. There is always a personal relationship involved in Christian work. Programs do not necessarily foster personal relationships, and frequently harm them. Programs make it easy for a few people to manage a lot of work the best way they see fit, but they can't see everything that is going on. Jesus Christ manages his church by individually loving every member of it and motivating them, individually, to serve him in their particular situation.

There are many pastors and church leaders that will say if you don't have someone managing all these people, things will get out of control. In whose opinion are things out of control? If the pastor can't control everyone, they are obviously out of *his* control, but are they out of *God's* control? The body of Christ exists all around the world, and everyone who has Christ in them is part of it, whether or not they are part of an Institutional Church. Even in institutional churches, God uses his people to minister to others entirely without the direction of the church staff. The church staff can manage programs and direct a great deal of work, but they are completely unaware of a great many things the people of God do within their church. It is impossible for them to manage it all. They can manage only what they understand and control, and that is a *very small* part of what the body of Christ does. But what a "church" does is what defines that church. So any Institutional Church is the personal ministry of the senior pastor. It can't be anything else. The pastor decides what happens and doesn't happen within his church. He approves or disapproves everything that goes on or is presented as an idea. Even God can't do anything in his church without that pastor's approval. So whose church is it, really?

This is why the modern church is brain-dead. Our culture assumes that institutional churches are the body of Christ, and those churches are defined by men, not God. God is given lip service, but the deeply felt spiritual needs of the members of that church are only partially addressed, if at all. Ask yourself--how many people in your congregation are having their deeply felt spiritual needs met by an activity of this church? Are they being loved? Do you even know what those deeply felt spiritual needs are? Not just physical or measurable needs, but those needs that are deep in our soul and make all the difference as to how we live our lives and serve Christ. I daresay the pastors and staff of most churches are oblivious to most of those needs. They are aware of some, I'm sure, but the fact is they don't know all of them and don't have the capacity to deal with them or even be aware of them all. They are too busy managing the institution. They are unable, if not unwilling, to deal with the deeply felt spiritual needs of their congregation in a meaningful way. That would force them to fundamentally change their thinking, which will not happen.

As an example of just how incapable the modern church structure is at addressing deep spiritual needs, I would like to return to the issue of singles. The body of Christ is predicated on the reproduction of human beings, and that is predicated on men and women getting married and having children, the more the better. God created marriage for a reason. The more Christians that get married and have children, the more children are likely to become Christians and further the work of Christ. Since the percentage of nuclear families in our culture is declining, and modern churches make it a point to minister to

families, not singles, the church is reaching out to a shrinking market. If the percentage of nuclear families falls to a level that reaches critical mass, the Institutional Church will not have a market left, and may just disappear. It seems to me the church should involve itself in helping singles get together and create Godly families. The fact that there is a positive resistance to this in churches is baffling. It is brain-deadness on steroids. The Institutional Church is following a long-term plan to positively kill itself off.

The whole issue of singles ministry is irrelevant in a house church setting. A small group of people who genuinely love each other will address all felt needs, including the need of singles to find a mate. The brain-deadness does not happen in a small group led by Christ himself, because everyone has the opportunity to share and minister without the interference of official leadership.

Institutional churches are brain-dead because of their inherent structure. They can't help it. Only the house church model is capable of representing Christ as the New Testament illustrates.

“The first guarantee the church must make to people is to always love them, under every circumstance, with no exception.” David Savage, Baker Handbook of Single Adult Ministry, p. 195, by Douglas L. Fagerstrom.

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