

INTRODUCTION & PRUNING

One of the “holes” in the programs and patterns of many churches, in my opinion, is the dearth of interest, attention, and focus put on Living The Life. That is, there is very little time or attention given to training the troops. This may be truer in “mainline” (liberal) churches than it is in some more evangelical churches. However, with notable exceptions, even more conservative fellowships often “train” by proof-texting, and with a not-very-hidden agenda for either making the church organization “successful” or helping individual members to be “successful,” or both. But it is not for success in spiritual values and purposes; rather, it is for success “in this world.” In any case, we are in the mainline tradition. So we live in the dearth. (Scarcity, famine, inadequate supply.)

There is probably no need to convince you, but I will remind you anyway: If you join any of the “liberal” churches in our day, in the majority of them you will find much information on ecological issues; on human needs and disasters around the globe; on ways to “help” via this or that effort, offering, or organization. Most of these appeals, by the way, are blatant efforts to siphon money, time, and energy away from the church – that is, away from where people have any interest in Jesus, His purposes, or His ways. And the resources are typically sent to “other organizations” that never name “The Name” or claim any allegiance to Jesus, and that have zero interest in any connection, never mind relationship, between Jesus and any of the people or purposes they are trying to help. But few people complain. In fact, it is assumed by the people of liberal churches that these “other” organizations are superior to the church, know what they are doing, and do more good and help people more than the church does. It is an unexamined assumption almost across the board. It tends, however, to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Having given away so much of its resources, including the time and energy of many of its most dedicated members, the church has little chance left to be effective in its own right or for its own purposes.

But back to my main point: Most of our churches have no budget for, no board or committee for, and no intentions toward training their members to “Live The Life.” Apparently it is assumed (again, without examination) that all church members know all they need to know about such things. The truth is, none of us know as much as we need to know

about such things. Most of the members of our churches do not practice with any consistency even the disciplines and principles that they *do* know or have deduced. And the tragedy is that much of the excitement, sharing, bonding, and love of the Christian fellowship comes from participation in a disciple band that is, among other things, sharing The WAY – meaning, always in training to Live The Life. Hence, more than a few people are bored with church life precisely because it is missing this core element. How long does any theory, any learning process, any series of gatherings stay exciting if there is no application – no connection or intention to apply any of it to how we really live?

It is my hope that from the beginning, The New Church will put far more attention on Living The Life than any of us are used to. Imagery is always limited, yet it is also useful. Paul was always using imagery from either the military or the sports world. Even if it annoys some of you, nevertheless, with a little effort, we can get to the useful and helpful portion of the imagery. If we are part of a disciple band, we all need to become spiritual warriors. Most of you have become such warriors (by whatever wording you use) long before now. Warriors know they must always be in training. They also know that there are real adversaries, and that they may find themselves in serious combat at any time. We still live in a broken world. We do need to care for other people, and for our planet. But do not confuse these illustrations with the issues themselves. Far more than in most churches, we need to care for each other and train together or we will not have sufficient health, hope, or resources to do anybody any good. And we must stay “on the vine,” or all hope is lost.

So where do we start with Living The Life? That seems like a silly question. None of us are beginners. We have all been trying to figure it out for years. In all likelihood, most of us are far too hard on ourselves when we come to such a subject. How well are we following Jesus? Naturally we expect perfection, at least from ourselves; suddenly all grace is forgotten and we focus on the flaws. But Living The Life should be a joyful subject, don't you think? And if we are each a “work in progress” under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit, flaws and imperfections are just new places to find further blessings – that is, new places to off-load stuff getting in the way of our discipleship and the abundant LIFE Jesus wants for us.

There is no right place to begin, and life never presents us with one thing at a time, but I suggest we start with the notion of pruning.

That fits nicely with the comment we just remembered about “staying on the vine”: *“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.”* (John 15:1-2)

Along with my own experience, I have come across a long string of people who have struggled with alcoholism. And I have also talked with a good many others who have struggled with alcoholics. It is interesting how many people want to be hopeful about this or that little improvement an alcoholic may be making, though he or she is still drinking. The bare fact is, if you are an alcoholic, no improvement will last or make any real difference until the primary problem is taken care of. That is, as long as the alcoholic is still drinking, hope for a better life is a mirage, and ultimately ludicrous. In fact, the little improvements are often part of a smoke screen being used to protect and defend the drinking pattern.

So we start with the principle of pruning not because it’s the biggest or most important principle. But the truth is, if we are unable or unwilling to order our lives around Jesus and His Holy Spirit – if we will not truly carve out time for God and what God wants of us, instead of continuing to try to please everyone or anyone else – then Living The Life is not a real possibility for us.

How many distractions does Satan put on our path? How many addictions surround us? How often do our emotions and moods threaten to break our concentration, or even to destroy our hope? How many of our friends, usually trying to be helpful, give us questionable advice, or deluge us with good ideas, books, articles, causes, programs, opportunities – all intended to be helpful, of course. In the Age of Aquarius, with available information blowing off all charts in all directions, distraction has become the chief tool (the chief temptation) of Satan. If we cannot keep focused, we are doomed to fall into the modern slough of despond, which always lies just beyond all the excitement of too much information, too many opportunities, and too many things to do, learn, and help with.

Consider just one facet of this reality: What is your policy regarding interruptions? Who, or under what circumstances, do you allow people to interrupt what you are trying to accomplish at the moment? I know counselors who will not allow interruptions when they are with a client.

I know surgeons who will not take a phone call from their spouse when they are in surgery. But if you are pruned and are doing what you believe the Holy Spirit wants you to be doing, what is your policy regarding interruptions? Life is full of possible interruptions, and some may even be from the Spirit. But that does not alter the fact that many people allow so many interruptions that, even according to themselves, they can never seem to get anything done. And I do still have friends who, in the middle of their prayers, will answer the phone if it rings, even if the Spirit does not direct them to do so. How many people can be calling us who are more important than God? Or who have more important things to say to us than God does?

We are “warriors” under fairly strict (often stern) discipline, or we are spiritually dead. That is, Satan’s next attack will take us under. (Fortunately, there is also resurrection for us, whenever we ask for it – if we remember who we are and who we belong to.) Nevertheless, Living The Life is a very serious, very joyful, very delightful, very demanding part of “Our WAY.” We will want to make this dimension a conscious part of what we are hammering out and helping each other with in our disciple bands (and with our Mentors).

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Of course, talking about it (writing about it) here doesn't *do* it for us, but just for previews of coming attractions:

Together we will need to develop a far more intentional way of staying on track and staying focused on Jesus.

1.) This requires serious prayer and meditation, as we do the necessary pruning it takes to get our lives in balance and on track with the purposes and guidance the Holy Spirit has for us.

That means going over our list of friends, activities, organizations, obligations, promises, goals. Often with regrets, but trusting the Holy Spirit – and with a calm inner willingness – we will allow the Holy Spirit to prune our lists, until the guidance of our prayers is “peaceful” within us.

2.) Having done the basic alignment, how do we maintain? Maintenance is always a far bigger item than beginners ever figure on.

- Never take on a new obligation without off-loading a prior one.
- Never add a new friend (one you are seriously committed to) unless another friend dies or moves onto the “acquaintance” list.
- Never join an organization without resigning from one you are presently involved with.
- Never buy a shirt or skirt without sending one to Goodwill.

We may try to increase the quality of what we are engaged in, but quantity is our potential enemy. Travel light. Keep trimmed down. Weight drags us down. It doesn't take long before we cannot do anyone any good, including ourselves, because we have allowed the burden to become too great.

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As mentioned earlier, writing this solves nothing, but these are the kinds of issues and principles we need to be talking about with each other, dealing with together, and sharing with each other in intentional groups. Otherwise, how well or how long will we “Live The Life”?

And behind the scenes? Thoughts of such details annoy some and enliven others. A discipline laid on from outside is a rule (tyranny), and gets odious fast. A discipline chosen from within is beautiful and satisfying, if we value what can come from it. But there are principles which are true whether we like them or not. For instance, there is no such thing as “community” without limiting individual freedom. If the limitations become greater than the rewards, we destroy the community (get a divorce, leave the church, start the American Revolution, or whatever). But the fact remains that there is no community without a limitation of individual freedom. When the community is good, we consider the limitations a small price to pay, and even say they enhance our lives and make them better. Just so, there is no discipleship without discipline.

Within The New Church (for ourselves and any who come our way) we must always keep it clear that the Holy Spirit guides and directs each one of us. That, at least, is our intention and aim. We cannot deal with the above-mentioned axioms except in prayer. Only the Holy Spirit knows our true capacity. What is chaos for one may be the creative edge for another. So we can share to keep alert and to keep receiving perspective beyond our own opinions. But never ever do we want to be in charge of each other’s choices or decisions. That, it seems to me, is the great blunder of most religious organizations. The institutional structure starts to usurp the place of the Holy Spirit, and thinks it’s beneficial for it to control the lives of its members. Very few church organizations are entirely free from this tendency, even in the protestant “free church” traditions. So let us be wary from the beginning. Not only will each of us want to be alert and wary about undue influence on others in our fellowship (no matter how much we love them), but each of us must also be careful not to allow anyone (no matter how much we respect or like them) to get between us and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Hopefully you are not mishearing this. None of us can decide for another what pruning really means. There are some among us who carry huge responsibilities, yet have somehow learned to carry them lightly. Just getting rid of material things is a cheap-shot pretense at true pruning.

Some people have almost nothing, yet are still slaves to material things. Others have great abundance but only use it for the Kingdom, and they allow it to have very little influence on their loyalties and choices. The remarkable thing about Jesus, and the LIFE He invites us into, is that He would never revert to codes or rules as the secret to life. That was the Old Covenant. Jesus always prayed – He was always seeking the will of the Spirit as His true guide. And that, of course, will be the secret of *our* Living The Life ... or we will not find it.

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A couple of final comments before we get to the worksheet:

We are wanting to follow Jesus. None of this would matter to us if we thought it was merely good logic or wise human advice. The principle does come from Jesus, or it would have no authority for us. This principle *does* come from Jesus.

One of the axioms I have learned to love is to always compare what Jesus says with how He Himself does things. Often we get further clues to what He really means by watching how He does it.

Just so with pruning. Beyond John 15:1-2, we get further hints. Among them:

- The Gerasene demoniac (Luke 8:26-39)
- Who are my mother and my brothers? (Mark 3:31-35)
- The Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:24-37)

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.”

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So, if you wish, here is a worksheet to use with each other.

1.) If the cup is brim-full, there is no room for any more. “My cup runneth over” has some lovely associations. It also has some terrible consequences. As we have all learned, if we do not schedule time for our mate in our calendars, there is never any time for our mate. That is, we have to mark out time in our calendars for our mate and then guard it as a top priority, or endless other claims on our time will use it all up and leave us mateless.

How much time have you scheduled for Jesus? Some of us do a “morning devotions” discipline with fair regularity. But the question here is: How much time do you leave “open” for Jesus to use? Put another way: How much time do you leave open so that you can respond to the directions and suggestions you receive in prayer? Don’t just do something – stand there ... waiting and ready to be of use to the Holy Spirit. Many of us would feel guilty not using up every hour of every day. But for what? For the needs of those around us? For the demands of the world around us? That only means we will live frenetic lives, and lives that have no room for service to the Kingdom.

When we contemplate this and pray about it, there comes a time when we know we must rework our calendars to leave room for Jesus. And we know for certain, even as we rework our calendars, that the temptation to fill them back up again without regard for our Lord will be huge and raucous. It is, after all, Satan’s ploy to fill our lives so full – with good things and with doing good – that we have no time for the most important relationship and response of all.

2.) Most of us discover quickly that we come to a place where there is absolutely nothing we can subtract from our schedules. Everything we are doing and caring about is absolutely essential. (Though the “wool over our eyes” becomes obvious if we stop for even a moment to realize that there are other needs in the world at least as great as those we are working on.) When we hit this barrier, we learn how carefully and completely our lives have been walled-off from following Jesus. And at this point I always start thinking about all the ways Jesus might be, and hopefully is, using all the things I’m already doing. This is more than believable – that is, many people get away with using this excuse, even for years. But the truth is that this approach is not me following Jesus, but me asking Jesus to follow *me*. (“Never mind what *You* want me to do; come bless what *I’m* doing.”)

Then, sadly but with a whole new awareness, I must get completely serious about “turning will and life over” to Him. This WAY is not open to the casual disciple. *“The way is narrow, and those who find it are few.”* Is Jesus my Lord, or not? He is the friendliest and most benevolent Lord I will ever encounter. But that does not mean I can go on being idolatrous. The old saying was, “God will put up with almost anything, but not with being put in second place.”

3.) The assignment is now clear and obvious: Get out your calendar, your schedule, your list of obligations and responsibilities and tasks and meetings – of everything that is demanding your time and energy – and prayerfully redesign how you spend your time and life. Prune! With diligence, and if necessary, severely, prune your life until you are cut back far enough to bear fruit for your Lord and His Kingdom. You can stop “the flow of blood,” and the complaints and accusations of those you have hurt, in just a few days – a few days of misery for a whole new LIFE that can be used in service and in love for God.

And pay attention to how much resistance to doing this you run into. How long will it be before you “get to this task”? How many reasons and excuses will life hand you for not doing it? Or for not doing it wholeheartedly, or diligently? If you find this assignment easy or pleasant, then I’m wrong about all I have tried to tell you. Either you, or this world, are already reconciled to God, and you have only to enjoy the glory. On the other hand, if you find the pruning process difficult and realize that you are avoiding it – putting it off in ways large and small – then guess what? Satan has more at stake here than you were imagining.

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.”