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by

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Contents

Introduction.....	3
Analysis of Body Life	3
How Body Life relates to Being and Making Disciples for Jesus Christ	5
The Three Major Purposes for the Creation of the Local Church	6
Identification of My Spiritual gifts and How They are Being Utilized	7
Conclusion	9
Bibliography	10

Introduction

As we reflect upon the early church and compare their practices with our current practices, it is a rational thought that things seem to have significantly changed over the centuries. The early church members worked with a “loose” structure. People assumed roles and duties based upon their skills and gifts. These small gatherings spread rapidly through the ancient world, and Christianity became the dominant religious belief system, displacing many long-standing pagan religions. Their practices allowed for rapid numerical growth as well as increased spiritual maturity. This paper will reflect upon several writings that describe the development of the life of the “body” in the church over the centuries, how the body life of a church empowers discipleship, what the local church should be, and how this writer’s spiritual gifts are being used in ministry.

Analysis of Body Life

The early church began as small gatherings that met in homes. These simple gatherings focused on building relationships among the attendees and considering the Word of God and how it applied to their lives. Over the centuries, the church and the governments blended, and the governance of the church became more structured. An ecclesiastical order became the norm, where priests were those who had religious education with the ability to read is a crucial requirement. These priests were trained in religious methodologies and were supported by the governments where they operated. This led to the establishment of two classes of church attenders: laity and clergy. Over time, the laity became spectators to the efforts of the clergy.

Unfortunately, the church has experienced a decline in overall numbers and in the influence it once had in culture. The clergy are simply not numerous enough to impact the populations around them, even if they were wholly devoted to living holy lives. The clergy often

demonstrated over the centuries that they were more concerned with worldly matters and personal comfort. These examples, along with Satan's efforts, have undermined the credibility of the ecclesiastical order. Simply put, the church had become regarded as unhealthy.

In the 1500s, God stirred the hearts of several men in the Catholic church and led to an effort to reform the institutions of the church. Most of these reformers desired to see individuals engage with Scripture and be empowered for ministry. One of these reformers, Phillip Spener, encouraged behaviors that have been put in place by many contemporary evangelical churches. Spener encouraged the empowerment of the laity. McCallum commented in his article about Spener, "Thus Spener argues that there are three bases for lay access to the Bible and ministry.

1. Direct biblical command.
2. The fact that the Bible is addressed to all.
3. The fact that all Christians have the Holy Spirit, who alone can interpret the Scriptures."¹

These reformers helped move forward a thought process that has continued into current days. The process of empowering the laity has been attempted in many different forms, and there is still much to be done. Overall, no one process has been developed that has gained consensus from all churches. Some have even suggested the idea of an ecclesiastical order is not consistent with Scripture. Ogden has suggested,

Any view of call that debilitates and devalues the ministry of the whole body of Christ is contrary to the New Testament conception of the church: The traditional roles of clergy and laity must be reversed: The laity become the troops in the front lines and the clergy, with the gathered church, help to support them. Until this

¹ Dennis McCallum, "Phillip Jacob Spener's Contribution to Protestant Ecclesiology." (XENOS Christian Fellowship), Accessed May 29, 2020 from <https://www.xenos.org/essays/phillip-jacob-speners-contribution-protestant-ecclesiology>.

revolution occurs, the Protestant concept of “the priesthood of all believers” remains vague and unrealized.²

Such ideas are not universally accepted, but the need to mobilize and empower the body of the church is necessary. Rod Dempsey proposed that to help the church remain vital and relevant, believers need to “connect with Christ, connect as disciples, and then connect with others outside the fellowship of the disciples.”³

How Body Life relates to Being and Making Disciples for Jesus Christ

The process of making a disciple originates with a person who commits to being a disciple. The process of discipleship is much like an apprenticeship practice in where a tradesman teaches an apprentice how to become skilled in the trade. Part of this process requires education from written material and lectures. At some point, the apprentice must take the tools of the trade in hand and begin to use the knowledge that has been gained to utilize and develop their skills. Believers face a similar challenge. Hull notes that the apostle Paul directed the Corinthian church to “Imitate me.” Hull continues by pointing out, “In just a few words, Paul set up two primary goals of discipleship. The first: Imitate Christ. The second: Although other disciples make for earthly and imperfect examples, imitate them.”⁴ Becoming a disciple is not merely a matter of memorization. It requires a changing of the mind to adopt the mind of Christ and behave in a fashion that is not natural to mankind. This practice is best caught by observing

² Greg Ogden, *Unfinished Business: Returning the Ministry to the People of God*, Revised Edition, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 266.

³ Rod Dempsey, “Presentation: Historical Discipleship and the Priesthood of the Believers”, (Liberty University, February 8, 2019), Retrieved on May 29, 2020, from https://learn.liberty.edu/webapps/blackboard/content/listContent.jsp?course_id=_621246_1&content_id=_39428143_1.

⁴ Bill Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship: On Being and Making Followers of Christ*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress Publishing Group, 2006), Accessed May 29, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central, 115.

a more experienced believer in action, then putting those practices in action with an experienced voice, helping to explain areas to improve or being encouraged for proper actions.

This practice has become unusual in the American church and is one that should be renewed. The separation of clergy and laity creates an unusual distance for a person who is disciplined by a clergyman. There is enough of a perceived difference to their lives that the disciple may erroneously believe the only way to become a true disciple is to accept a position in full-time ministry. Certainly, that is not a requirement to be a disciple and is an issue that should be addressed in the modern church.

The Three Major Purposes for the Creation of the Local Church

Stedman contends that there are three primary purposes for the local church. He explains that the church should reflect God's holiness,⁵ reveal God's glory,⁶ and be a witness to Christ.⁷

The church is to reflect God's holiness

Stedman asserts that God cares first and foremost is who the "church" are, rather than what they are doing. "Being must always precede doing, for what we are determines what we do,"⁸ Stedman shared. God has provided many examples of how He expects His people to conduct themselves. Their character and integrity should be an overwhelming testimony of their holiness as His people.

The church is to reveal God's glory

⁵ Ray C. Stedman, *Body Life: The Book That Inspired a Return to the Church's Real Meaning and Mission*, (Discovery House, 1995), Kindle Edition, Kindle Location 298.

⁶ Ibid., Kindle Location 318.

⁷ Ibid., Kindle Location 357.

⁸ Ibid., Kindle Locations 302-303.

The author directs the reader to consider that the primary task of the church is not to tend to the welfare of others. The first priority of the church should be to seek to bring glory and praise to God through the way we live our lives.⁹ God's people can demonstrate devotion to Him by serving with amazing lovingkindness to others, enact self-sacrifice that is unmerited, and share God's truths with others and reason with them about how those truths apply to all men's lives. These actions raise awareness of God in the minds of those outside the church and inspire those inside the church of His amazing love for us and the grace He has given to us.

The church is to be a witness to Christ

The church is to be a witness to Christ, and a witness is one who declares and demonstrates. This idea is conveyed in 1 Peter 2:9,¹⁰ "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." Stedman encourages believers to remember that they have an individual responsibility to witness and that they can not simply rely upon the corporate witness of the church organization. He states, "All are called, all are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, all are expected to fulfill their calling in the midst of the world."¹¹

Identification of My Spiritual gifts and How They are Being Utilized

The apostle Paul described how believers are gifted with spiritual gifts upon regeneration by the Holy Spirit in Eph 4: 7, which Stedman describes as, "... two tremendous things: (1) the gift of the Holy Spirit for ministry, which is given to every true Christian without exception, and

⁹ Ibid., Kindle Location 316.

¹⁰ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

¹¹ Ray C. Stedman, *Body Life*, Kindle Edition, Kindle Location 362.

(2) the new and remarkable power by which that gift may be exercised.”¹² Each of these gifts is given to serve the people of God and to minister to others. Stedman referred to 1 Cor 12:7 as he shared, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”¹³

As this writer reflects upon the regeneration process that occurred many years ago, it is apparent that the gift of pastor-teacher was given. It has taken many years to mature in that gifting. The evidence of that gifting shows as opportunities to expound upon Scripture are provided, and listeners respond with comments that explain that they received new awareness of how that portion of the Word of God applied to their lives. In addition, it is painful to hear teaching that is in error or is misleading, and this writer feels compelled to respond.

God also has gifted talents that are specifically useful to His church. This writer has been trained in accounting, certified as a public accountant, and was provided opportunities to serve in chief financial roles in the secular world. The skills and experiences that were gained in those roles have proven to be needed within the Kingdom outposts, where God assigned this pastor to serve. The leadership skills and administrative mindset serves the types of ministries where God has assigned this pastor, and they serve well when working with a team of pastors who seek to serve a large congregation well.

Finally, God has used this writer’s life to serve as an example to others that God can use anyone to fulfill His purposes. People in secular jobs can be used to minister to others. Skills that serve a secular purpose can be modified and utilized to further the Kingdom. Every believer has a specific purpose in the Kingdom, and they should eagerly seek God to discover how to be used for that purpose. This writer never expected to be called into ministry, to serve as a pastor,

¹² Ibid., Kindle Locations 756-758.

¹³ Ibid., Kindle Locations 771-772.

and to be regarded as someone with wisdom to share. God's favor is what enables each of those things, and to Him must all glory be given.

Conclusion

The gatherings of believers in current days would be well served as they consider how the early church was operated and what the key attributes of their activities should be oriented toward. Many congregations meet without a sense of purpose and feel that the problem is their clergy leader's fault. It would be a refreshing turn of events if each believer agreed what the critical mission is for the church, then decided what role they are uniquely equipped to fill. In fairness, it has taken centuries for events to have influenced the current operations of churches. The ability of a believer to mature and then disciple others holds the promise that at any time, churches can be revitalized to pursue the purpose and perfect will of God.

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