

The Nature of the Church

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1 Corinthians 14:26-33

John 3:7-10

Acts 16:25-34

When I was about 8 I had a very good friend called John. John came from a very musical family and one day when I went to his place he played on the piano the theme song to our favourite TV series “Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea” Till that moment I had had no real interest in playing a musical instrument and hadn’t even thought about it. But that one moment of inspiration and joy gave me a vision of a whole new world – one that I could possibly participate in and so I went home and told my mother I wanted to learn the piano. Of course I had visions of playing like John the next week. And then I started piano lessons and with them came practice and exams and discipline. To say I hated it wouldn’t be quite accurate but it comes close. Still I could never get rid of the hope that had been ignited that day at my friend’s place and so I worked at it and I became a reasonable piano player. And two things got me there. One was the hours of practice, the system of learning which was essential to develop the strength and coordination needed to play but the second was the vision, the hope, the inspiration my friend had given about what could be done with those skills. That was the driving force, the life behind all I achieved.

Today I am wanting to ask about the nature of the Church and I am going to say that when we look at the Church we find a similar kind of two-foldness operating there. This ‘two-foldness’ parallels in many

ways the two natures of Christ – human and divine and it is vital that we have some understanding of how these two sides of the church operate. Now you might call these two sides, organic and organisational; you might call them divine and human as with Christ; you might even call them the body and the soul. Whatever the case the Church requires both to be the Church.

What, then, is the nature of the Church? What should we look for in a church that is working as it should? In my experience we are usually faced with two competing theories. The first is that the Church works by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. You really know a church is in the right territory when things are happening spontaneously. So in our scripture readings today we see the Spirit working spontaneously to convert the Philippian jailer and his whole family. That's the kind of church we want to see. Things moving, people coming to the Lord, people being convicted of their great need of God. And there are plenty of other examples of this in the NT. The Spirit at Pentecost, the leading of Peter to the Centurion's house in Damascus, the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch by Philip, the conversion of Paul and this is to say nothing of the ministry of Jesus.

The church is a Spiritual reality and it seems to work by the moving of the Spirit so effectively and so wonderfully throughout the New Testament. The Spirit breathes life into the Church. But there's another side to this story.

There's another kind of church which is clearly upheld in the scriptures and this is the church which is, for want of a better description '**in order.**' I have to confess that this was the kind of church our Presbyterian ancestors tended to like. You know, the 'no surprises' church – everything is expected and nothing is unexpected. The '**God**

don't rock the boat' church, the **'frozen chosen'** church! It's the church we all tend to shy away from – the institutional church or, at least, the **institutionalised** church. It's the church of order, the church of systems, the church of method, the church of work! And we might say surely not the biblical church and yet... this is the church we find Paul recommending in Corinthians when he says...

³²And the spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets, ³³for God is a God not of disorder but of peace.(1 Cor 14) and later on in the same passage...

⁴⁰but all things should be done decently and in order. (1 Cor 14)

'Decently and in order...' doesn't that sound so marvellous – so interesting, so appealing? No? And yet down through the ages since the birth of the Church so many great movements of God have been marked largely by the incredible organisational genius behind them.

The beginning of the monastic movement which contributed enormously to the growth and spread of Christianity throughout the West and East can be traced to the ascetics who looked to live a radical life of dependence on God by leaving civilisation and going into the desert to be alone. From the earliest times of the church individuals left their families and villages to imitate Jesus' 40 day fast and to spend time seeking God. Their life gave rise to another form of asceticism which emphasised a more communal approach to this life. This became the basis for the monastic movement where groups of men (monks) and women (nuns) lived in community and followed a special **rule of life**. These rules represented the flowering of the organisational side of the Church and the made available to people throughout Europe and

Asia a way to discover and follow the god of the Bible. Through these Rules Christianity underwent a massive revival.

The earliest complete rule we know of is that of Basil who lived from 330-379AD. His rule became the basis for the Eastern tradition of monastic life and it was also the rule from which St Benedict wrote his rule which became the standard of life for a monk in the West. St Benedict lived from 480-547AD and began what became known as the Benedictine system of Monasteries. St. Benedict contributed more than anyone else to the rise of monasticism in the West. His Rule was the foundational document for thousands of religious communities in the Middle Ages. To this day, The Rule of St. Benedict is the most common and influential Rule used by monasteries and monks, more than 1,400 years after its writing. Many consider that Benedict was the main Christianising influence which enabled Europe to recover from the fall of the Roman Empire and all this because of a **Rule** which created **order!**

A further example lies in the Ministries of the two great preachers of the great Awakening, George Whitefield and John Wesley. Of the two George is universally recognised as the greater preacher. From the very first time he preached he had the ability to communicate and to hold an audience spellbound with his oratory and his ability to tell stories. It was Whitefield who invented the strategy of taking preaching to the people and into the outdoors and who attracted audiences of somewhere between 20 and 30,000! His sermons were riveting, his oratory magical and his voice enormous. Wesley was a pale shadow by comparison and any estimate of the influence of these two eventually settles on Wesley as casting the longer shadow – why? Because Wesley insisted on organising his converts immediately into fellowships in

which a deliberate system of discipleship was injected. In the end for all his great gifts Whitefield left no lasting legacy whereas the Methodist denomination which John Wesley and his brother left is still going strong around the world and has been involved in numerous revivals since its inception.

No wonder Paul lays down the law in Corinthians insisting that their service of worship must first of all be ordered and peaceful. Order is a fundamental principle of Creation. Creation is the creating of order and this is clearly the picture we get when we look at Genesis.

¹In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ²Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. (Gen 1)

What was there in the beginning? Chaos – disorganisation – a mess. And how does God create? God brings **order** to the chaos.

What is the first tool given to humankind to combat sin? **The Law!** Order, clarity, organisation. What does Jesus bring? He brings... **order!**

¹⁷“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. (Matt 5)

⁴⁶ I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness.

Jesus comes to bring order, admittedly a **new** order, but order still the same. He's not even willing to abolish the law and prophets. He wants order.

And so we see this two sided nature operating in the Church. On the one hand you have a Church very much inspired and moving by the power of the Spirit. A power that cannot be controlled much less contained. A power that is spontaneous, surprising, unpredictable, impulsive, even, perhaps, random.

On the other hand you have scriptures that emphasise how important order for both Jesus and the early Church. It is not too much to say that order was absolutely imperative to the life of the Church and, in fact, much of the attraction of the early church was its ordered life because that brought a significant measure of security into the lives of people who had lived without such a thing virtually all their lives.

But how on earth do we hold these two in tension both in the Church **and** in our own lives? How does it work to have a Church that must be Spirit filled and Spirit led **and** be well ordered at the same time. Indeed, is it possible?

1. It is possible but it's not easy

Even Jesus said in His conversation with Nicodemus what is living by the Spirit must be born of the Spirit. In other words we must rely on God to build a Church where the Spirit and order are given equal voice. It is very easy to settle for what we are comfortable with whether it be the familiarity of order or the spontaneity of the Spirit. In this as in so many other things of God we must press in to a vision of the right balance, insisting on the one hand that we allow the Spirit freedom to do what the Spirit will do in our own lives and in

the Church while at the same time not neglecting the importance of order and organisation.

2. We must be open to both and respect both.

Revival is a word many of us shy away from for it raises the spectre of emotional decisions, narrow preaching and frivolous faith and yet most denominations can be traced back to a revivalist movement of the Spirit in some way – yes, even the Presbyterians. Most conversions aren't so much moments of deep understanding as they are moments of deep conviction and desire. God moves in our heart to convict and convince us of what is right and of His love for us. The Spirit is at the heart of our faith whether we know it or not.

On the other hand we are used, aren't we, to acknowledging the need to apply ourselves in a systematic way to the task of learning. We have a whole education system designed to systematically help our children gain the knowledge and skills they need to become successful and productive members of our society. But we so often resist the idea that we need to do the very same thing as Christians if we are to grow in our faith and become productive for the kingdom. And we do.

We cannot grow as Christians without applying ourselves systematically to the basic Christian disciplines of prayer, reading the Word, service and fellowship. The notion that we can survive as Christians apart from these things is totally bankrupt. We need discipline if we are to be disciples.

Jesus pointed out this imbalance in the life of the Pharisees when He said...

⁴²“But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others.

The system of giving to God created by the Pharisees was highly detailed and complete but it was devoid of the Spirit's influence and because of this it completely missed the greater things of God – justice and love. And we can see in the whole interaction between them and Jesus they are blind and deaf to the person of the Spirit. They can see what Jesus is doing is wonderful but they insist either that it is demon working in him or that it is simply not God.

And yet Jesus will not criticise the Law. He will not abolish it for, as He said, He came to **complete it!** It is not the Law which is at fault but the Law without the Spirit. This is also the balance we must strike in our life together. We must work hard at our organisation while allowing the Spirit to speak freely into our lives and into our processes so that God's Life may breathe through them.

3. Both moving with or by the Spirit and staying in order require one thing... a fundamental relationship with Christ. If we look for a common denominator in our readings today one thing stands out. Life starts with the person and activity of the Holy Spirit. Whether it be how we run our services, or what was happening when the Apostles were freed from the Philippian jail or, indeed what Jesus was trying to get through to Nicodemus the theme of life starting with the our submitting to the Spirit's moving is paramount.

I love music and I love to play music. I love the piano. I have had to work hard, systematically and habitually to learn the piano but it all

started with the fire of inspiration my childhood friend gave to me. That's where my music life was born.

The Church also requires work; it requires organisation and effort but its **life comes from the work of the Spirit** and each of us must also begin there in faith.

It is one thing, an important thing, to put in the work. But life begins with God and we need life if we are going to survive a life long journey with God.