

## **Church Activity vs. Spiritual Transformation**

There are certain moments I have as a father; all of you who are parents have had them too. They are those moments when I am simply overwhelmed. Those moments when I look at my girls, and I am awed by who they've become.

*(Pictures of Alyssa and Allison)*

They are 16 and 20 and sometimes I simply cannot fathom we they got from there to here. A couple of weeks ago we met at my parents' house in Kansas City for a concert. Alyssa had driven up straight from work at Freeman Hospital in Joplin, so she was still in her scrubs and had her ID and everything, and she just seemed like this young, professional woman, and I'm wondering what happened to my little girl.

Allison loves to write. In fact she's writing a book. She's been very protective and secretive about her little project. We don't get to see it until its completed, but she reads us other things she's written— short stories, creative writing, and such, and I'm blown away by how good a wordsmith she is. She'll read it, and I'm sitting there flabbergasted, "Honey, that's...really good!" I'm amazed that all that came out of the imagination of her mind.

They are in a constant state of becoming, growing, changing, and transforming from one thing into another. That's okay. It still amazes me, but that's the way it's supposed to be. They're supposed to grow. If they didn't grow, if they didn't change, if they weren't becoming, if there was no transformation, then...I would be worried.

Should it be any different with a child of God as he or she grows to be more like Jesus? Aren't we to grow spiritually becoming ever more like Jesus? The apostle Paul compares our spiritual growth to physical growth writing in 1 Cor. 13:11 "When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things." Doesn't Jesus promise that those who abide in him will bear much fruit. Peter writes in 2 Peter 1:5-8:

5 For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; 6 and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; 7 and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. 8 For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Over the last several weeks we have been looking significant cultural changes that are

having a major impact on the church. We've been trying to do some honest self-assessment in light of these things and also asking how might God use these changes to build his church in the future. Most of this has focused on how the church relates, responds and reaches out to the non-Christian world around us. Now some of you may have been wondering, "what about those already in the church? How does this impact our ministry to those who already believe? What does all of this mean for us?"

Certainly, this is a much larger question than we can answer here this morning, but I do want to look at one core purpose that we must make a key focus as the church moves into the future. **In the future the focus will be less on church activity, and more on spiritual transformation.**

### ***Church Activity Does Not Equal Spiritual Growth***

What does this mean? First, less focus on church activity. For years the church has assumed that if people attend enough church programs and participate in enough church activities they will grow spiritually. Whether we've meant to or not, we equated being church involvement with spiritual growth.

One of the pastors of Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago put it this way a few years ago. Willow Creek is one of the largest, most growth oriented churches in the United States, and they did some honest soul searching to see if everything they were doing was really changing lives. Here's how they described their assumptions: "Participation is a big deal. We believe the more people participating in these sets of activities, with higher levels of frequency, it will produce disciples of Christ." The church creates programs/activities. People participate in these activities. The outcome is spiritual maturity.

What they discovered blew their minds. Here's what they found. Getting people involved in all sorts of church activities and programs didn't produce spiritual growth. They were so blown away by the results that they expanded their study to include hundreds of churches of every size and style and the results were the same— church activity doesn't equal becoming more like Jesus.

But here's the reality. Church activity does not mean spiritual maturity. In fact, church activity can be a very poor substitute for genuine Christian transformation. One of the things I've long noticed in the church, and it used to baffle me, is the number of people who've been in

the church for 30, 40, or 50 years or more, but evidence very little christlikeness at all. Frankly, some of the most bitter, resentful, nasty, and unchristlike people I've known are people who've been active in the church the longest. They are people who've been most involved, most active, and most committed to church activity. If they are what you get being in the church for several decades, no wonder so many are done with the church. I think if you were to spend years with Jesus, you shouldn't come out the other side bitter, selfish and contentious.

Certainly, I've known plenty of people in the church whose lives demonstrated a lifetime of being in love with their Savior. They bubbled over with a joy and hope that were contagious. A little time with them felt like a moment with Jesus. They gave the encouragement to keep going when I felt like giving up.

But sadly, I've known far too many of the other sort for it to be just a freak occurrence. Whether its deacon grump, elder grouch, or auntie sourpuss, I've seen more Christians who seem like they were pickled in vinegar, rather than baptized in Christ. In fact, some churches seem to manufacture them in assembly line fashion.

John Ortberg describes such a man in his book *The Life You've Always Wanted*. His name was hank. Hank had been a source of joylessness, disapproval and judgment in his congregation for decades. He was a cranky young guy, and he grew up to be a cranky old man. His life showed no Christian transformation. Ortberg writes:

But even more troubling than his lack of change was the fact that nobody was surprised by it. It was if everyone simply expected that his soul would remain withered and sour year after year, decade after decade. No one seemed bothered by the condition...No church consultants were called in. No emergency meetings were held to probe the strange case of this person who followed the church's general guidelines for spiritual life and yet was nontransformed.

The church staff did have some expectations. We expected that Hank would affirm certain beliefs. We expected that he would attend services, read the Bible, support the church financially, pray regularly, and avoid certain sins. But here's what we didn't expect. *We didn't expect that he would progressively become the way Jesus would be if he were in Hank's place.*

I'm not so baffled anymore. I can see how someone can be very involved in church activity and not have real relationship with Jesus. In fact, church activity can become a cheap substitute and an easy escape from true, dynamic, life changing relationship with Jesus. Churches will tolerate all sorts of unchristian attitudes and behavior from people so long as

they support the church.

### ***God Invites Us to Join Him in His Creative Work In Our Lives***

As we move forward in our post-Christian culture, we will need to focus less on church activity and more on spiritual transformation. What do I mean by spiritual transformation? Simply this, spiritual transformation is joining with God in His creative work to transform our lives from the inside out into the likeness of His Son, Jesus. It is becoming more like Jesus.

It is the goal of every Christian, and when it doesn't happen, something is wrong. The apostle Paul was greatly troubled by the Christians in the Galatian church who were not becoming more like Jesus. He laments in Gal 4:19, "*My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.*" To the Corinthians Paul writes, "*And we ... are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18).*"

What is this transformation? Well, the word that Paul uses here is the very word from which we get our word metamorphosis. (*Metamorphosis*) Do you remember your high school biology? That's the word we use to describe what? the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly.

### ***Spiritual Transformation works from the Inside Out***

Such a transformation is not just on the outside. Spiritual transformation is not simply conforming our behavior on the outside to fit in. It is renewing us from the inside out. Rom 12:2 says, "*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*" It is the world that presses us into its mold and forces us to conform to its ways. It is the evil desires of our unsaved self that forces us to conform 1 Peter 1:14 says, "*As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance.*" But Jesus starts with our heart and changes us from the inside out. A transformed Christian doesn't just do the things that Jesus did, he wants to do the things Jesus does. He enjoys it. She is fulfilled by it. Our very desire is transformed.

### ***Spiritual Transformation Does Not Turn Us Into Mind-Numbed Robots***

Spiritual transformation also does not mean we become cookie cutter Christians. We don't lose our individuality or our uniquely created personalities. God does not want the church to be full of mind-numbed robots or spiritual clones.

So what does it mean to say that Jesus is formed in us? Turn in your Bibles to Galatians 5. In Galatians 5 Paul tells the Galatians just how Christ is formed in them. He tells us that God put his very spirit within us and that if we live with the Spirit, if we live in relationship with the Spirit, Christ nature will be reproduced within us, and Paul describes that in verses 22 and 23. Read them with me.

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*

Now let's personalize that a little bit. Keep reading with me.

*But the fruit of Christ's Spirit living in me is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*

Okay, now we're getting warmer, but we need to take it farther still. Keep reading with me, because this text is all about us.

*Because the Spirit of Jesus lives in me I will continually grow to be more loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled*

Can we with all honesty say, "Today, I am more loving than I was last year. Next year I will be more loving than I am today. Today I am more joyful than I was last year. Next year I will be more joyful than I am today. Today I am more peaceful than I was last year. Next year I will be more peaceful than I am today." And go through each one of those things. Where are you growing? Where are you not growing? Is your life being transformed?

If you are not becoming more loving, more joyful, more peaceful, more patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle and self-controlled, then it doesn't matter how much church you attend, how involved and active you are. If we are not a changed people we can't change the world. If we are not a changed people, then do we really have a relationship with Jesus. We might have a relationship with a church, with an institution, with an organization, with a tradition, with a ritual, but not with Jesus, because you can't have a relationship with Jesus and not be changed.

I'm not saying church activity will end. I'm not saying there will be no more need for people to support church ministries. However, our view of these things and our motivation for them has to change. They do not in and of themselves make you more spiritual. True spirituality is not doing things for God, but it is being with Him, and doing things with Him. So much church activity is people trying to do things for God, instead of being with God as we do it together.

Going back to the big Willow Creek study, do you know what they found what people were crying out for instead of lots of church activities and programs? They found that we need to teach people to be self-feeders, to read and study the Bible on their own, to have a personal prayer life, to pursue spiritual practices in their daily life, and to take responsibility for their own spiritual growth.

Instead of asking "what can we do to get more church work done, and how can we get more people here to do it?" we need to be asking, "what can we do to become more loving, more joyful, more peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled." Too often churches are pursuing the outward appearance of spiritual growth, but without the substance. But if Christ is formed in us, and we are spiritually transformed, the rest of this stuff will take care of itself.

This is one of the primary reasons why God doesn't save us and then just place us in the world as individual Christians, isolated from each other. God doesn't want us to be spiritual Lone Rangers trying to do it on our own. Anyway, even the Lone Ranger had Tonto. This is why we are saved and placed into a community of believers. We all need others. We need each other. Spiritual transformation takes place in partnership with God, and it takes place in a partnership with other believers.

Eccl 4:9-12

*Two are better than one,  
because they have a good return for their work:  
10 If one falls down, his  
friend can help him up. But  
pity the man who falls and  
has no one to help him up!  
11 Also, if two lie down together, they will keep  
warm. But how can one keep warm alone?  
12 Though one may be overpowered,  
two can defend themselves.  
A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.*

Prov 27:17

*As iron sharpens iron,  
so one man sharpens another.*

This is one of the main reasons why we are called to meet together as Christians, to encourage one another in spiritual growth.

Heb 10:24-25

*And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. 25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

There are some 36 "one another" passages in the N.T. that describe how we should encourage one another, teach one another, admonish one another, and love one another. This is where spiritual transformation begins

Leader:

*Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Rom 12:10*

Response:

*Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited Rom 12:16*

Leader:

*Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. Eph 4:2-3*

Response:

*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Eph 4:32*

Leader:

*Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord,  
Eph 5:19*

Response:

*Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. 1 Thess 5:11*

Leader:

*But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. Heb. 3:13*

Response:

*And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Heb. 10:23-25*