

BodyLife Past Article Archive

Freedom is Only the Beginning

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While in St. Louis in April after an outing looking to help some of the homeless in downtown a group of brothers took me to stand under the arch at 9:00 at night. We ascended the hill it sits on next to the Mississippi River just as a thunder storm made its approach on the city. As we stood there lightning flashed across the skyline, racing through the clouds then suddenly spearing the earth with its jagged fingers while the thunder rolled in the background. It was one of those rare moments when the awesome beauty of God's creation literally takes your breath away and its memory hangs on for weeks afterwards.

As great as times like that are, they pale in comparison to those moments when God lets someone see just how free they are in his love. Sometimes it comes with a flood of tears and at others with a simple chuckle and a shake of the head. I've seen it happen while sharing through a portion of Scripture, or sitting down with someone to talk or to pray.

Somehow, as only his Spirit can do, God allows them to see that they are carrying far too much baggage in their Christian walk, robbing themselves of the simplicity of knowing God as their loving Father. Some have labored for months or years under the oppressive burden earning God's approval, trying to please abusive leadership, or failing the expectations others have held for them. The moment God's love works its way past all those things and captures them in his sheer delight is a moment that knows no equal in creation.

Once people discover just how much he loves them, and that love is motive enough to allow God to do everything in their life that he wants to do, you can see the weight lift from their shoulders. You can see in their eyes the renewed hope of enjoying again their relationship with Father.

Recently someone wrote me with huge letters, all in caps. "I GET IT!!!! I FINALLY GET IT!!!!" I could see them in my mind's eye and laughed out loud as I read. What is better than that?

I still remember one of my moments like that almost six years ago. Having tried to fit myself into a calling God had not given me (nor anyone else for that matter!), and having tried to find a Christian response to people who were playing power games God wouldn't let me play. While I was walking through a park he spoke to me: "If you never teach another sermon, write another book, or spend one more moment counseling a broken life or witnessing to a lost soul, I will love you just as much!" What a moment! I never realized how much of my efforts as a believer had been wasted at trying to earn approval he had already given me. It had devoured my relationship with him and twisted my relationships with others.

That moment of revelation freed me to make the decisions he asked of me--even though many people I knew at the time would reject me for it. It also allowed me to reorder my entire life, no longer trying to earn his affection, but simply living in its reality every day.

Not the End-all!

As spectacular as God's freedom is, however, it is not the end of the journey. In fact, it is only the beginning.

Don't forget, it was freedom that allowed the Prodigal Son to leave his father's house and strike out on his own. He used his freedom as an excuse to indulge his flesh, not knowing how much it would betray him and leave him broken in a pig-pen of self-doubt, loneliness and desperate need.

God's freedom doesn't make us his disciples, it only opens the door for us to decide whether we want to be or not. I'm convinced that without the freedom to be authentic and to make choices based on our own free will rather than the pressure of others, true discipleship cannot begin.

It is the environment Paul protected at all costs. He already knew all too well how our religious tendencies make us great rule-makers. It takes our own best intentions for others and makes part of a conspiracy that actually denies others the life they are looking for in God's.

So when believers in Galatia sought to institute a set of "New Testament principles" that would rob God's people of the freedom to hear Jesus and trust him, Paul rushed into the breach asking why they would trade the simplicity of relationship with Jesus for rules and regulations that they would have to keep by their own effort? Why indeed? Wasn't loving Jesus enough for them? Obviously not for everyone!

We have every reason to believe that there were Galatians who were using the excuse of freedom to indulge their flesh and conspire in their own destruction. But even in the face of those who would abuse freedom, Paul still spoke up for the necessity of it if people are really going to be changed by God. Freedom is the only incubator in which God's Spirit can thrive to transform those who want to walk with him.

Though freedom is the trailhead to the depths of God's heart, it is also the trailhead away from it. Scary isn't it? The choice is ours. Freedom itself is no virtue. Only if we use it to engage him in ever-deepening friendship will freedom be the blessing God intended.

The Fellowship of Freedom

"You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love." The freedom to do whatever I want isn't God's kind of freedom

at all. His freedom invites us to experience the depth of his love, both in our touch with him, and in our life with others.

Just because many of us have been manipulated and abused by those who claimed to be more knowledgeable (or more anointed), doesn't mean we have to now make it on our own. We are as much a prisoner reacting to hurt as we were when we were bound by it. That's true of sin and of unhealthy relationships with other believers. While it may make us more aware of how well-intentioned relationships can turn destructive, it doesn't mean we throw out body life altogether.

Father has some incredible brothers and sisters out there who are discovering who he is and can encourage you along the journey even as you encourage them. At first blush they may seem difficult to find, but searching them out is well worth it. Whenever Scripture talks about my ability to know God as an individual, it makes clear that our best view is a dim one, as if through a darkened glass. It is only through his body that the fullness of Jesus is revealed. (Eph 1:23)

Of course we've got to define that term as Jesus did. He wasn't referring to the numerous groups who get together and name themselves the First Something-Or-Other Church of Wherever-We-Are. He was referring to other believers who are on the journey of knowing him. We all know that trying to fellowship with people who are more in love with religion than God is a near impossibility and often find it distracting and discouraging to God's work in our lives.

Freedom invites us to fellowship with those who are on the journey of knowing the Living God and understand how God works in our lives--not through manipulation and control but revelation of himself. When I find people like that I always come away strengthened, encouraged, and enlightened in what God is doing in my life.

Just because God has set you free, doesn't mean you have to walk this journey alone. If you just want to see what you see, you're free to live that way. But I want so much more. I want to know what Jesus is showing others as well. That may come in a serendipitous conversation Jesus sets up for me or through regular contact with people I get to be with more consistently. Of course, I think the best expression of this comes when people are willing to share intentional community together as they learn to listen to God together while they encourage and serve each other in the journey. Unfortunately the latter is difficult to find in this day and age. But don't stop looking and asking God how he wants to connect you with others in that way.

How does that happen? It can only begin first in our relationship with God. Over the centuries we have been taught that our relationship with God rises out of body life, when it works just the opposite of that. No wonder true fellowship is so rare. If we don't find our own relationship with God, we'll merely use others as a substitute for what we're not getting from him, disappointing ourselves and frustrating them

in the process.

That's why God is calling people in our day back to himself. For too long we have looked to groups or gifted 'leaders' to provide what Father wanted to give us. You may not find many others in the early days of this process that can validate what God has birthed deep in your heart. That's because he wants to be the center of your life first. However, as he draws you closer to himself he will begin to connect you to healthy relationships with fellow-travelers that will encourage your journey without impinging on his freedom.

The Marks of a Free People

Relational Christianity is not primarily a different way of doing church. It is a different way of thinking about God and his family that will allow you to truly experience his life directly and alongside other followers. I don't know of anyone growing in a relationship with Jesus that doesn't hunger for friends who really want to share the journey with them.

But once people have been hurt by those who are willing to use God's words to manipulate others, it is easy to see why they mistakenly equate body life with a compromise of freedom. But that really isn't so.

As excited as I am about the current trend to gather in homes to discover relational life together, just because a group meets in a home doesn't make them relational. And just because a group meets in a facility doesn't mean they're not. While I do think the home is the most natural place for us to discover life as a family, ultimately what facility we use is far less important than a host of other factors.

I travel among various expressions of the body of Christ regularly and find people I connect with instantly and others that seem forced and ultimately never become fruitful. I've noticed some common ingredients in relationships that spawn a healthy body life. Though I often befriend those who don't understand many of these priorities, my greatest times of fellowship arise where people understand the nature of how God works and the freedom essential to true growth. Here are some of the signs of people who understand body life as God designed it:

The living presence of Jesus is their central focus. He is the only attraction and the only voice people are encouraged to follow. They don't boast about the glories of their 'worship', the giftedness of their 'teacher', or even how 'relational' their priorities are. They only want to know him better and follow him more closely while helping others do the same.

They value authenticity over conformity. They would rather see the rough edges in someone's life than have them put on an image. They allow people to feel what they feel, share what they think and question what they don't understand without being judged, silenced or called independent or unsubmitted. Blind trust is never sought, nor are people encouraged to 'act' better. They're more concerned about what's

really going on inside you than having you look better on the outside.

They trust grace-based transformation. Groups steeped in religion only know behavioral modification as the tool for personal change. If you'll try harder you'll get better. Those on the journey recognize that only Jesus can transform a life and see more fruit in encouraging each other to know his love more completely than to pressure people to outward change.

They are more concerned about relationships than meetings. Isn't it interesting that Jesus never seemed to have held a meeting that bears any resemblance to most of what we do in what we call church today? He got to know people at a heart level and spoke Father's wisdom into the most mundane moments. His most effective exchanges with people came in homes, walks by the sea or even at a well outside Samaria. As wonderful as it is to gather together for prayer, worship or learning, without relationships that carry through the week we can't really share the journey. Encouragement is a daily reality. I've been in home groups that have met for years where the people don't really enjoy each other and can't even carry on a normal conversation around a dinner table.

They are as honest in their struggles as they are in their joys. People who play one-upsmanship games, trying to convince others of how much they know and how together their lives are haven't the foggiest idea what it is to know the Living God. Among them you'll find far more gossip about the needs of others than confession about their own. But those who are growing to know God would rather expose the truth about their journey than try to impress each other with a false front of success. I love people who know they haven't arrived yet, and who are in touch with the reality of their own doubts and struggles.

They are learning to depend on God's agenda, work and power, over human preference, effort and ingenuity. They've given up trying to do things for God, and are nuts about doing things with him. Like me, they've messed it up enough, hurt enough people and fallen too far short too many times to keep trying to get God to bless what they want him to do. They only want to tune in to what he is doing and cooperate with him in it.

They are more interested in following God than getting their needs met. Look how divided Father's family is in our day because people prefer worship a certain way, being led by a certain person or because the program fits their family best. The way of the cross is not to find a way to get all of our wants met, but to follow the Lamb wherever he goes. Ultimately what makes us most comfortable and secure in ourselves may be the worst thing for us. Following his ever-present voice is the only way to know for sure.

They know that worship isn't something we do to start a gathering, but how we live in God every day. Rather than being frustrated at everything they wish they could change about their lives, they are simply learning to be grateful for what he is doing every day.

They understand that we are all part of the body and desire environments where interaction happens

rather than an up-front performance by a few. The living reality of God's people is that everyone has a part, and they would never want to see a few gifts glorified at the expense of everyone else simply being who God has made them to be. They have the ability to celebrate the unique contribution of each of God's kids, from the oldest to the youngest, male and female, without regard to status or station in society.

They trust God's ability to connect them with people and don't force themselves on anyone. I can be with some people for ten seconds and know God has brought us together for some purpose. I've known others I've tried to build a relationship with that never seems to work. I don't really need to fuss over that, but trust what he is doing to knit his body together the way he wants.

They are not exclusive about God's working and realize that what he is doing in the world and even in their own locality is far larger than they can see at any one moment and cherish opportunities to meet others who hunger for the same God they do even if they aren't part of their same group.

Having been loved by God, they want to help others taste that love as well. They are learning to serve others in the most mundane ways and enjoy seeing others discover the same freedom in God that they enjoy.

Of course even a list like this can become another tool of bondage if people try to live up to it. These are not qualifications you should emulate, but simple observations as to what Godly fellowship can look like.

Don't limit your relationships only to those who have it all together here, because God will bring lots of people across your path on any given day who are no where close to understanding the journey. But if you want to know the depths of what living in God's family is about, this will give you some idea.

Where you find these kind of friendships, cherish them, and make the choice to invest some time cultivating them. Where you don't, ask Father to bring about those connections in his way and in his time. Your journey will be all that much more fulfilling.

There's nothing like it in all the world, when free people in Christ learn how to love each other without all the bondage of religious obligation. It is some of the richest fruit of God's freedom. Only in freedom will we discover what true friendship really is.

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