

What Brings Life to a Church

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We have all been in churches that seem to be alive with the joy and power of the Holy Spirit. Most of us have also been in churches that are spiritually dead. Let me tell you a story I recently read as told by the Reverend Kenneth Hagin.

Years ago, I ministered in a Full Gospel church that was running several hundreds in the Sunday morning services. And on Sunday night the building was almost full.

They had a dear old lady, dear old Grandma Greer, who was at the time some 80 odd years of age. She'd been in Pentecost since the turn of the century. Away back around 1906 she had been baptized in the Holy Spirit. She knew something about travailing and waiting on God. (The old-timers did.) She would pray at the altar, groaning and praying in other tongues in the spirit of travail--carrying the entire thing, probably, on her own back.

Three years later I came back to this same church. Instead of having the building full for Sunday morning services, they had about 80 or 90 people. On Sunday night they had 35 to 50.

"What happened?" I asked someone. One of the members said, "Do you remember old Grandma Greer?"

"Yes."

"Well, she was in the altar praying like she always did, and the new pastor got up and said, "We're not going to have any of that around here."

He put a stop to it.¹

What a tragedy! But how many of us could tell similar stories?

In this article I want to look at the factors and forces that I believe set the course of any local church. These same factors can bring life or death to an entire network of churches and even to a denomination.

I believe the place to begin our examination is Deuteronomy 30:15-20 where God, through His servant Moses, set life and death before Israel. In this text in today's language Moses would say, "I have good news and bad news for you."

"See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live, and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. (NIV)

From these verses we know that God offered His

people a choice. They (and we) can choose life and prosperity, or we can choose death and destruction. Let us first look at the things within the local church that can bring death.

What Brings Death to a Church?

1. Factions and Divisions

The first thing that can bring death to a church is factions or divisions within the congregation. I call this the "us verses them" mentality. Once these factions develop, the door opens wide for demonic forces to come in and form a stronghold over the church.

We need each other. First Corinthians 12:12-27 tells us that we are one body. No one member is to consider himself or herself any better or superior to any other. Paul makes it crystal clear: "As it is, there are many parts, but one body." (1 Cor 12:20 NIV)

Another problem that grows out of these factions is that our divisions cause us to judge each other. And of course, we never judge someone harshly who is struggling with the same sin we are! Oh no, in our sinful-ness we like to judge others on the weaknesses we see in them that we are sure we don't have. Here again, we are violating Scripture. Jesus said, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" (Mat 7:3 NIV)

If we see a fault in a brother or sister, we should go out of our way to extend ourselves to that person. Show them the way by love and encouragement, not by judging them. That is what the more mature Christians in any church or setting should do. (Of course, I am not speaking here of ignoring blatant and unrepentant sin in someone. There are times and ways that this type of behavior must be dealt with but that is outside the context of this point.)

2. Pride or Elitism

The next factor that can bring death to a local church is spiritual pride. This is a sin that we can easily fall into, especially if the church has experienced God's presence and favor. There is a tendency to think that "we have arrived" and that we are special. This is wrong! We are part of every church. You and I are just as much a part of the church down the street as we are of our home church. We are not special. The only thing that makes us special is that we believe in Jesus; and even then, it is God's grace and Jesus' sacrifice that enables us to believe and be saved. This kind of pride can also grip a network of churches or a denomination.

3. Doctrinal Division

Another factor that brings death to a church is doctrinal divisions. Every church needs to be in good balance in its doctrines. If there is an overemphasis on certain doctrines then there will inevitably be an underemphasis on certain other doctrines.

Let me make a distinction between essential doctrines and what I call nonessential doctrines. As I see it, there are five essential Christian doctrines. They are the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, the death/burial/and resurrection of Jesus, the inerrancy of Scripture, and the universal sinfulness of man. These doctrines are the foundation stones of Christianity. It is essential that we believe all five in order to maintain the integrity of our Christian faith. To eliminate one or more of these doctrines erodes the foundation of Christianity.

But there are a whole lot of nonessential doctrines. By a nonessential doctrine I mean one over which reasonable Christians may differ based on his or her interpretation of Scripture. One example of a nonessential doctrine is the manner of water baptism. Some Christians believe and practice full water emersion. Others sprinkle water on the person being baptized. Now, I have my own personal opinion as to which method is more desirable or closer to Scripture. But I will not judge or look down on another Christian because he or she disagrees with me and does it in a way I would not.

Other examples of these nonessential doctrines are the baptism of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, eschatology (the study of the end times), and eternal security. Well intentioned, serious students of the Bible differ on these doctrines. Some people enjoy having a good discussion concerning the various Scripture that seem to buttress one particular point of view. And that's fine. But it is not alright to argue in a mean spirited way with one another just because someone doesn't believe exactly as you do.

The danger of this divisiveness is that you start to base your Christian fellowship on doctrine rather than on the person of Jesus Christ. In other words, you will only fellowship with other Christians who agree with the doctrines you hold. If you fall into this error, after a while you will notice that your circle of fellowship gets smaller and smaller! Finally, it will just be you and Jesus, which is not a good place to be.

I think of the analogy of children playing together. They get into an argument and you overhear it. Each child is very heated in asserting that he or she is right. But to you, as the adult, the whole argument seems silly, doesn't it? Well, I think a lot of our doctrinal arguments must seem a little like that to our heavenly Father as He looks down on us!

Now let me distinguish between reasonable differences of doctrine and false doctrine. When I say we

must be tolerant of one another's doctrinal differences, I am not speaking of false doctrine. By false doctrine, I mean doctrines that are clearly unbiblical. As Christians, we are to reject false doctrines in no uncertain terms while still endeavoring to love the person who holds these false doctrines. Some examples of these false doctrines are Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, spiritualism, and so on. These people believe in unbiblical doctrines and they are just plain wrong. These are false religions.

4. Control/Manipulation

Excessive control or manipulation in a church will bring death to that body. This type of control usually comes from the leaders in the pulpit. Manipulation is just another form of control but it is usually a little more subtle. Both are wrong and no leader should allow himself or herself to be tempted by these sins. They may work for a while, but eventually God will say, "Enough!" and allow the church to move into darkness.

5. Sin in a Church

Sin in a church will cause it to die. But you say, "Brother Murphy, that doesn't make sense. We all sin. Every church is full of sinners who sin!" And of course, I agree with you. We are all sinners. But the kind of sin I am talking about here is that sin which permeates the church, and which most often has a stronghold on the leadership. These sins can be of a sexual nature, gossip, lying, and so on. If there are these kinds of sins permeating the body, the church will eventually experience death. God simply won't honor that kind of sin indefinitely, either in an individual or in a church.

6. Politics or a Social Cause

No matter how well intentioned the church may be in getting involved in politics or a social cause, an overemphasis on anything but the Gospel of Jesus Christ will bring death to that church. We are called on to preach the Gospel. It is the person of Jesus Christ and His Word that brings life.

Unfortunately, many local pastors lead their people into what I call "the Gospel plus. . ." And that plus can be anything. For example, it can be trying to make one political party of a region or nation "God's party." I recently heard one preacher here in America admonish the church concerning an overemphasis on politics. He said, "Forget the right wing and the left wing. . .the bird is DEAD." In other words, don't look to anything, or any person, but Jesus for life. If you do, the church and your own personal Christian walk will suffer.

Of course we are to be good responsible citizens of our nation and world. We should vote when given the

opportunity and we should make the effort to stay informed about the world around us. And most importantly, we should pray for our leaders. Remember Paul's admonition to pray for those in authority over us. He said, "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone--for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. (1 Tim 2:1,2 NIV)

7. Wrong Foundation

The last factor we will analyze that can bring death to a church is if it is built on the wrong foundation. There is only one foundation any life-giving church is built on and that is the person of Jesus Christ. A church built on a wrong foundation will grow only so strong and then it will decline. I have been in churches that were built on the personality of the pastor. That may work for a while and the church may experience growth for a season. But what happens to that church if the pastor becomes ill, falls into sin, leaves for another ministry, or dies?

The best pastors are the ones who raise their people up under the personality of Jesus. Then when he or she leaves, the next pastor can come in, preach the gospel, and the church and its members continue to experience life in Christ.

What Brings Life to A Church?

Now that we have examined several of the major factors that bring death to a church, let us look at the things that will bring life to a church and its members.

1. Consistently Teach the Word of God

No church will truly enter into the light of Christ unless it is well taught. Careful teaching from the pulpit, all Sunday School classes, Bible studies, etc. is a must. A healthy church must be consistently taught the word of God and be Bible centered.

The danger today is to teach **need** centered doctrines. By need centered I mean to teach and preach answers for the human needs of the people. I refer to these as the "how to" teachings. "How to have a successful marriage," "how to control your anger" "how to prosper," the list is endless.

The congregation must be taught biblical principles. Then they can apply these biblical principles to the human needs in their lives. Of course this will only work if the people are taught obedience to the word as well. In other words, first you teach them the Word of God, then you show them how it applies to their lives, and then you teach them to obey these principles. Every healthy, life-giving church teaches its people to put God's word into practice. Paul said, "For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who **obey** the law

who will be declared righteous." (Rom 2:13 NIV, emphasis added.)

2. True Disciples of Jesus Christ

John 8:31,32 states,

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teachings, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (NIV)

These are powerful verses and a clear directive from our Lord Jesus. Notice the true disciple test, "**If** you hold to my teachings." In other words, we cannot be true disciples of Jesus unless we learn and follow the teachings of Jesus. And note that it is on that basis that we will really know the truth that sets us free.

The objective of a healthy church must be to make the people within the church true disciples of Jesus. It is the leadership's job to teach others to hear and obey the voice of the Lord.

Certainly a good stable Christian should have disciples. Jesus said, "go and make disciples of all nations." (See Matt 28:19) These disciples may be our own children, friends, neighbors, or younger Christians at our home church or elsewhere. The only question is whose disciples are they? If they are disciples of any other than Jesus, we have not done our job.

3. A Praying Church

A life-giving church is always a praying church. If I could only say one thing to any church, it would be to pray, pray, and then pray some more. I believe God is calling His church into prayer as never before, at least in my lifetime. Prayer should be emphasized from the pulpit and demonstrated by the leadership.

God wants intercessors. And usually people must be taught to be intercessors. I believe God calls some into the ministry of intercession, but even they need to be taught.

I define intercessory prayer as praying for issues and/or people not necessarily related to self. In other words, it is to intercede in prayer for others. These others may include family members, friends, or local entities such as your home church. But God also wants to broaden our vision in prayer so that we learn to intercede on behalf of cities, nations, denominations, the worldwide church, and the lost. A truly mature intercessor can instantly begin to pray into the heavenlies on behalf of a situation anywhere in the world.

As a local church matures in prayer, there is prayer going on at several different levels. There is the general prayer that the newer Christians are involved in. This tends to be more narrowly focused. But these people are learning what it is to pray and should be encouraged.

Then there are the true intercessors who seem to be

able to pray right into the heart of God on a matter. Remember the Grandma Greer story at the beginning of this article? It is these people that you may hear groaning and travailing before the throne of God into the night until they have a breakthrough. "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express." (Rom 8:26 NIV)

This type of intercessory prayer is vital to a healthy life giving church. We need these intercessors to pray, to model intercessory prayer to others, and to teach others how to enter into this type of prayer.

4. Fruit of the Spirit

Galation 5:22,23 lists for us the fruit of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. No church can be really life-giving without this fruit of the spirit permeating its members.

It is this fruit that gives that deep peace and joy to each member of the church. And it is this fruit that draws others to the church. The fruit of the spirit is what energizes Christians to preach the gospel, to reach out to each other and to the lost, and to mature in Christ.

Let me make a distinction here between the fruit of the spirit and the gifts of the Holy Spirit enumerated in 1 Corinthians, 12. The gifts of the Spirit are wonderful and should be sought after as the Scripture tells us. But they are **given** by the Lord. Thus there is no personal merit in receiving a gift.

But the fruit of the spirit is different. It is grown. Every Christian can have all the fruit listed in Galatians, 5. It is produced in a life that is lived after the character of Christ. It is Jesus molded in us. Spiritual fruit is the hallmark of the mature Christian. And it is the hallmark of a mature church.

5. Openness

There is one more, simple thing that gives the Holy

Spirit great liberty to work in a church or group of believers. That thing is an openness and honesty among the people. I recall a great openness during the Charismatic revival here in America. More than once I heard a young person stand up in the midst of the assembly and ask for prayer because, "I've been really bothered with lust this last week" or, "I have resentment in my heart toward a brother. Will you pray with me that I can overcome it?"

If a church does not have this kind of openness then in one sense there is hypocrisy, or at least a sense of unreality. God wants His people to be real with one another. That is how we share one another's burdens and rejoice in one another's victories. Of course, it goes without saying that good judgment and discretion is needed in a willingness to share. When it is done with modesty and wisdom, God always honors both the one who shares and those who listen, encourage, and pray.

Conclusion

A life-giving church is not a perfect church. Indeed there is no such thing as a perfect church. If you ever find one, don't join it or it won't be perfect anymore!

Rather a life-giving church is a place where people are being made whole, sanctified, and becoming more and more Christ like. It is this kind of church that draws the lost, the backslidden, and the committed believer alike. It is also this kind of a church that receives God's favor and results in abundant life!

Lord, we ask You to give us the wisdom to recognize anything in our church that brings death. Grant us the strength to not allow it to take root. Grant us also the wisdom to practice those things that bring life. Empower us by Your grace to be life-givers to Your church.

1. The Art of Intercession, Kenneth E. Hagin, P O Box 50126, Tulsa, OK 74150, Page 56-57.

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