

# Detoxing From Church

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## Beginning the Process

Back in February, as Mark and I were praying and talking about beginning a missional community, I emailed a guy on the other side of the US who had already begun one of these communities. Here are a couple of things he said in our correspondences.

"Here's a strong statement: most evangelicals, including Vineyard people, are addicted to church culture. Take away their Sunday service, their bible studies, prayer meetings, and five-song worship teams and they start having withdrawals quickly. I think that it is a necessary part of this process to have a detox time... I would suggest a time of at least a year of not doing the 'normal' church stuff. For us, during that time of detachment we only did a few things together – ask hard questions and eat. Those were our corporate disciplines."

In another email he reinforced the point:

"Let me reiterate from my last email that one of the most beneficial things you might do is take a break from all things church for a while. This may seem really counterproductive, especially when you start having people wanting to be a part of your community immediately. But if your aim is to get people to begin thinking outside the bounds of cultural Christianity, some significantly radical action is required."

When I first read these comments, I knew he was stating something profound. What I didn't anticipate was the extent of my own addiction to the contemporary church and the painful detox process I would experience. What I'm coming face to face with through the process is the non-authenticity and impotence of my own faith. Let me explain.

## My Addiction To “Church”

In the Americanized church, the organization is designed to turn life and faith into a simple prepackaged consumer product. This is what John Drane calls the “McDonaldization of the Church.”

- I need to worship. So I go to my local church, which, if it's cutting-edge, has a worship pastor on staff that prepares an inspiring "worship experience" for me on a weekly basis. One local church I know advertises its worship services on its marquee, "We worship five times, three ways, one God." (Hello! Is it me or does that just sound wrong?)
- I also need to fellowship with my fellow Christians. So I go to my local church to attend a programmed version of community that provides a surface-level contact with people around some form of activity at my convenience. If I need more fellowship, I go to a small group, usually focused on the dynamic personality of the small group leader or on the subject matter I feel I need to better my life. But again, this is at my convenience and fairly optional if my schedule becomes too demanding.

- I need discipleship and Christian growth. So I go to my local church to attend Sunday services, Bible studies and small groups where someone opens the Bible and tells me what it says and how it should apply to my life. I also have the option of learning "practical" topics such as how to be a good spouse, parent, employee, leader, steward, etc.
- I need to serve. So I go to my local church and participate in a program where I use my time and skills in a fairly convenient manner to help others. For the most part, it's fairly safe. And if I'm a volunteer, my participation is completely based on my schedule.
- I need to be engaged in mission. So I go to my local church to connect to their evangelistic ministry and their missions program. Every so often I might volunteer to hand out sodas or serve coffee in a convenient and semi-relational form of "reaching people" for Christ. I might also give money to local missionaries the church supports and maybe participate in a weekend mission trip.
- I need a children's program to educate my kids. So I go to my local church to place my children in the care of Sunday school teachers and youth pastors who will provide the spiritual and moral foundation for their Christian growth via an age-relevant program.
- I need purpose for my life. So I go to my local church, hoping to find a leader with a vision big enough to inspire me. Then I sacrifice my time, energy, and money to become involved in the leader's vision so I can build something big for God with him. New programs. New buildings. New projects. New groups. New services. New converts. New church plants. New missions. More and more and more vision to give my life a reason to exist.

To make matters worse, as a pastor on staff, all of my relationships and ministries are mediated through my title and position in the organization. An unhealthy symbiotic relationship occurs between myself and the organization as my life and faith becomes synonymous with the success of the organization. If we, as leaders, can design an organization that satisfies the consumer needs of a couple hundred people... well, then we must be doing something right in God's kingdom. And the more people we reach, then the better we are. So I preach, lead worship, administrate, counsel, teach, organize, recruit, train, write, and do practically everything as a "pastor" of an organization. Eventually my identity becomes distorted by what I do for the church. What's worse, my role and effectiveness as a staff pastor are intimately connected to my own formation and personal development. This continues to blur the line between my personal life and faith and my abilities as a leader of an organization.

## **Detoxing From "Church"**

Now strip all of that away. Imagine what you would have left after you remove from your life everything connected with the organizational church. I mean everything. I've discovered the hard way that living most of my adult life in cultural Christianity has formed my entire identity as a Christian. And when everything in my

life connected with the church is gone, including sixteen years of professional ministry, I'm confronted with the true raw status my personal faith.

Now I'm going to say something harsh: In order to BE the Church, we need to leave the church. In other words, in order to truly become God's people as he intended, we must abandon our cultural version of organizational church. The application of this statement might vary, but it must happen. And as we abandon the church to become the Church, we will go through a detox period.

Why such drastic measures? Involvement in an organizational consumer-driven church blinds us to the real state of our lives. By participating in this kind of church I can enjoy inspiring worship, biblical exposition of Scripture, fellowship, small groups, kids programs, service projects, missions, discipleship, books, radio broadcasts, multimedia presentations and virtually anything else I need in my spiritual life. In fact, I can enjoy an entirely alternative lifestyle where Christianity is prepackaged for me – books, music, entertainment, news reports, advice, etc. And as I consume it, it forms a façade over the real condition of my life. The rub is when my true condition actually bubbles to the surface and I find myself troubled, discontent or miserable. Then the church or the pastor or the worship team has lost the “anointing” and I must find a new organizational church that will provide me what I need to feel better about who I am.

In this distorted perspective, I fail to recognize that the true state of my life and faith is who I am and what I do in relation to God and his kingdom, not who I am and what I do in relation to the church.

## **Moving From Being Churchied To Being The Church**

Detoxing from any kind of substance abuse is only a means to a much greater end. It is the essential process toward a healthy life, free from oppressive addiction. The same is true for one who detoxes from the church. Remember, we must leave the church in order to BE the Church. We must stop being churchied and start being the Church.

What is the Church? It is a community of people who are each following Christ into his divine life and love here on earth. They are learning how to become by grace what Christ is by nature – the full and complete emptying of self in order to participate fully in God's kingdom so as to be a redemptive force that recreates all aspects of life and creation (*cf.* Phil. 2:5-16; Col. 1:19; Rom. 8:19-21). The Church is a group of Christ-followers who are sent as Jesus was sent (*cf.* John 20:21). In this way, the Church is the continuation of Christ's incarnation on earth.

These and other biblical aspects of the Church run counter to cultural Christianity and its addictive prepackaged consumerist version of the church. Being the Church is about who I am and who I am becoming as I follow Christ individually and in a community. Being the Church is becoming like Christ so together, I and other Christ-followers may continue his incarnation on and to the world.

A primary difference between being churchied and being the Church is how I approach the community. Being churchied assumes the organizational church is designed from the perspective that I am a consumer of religious goods and service.

Therefore, I am expected to participate in the church's programs chiefly to receive and consume. It's the organization's responsibility to program, coordinate and provide what I need for my spiritual satisfaction.

But being the Church requires me to take full responsibility to follow Christ and Christ alone into his life. I can't say this enough: We are to become by grace what Jesus is by nature. And he did not have an organization mediating his life and faith. He had a relationship with the Father by walking in the Spirit, expressed through a life of spiritual disciplines. Then he invites us to learn from him how to develop the same kind of intimate relationship with the Father in the same way (*cf.* Matt. 11:27-30).

The Christian community is then made up of Christ-followers who encourage, challenge, pray, minister, learn, honor, love and spur each other on. But it is not the community's nor the community leaders' responsibility to program or lead others into divine life. Only Christ can do that. So while my needs remain the same, I must look not to an organization, but to Christ alone to lead me into his divine life and love.

- I still need to worship, but I am to worship first as an individual follower of Christ daily. I am a priest, offering all of my life back to God in constant prayer, joy and thankfulness (*cf.* 1 Thess. 5:16-18). Then from the overflow of my personal worship, I join in corporate worship with others who also worship God on a daily basis.
- I still need to fellowship, but now I must actually alter my schedule and hang out with people in real ways – over meals, over coffee, at my home or theirs. This also means that there isn't a program or an event to generate fellowship. I have to initiate. I have to be prepared to discuss life and faith in real ways that encourage and build each other up. I have to be prepared to be used by Christ to pray, listen, minister, laugh, cry, confront, encourage, etc., all on the leading of the Spirit and not at the cue of a leader or scheduled time in a service.
- I still need discipleship and growth, but now I must walk with Christ, by grace in the Spirit through a life of spiritual discipline. I must follow Christ into a curriculum of spiritual disciplines that transforms my inner world into Christ's inner life. As such, I must study the Bible. I must pray. I must meditate. I must take my own personal retreats. I must read. I must educate myself. I must become theologically astute and spiritually vibrant. I must discover God's will for my life and not some canned version from a pastor who talks at me for 45 minutes each week. I must put the same or more energy and time into my personal faith than I do into my occupation, education, and entertainment.
- I still need to serve, but now I must look for the opportunities in my life. I can't enjoy the safety of a program with other Christians. I must view my entire life as service to the people I live with and live around. I must discover the poor and marginalized in my life and be Christ to them. I can't just give money to the organization to do it for me.
- I still need to engage in mission, but now I must actually BE a witness of Christ's eternal divine life to the people I live with, work with, play with and

shop with. I must actually be a living, albeit flawed, example of divine life on earth. I must be able to say, "When you see me, you see the Father." Then I must view my family, my neighborhood, my job, and my entire life as my mission field. Not in the imperialistic way the church has done evangelism and missions, but in the winsome, educated and Spirit-led way that drew thousands to Jesus when he walked this earth.

- I still need to raise my children in life and faith, but now I carry the lion's share of the responsibility. As their parent, my faith and life form their faith and life. I must learn to dialogue at their level. I must lead them in prayer, in worship, in fellowship, in spiritual disciplines, in service, in mission, in play.
- I still need purpose for my life, but now I learn from Christ how to be like him so I can live like him – completely toward God for the sake of the world.

## **The Proper Role of Community**

Now I know having read everything so far, it is easy to conclude, "Then I don't need community." That couldn't be farther from the truth. What we don't need is the organizational consumer church as a provider of religious goods and services. The consumer ethic of our surrounding culture has infected the organizational church turning pastors into entrepreneurs and CEOs and turning Christians into consumers.

Once we understand what it means to be the people of God and to shoulder the personal responsibility of transformation into Christlikeness, then we begin to realize we need authentic Christian community more than ever. Let me explain.

In *Renovation of the Heart*, Dallas Willard lays out a general pattern for personal transformation. He states:

If we are to be spiritually formed in Christ, we must have and must implement the appropriate vision, intention, and means... If this VIM pattern [vision, intention, and means] is not put in place properly and held there, Christ simply will not be formed in us.<sup>1</sup>

This pattern for spiritual formation is a fine balance between the individual and the community. First, the vision essential for transformation is a vision of life now and forever in God's will, partaking in the divine nature (*cf.* 2 Pet 1:4) and participating by our actions in what God is doing now in our lifetime on earth.<sup>2</sup> This vision is given to humanity by God, revealed to God's covenant people, the Jews, and given fullest expression in Jesus. As such, a personal vision for life in the kingdom comes directly from the Living Christ, but is also mediated through God's covenant community, the Church.

Second, the intention for spiritual formation is brought to completion only by a decision to fulfill or carry through with the intention. In this case, the intention to obey the model and teachings of Jesus must be "sealed" with an individual's decision to actually obey Christ in all of life. The intention and decision, which lie in the realm and responsibility of the individual, can only be formed and sustained by a forceful vision, which comes directly from Christ and is supplemented by the community.

Willard makes a significant point in this area, stating:

Our belief and feelings cannot be changed by a choice. We cannot just choose to have different beliefs or feelings. But we do have some liberty to take in different ideas and information and to think about things in different ways. We can choose to take in the Word of God, and when we do that, beliefs and feelings will be steadily pulled in a godly direction.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, the will is moved by insight into truth and reality, which in turn, evokes emotion appropriate to a new state of the will. This is how real inward change occurs. The consumer-based church does the exact opposite, trying to motivate and inspire people to choose to believe and do things they really don't believe. This approach does not result in any lasting spiritual formation.

Finally, the vision and intention to follow and obey Christ will naturally lead to seeking out and applying the means to that end. Scripture and church history are replete with the appropriate means for spiritual formation. The key is to target the aspects of our humanity – the thoughts, feelings, will, social relations and bodily inclinations – with the abundant individual and corporate spiritual disciplines available to us so that we become people who naturally and easily embody Christlikeness.<sup>4</sup> In this way, the statement, “Where there is a will, there is a way,” rings true for spiritual formation.

To illustrate this process, Dallas makes an interesting statement, “Any successful plan for spiritual formation, whether for the individual or group, will in fact be significantly similar to the Alcoholics Anonymous program.”<sup>5</sup> In AA, the participant is envisioned with the potential new life of sobriety and freedom from addiction that is available to him or her. The vision is then pursued by an intention to realize it, actuated by a decision. The means are then applied to produce the desirable state.

The program illustrates the important balance between the individual and the community. The individual must possess the vision, supplemented by the relational structure of the AA group. The intention and its accompanying decision rest solely on the individual. The means are then carried out primarily by the individual throughout his or her daily life, supported by the relationships and structure of the local AA community. The point is that as important as the community is, success and failure of AA in an individual's life rests primarily on the individual's intention to follow through daily. The community exists to support the individual's pursuit of sobriety.

The Christian community's role is very similar. Willard states that God's plan for spiritual formation through the local Christian community is threefold: First, create an ethos and culture that places apprenticeship to Christ in all the minute aspects of life as central. This creates the necessary vision to fuel the individual's intention. Second, immerse apprentices at all levels of growth in the Trinitarian presence of God through the community's structure and life. In this way, the community's primary purpose is to encounter the Trinitarian presence and hold people up within it. Finally, arrange for the inner transformation of people in such a way that doing the words and deeds of Christ is not the focus but the natural outcome or side effect.<sup>6</sup>

This creates a community of Christ's apprentices in which each member is pursuing Christ, spending time with him in the course of their daily life in order to learn how to be like him. When the community gathers, all relationships are then

mediated through Christ. Willard describes this Christocentric community in *The Divine Conspiracy*:

In the spiritual community there is never any immediate relationship between human beings. Another way of saying this is that among those who live as Jesus' apprentices, there are no relationships that omit the presence and action of Jesus. We never go "one on one"; all relationships are mediated through him. I never think simply of what I am going to do with you, to you, or for you. I think of what we, Jesus and I, are going to do with you, to you, and for you. Likewise, I never think of what you are going to do with me, to me, and for me, but of what will be done by you and Jesus with me, to me, and for me.<sup>7</sup>

In this way, Christ fills all of our needs for life and formation as we follow him (*cf.* 2 Pet. 1:3), not by participating in and consuming the organizational church's programs. As I follow the resurrected Christ with others who are following him, he meets us and ministers to us through all the members of the community.

## **Conclusion**

As our understanding of being the Church changes, the role of proper Christian community changes. We discover a need for authentic community more than any of us realized. As a follower of Christ, I constantly need my fellow Christ-followers. I cannot enter into Christ's divine life and love apart from Christ-mediated community with them. His life and love are expressed in fully giving myself to them (*cf.* Eph. 5:1-2). Therefore, I need to be with my fellow Christ-followers so I can serve them, love them and pour out on them everything I am becoming in Christ for their benefit. And they need to do that for me. Together, fully giving ourselves to each other, we continue on into Christlikeness.

This kind of Christian community is essential to grow into Christ's life. Christ is formed in each of his apprentices as they engage his abundant grace in daily living through a life of spiritual disciplines. As each Christ-follower shoulders his or her responsibility of following Jesus into the life he has mastered and alone can share, all are then supported by Christ as each member brings Christ being formed in them to the community.

Only Christ is the source of divine life. Each member must follow Jesus daily to learn his divine life. Each member must shoulder the responsibility to work out his or her salvation and not expect the community or its leaders to do it for him or her. In Christ, we can learn together, serve together, grow together, love together, etc. But we must first and foremost follow Christ into his life. And to do this we must abandon the distorted and addictive version of the consumer church in order to be free to become Christ's Church.

1.-Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting On the Character of Christ*, (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 85.

2.-Willard, 87.

3.-Willard, 248.

4.-Willard, 89.

5.-Willard, 85.

6.-See Willard, 240-251 for a fuller discussion of these aspects.

7.-Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1998), 236