

Growing Together As a Church

Ricahrd Dawson

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Matthew 4¹⁻⁴

Mark 11³⁵⁻³⁹

1 Tim 4⁶⁻¹⁶

About four years ago I had run consistently 3 or 4 times a week for at least 20 years. I was, so I thought pretty fit. Yes there were fitter people than me plying the tracks of Ross Creek but most of them were much younger than me and none of them were women. I have to admit to having a thing about women running faster than me. Let me confess to you that God has done a work in my heart. I no longer care about the many women who pass me running. I am simply thankful that I can shuffle one leg in front of another. And it all began on a fateful day in August of that year whilst running up toward the Reservoir from the Camp Ground in Leith Valley. Up ahead of me a young woman was running – slowly. I kept my pace up and raced past her feeling somewhat happy that I could still achieve this at my advanced aged. I entered a steep section and not wanting to slow down at all I pushed myself into the section bouncing off both feet so I could reach the top quickly and not be seen by her. All of a sudden something went snap in my calf muscle and a sharp pain caused me to immediately stop. I could no longer use the leg. I was stranded and as the young woman effortlessly ran passed me I was sure she had a little smile on her face. (Yeh that is me) That was the end of an era for me. In all the time I'd been running I'd never picked up an injury. Now I faced a

difficult 3 months recovery during which time I constantly went out too soon and reinjured the calf.

Now you could quite easily and with some justification point to my pride as a reason for the injury and, frankly, I wouldn't argue with you but the fact of the matter is that the way I ran and trained was completely imbalanced and contributed enormously to my problems. I ran largely anaerobically and would not feel I'd done something well unless I pushed myself to a standstill somewhere in the run. Precisely this kind of training is responsible for the growing number of deaths amongst fitness jocks around the world. What is needed according to a growing body of evidence is the building of a base fitness which is aerobic in nature. Yes some strength and anaerobic fitness is good but nothing replaces aerobic conditioning. And this is also a picture of what the church needs today.

What is the Church? We've been asking this question over the last few weeks and we came to the point last week where I said that the church lives in a twofold way. It lives firstly by the breath of God – its life depends on the work of the Holy Spirit igniting every believer and bringing inspiration and the living Word of God to us. Just as we need the gift of touch and of presence to really know that someone is there – so we need the closeness of God and the experience of God to be convicted of His Presence.

But there's another side to this life. The New Testament makes it clear that this life alone does not constitute the Church and that we need also to have 'order' in our life together. Paul insists on order. Jesus highlights His preservation of the Law, Peter creates new

rules for ordering our life together. Everywhere you go in the New Testament you find that where the Spirit truly is – order follows.

But how should that touch us? How does that **include** us? Have you ever gone to an event where something caused everyone to do something almost spontaneously except you didn't know what on earth you were supposed to be doing? I remember once going to a Requiem Mass for a person who had been a mentor and friend of mine. The Priest led it with gusto and many people seemed to know what to say, when to say and when to stand up and sit down. But I was totally confused and lost. I seemed to say things at the wrong time. Stand up when people were sitting down and sit down when others were standing up! There's only one thing worse than not knowing the customs of a group and that's displaying that lack of knowledge publicly. In the end I just concentrated on the standing up and sitting down because I figured If I got that right then at least most people would have to guess that I didn't know the rest rather than having it confirmed absolutely!

The same goes for certain kinds of dancing. If you don't know what's going on it becomes obvious pretty quickly. Who knows this one? (Play Macarena) So there are two key questions raised for us in this metaphor. Assuming Jesus is the dance master 1. How do we each get up to speed with Him? And 2. What can we as a church do to bring as many on board as possible?

I remember when the Macarena first came out and one of the great things about it was that we did it **as a group!** So no one stood out and you could pick it up as you went and then you had heaps of

fun **doing it together!** We face a similar challenge as a church because essentially – and here’s my third definition of church for you – **‘church is a group of disciples who are following Christ together’**.

This is such an important picture for us for us because as I suggested last week our ability to follow Jesus, to be His disciple, is a function of our being together. Yes. We can all have special experiences of the Spirit individually and these are important but in life as in the NT more often than not the Spirit turns up when we are **together**. Secondly, however, being together requires order. Chaos reigns where there is togetherness without order. The more people we have and the more we need to work together the more order is required and again, this is often not something that comes naturally but which requires us to learn new skills and new ways.

So this is the challenge and to meet that challenge I want to suggest that we need to build a base fitness very much like the aerobic fitness that is so important for our bodies. Aerobic training builds our ability to burn energy aerobically – that is by burning oxygen and fat to make energy. Current theories of fitness see this as the basis for everything else. Our cells are 12 times more efficient at burning fat than sugar and they do so when we keep our training within aerobic boundaries. **Anaerobic training forces your cells to burn sugar and a chemical in your body called creatine phosphate but,** and here’s the big ‘but,’ this system tires very quickly and creates bi-products which are potentially damaging to our body and our general health. And here’s the kicker, most of us rely on this system, the anaerobic system, to get stuff

done and even to train our bodies. We think, don't we, if we go out for half an hour and have a big blow out and get all sweaty and puff hard, well **we've done something – we've improved!** And the sore muscles the next day and the feeling of tiredness all over – well that's just testimony to the fact that we're **getting fit!**

Big news people. This is nonsense and we're likely to have improved our overall fitness very little and perhaps to have even over-stressed our body and done some damage. Anaerobic exercise greatly increases the free radicals in our bodies which are implicated in all sorts of bad things from aging to hardening of the arteries. In short – **don't train this way!**

Instead our whole aim in training should be to build our **aerobic capacity** because it is this which will enable us to go the distance and which will provide a base for each of the other systems.

Only when our aerobic system is fully functioning will we be able to use the others systems, strength and anaerobic capacity safely. And we do need these. Whenever we need to sprint or to apply significant force and use our muscles – we immediately buy into our anaerobic system – and we need this. But it will still be our aerobic capacity which enables us to use these system longer and more safely.

So strength training is OK and is required, especially as we get older and our muscles begin to atrophy but it's the aerobic system which provides us with the overall fitness required to go the distance. The same is true of our faith.

Paul saw that training was vital for a Christian and that such training had to be taken seriously. In short just as you can't eat and rest your way to physical fitness you can't take heaven for granted once you've been saved. The devil, as Peter points out in his first letter...

⁸Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. ⁹Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. ¹⁰And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹To him be the power forever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 5)

But what does this mean? I think it means at least two things.

Firstly it means that we need to establish our '**aerobic training**' in the faith – the training that gives us a base level of fitness and which sets us up to use the strength we have without fainting or falling short. What is that Aerobic training?

Well it's unlike our physical training in that whereas aerobic training of the body focuses on our body and therefore on ourselves – what we see with Jesus as He went into training is that it is all about focusing on God – drawing close to God –staying **in** God's Presence – seeking God's voice and leading. Spiritual aerobics is about 'being with God.'

There's a fascinating little note in Acts which comes after Peter and John have been interrogated by the Sanhedrin yet again for speaking and healing in Jesus' Name. After telling them off and insisting they cease this activity they dismiss them both and then we have this 'afternote' in which they comment on these brave Apostles. This is what it says...

¹³When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were **astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.** ¹⁴But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. (Acts 4)

Wouldn't that so get under your skin? Here's a couple of country bumpkins doing things that were unheard of in the Name of this Jesus character and the only explanation they can come up with is that they had spent a considerable period of time with Jesus.

What had changed them so much that even the Sanhedrin noticed? The time they'd spent with Jesus. This is what had made them into spiritual giants. This is what had given them spiritual fitness and this is what will mature us as well. As we seek Jesus and give time to being with Jesus we too will begin to 'get fit.'

The church over the first few centuries of its life worked out pretty quickly the basic disciplines required to do this and they did it first of all by looking to scripture and then by a process of trial and error. If we look first at scripture the four basic disciplines we see Jesus working at constantly are these... Prayer, Fasting, solitude

and silence. By these basic disciplines do we draw near to God and if you're anything like me something will be rising up in your spirit even now as I mention those things which is against what I'm saying. Something will be saying 'No' inside you; something will recoil against these things and will be saying things like – 'Don't like that.' 'That doesn't sound very exciting at all.' 'Not at all interested in those things.' 'Richard, can't you find something more inspiring to say about the Christian faith?'

And isn't that just how we'd feel about starting an hour's aerobic training? Isn't that just how we'd feel about starting a diet? The fact is that our spirits resist the work required to be healthy and we generally need to establish routines of healthy living to maintain our health. The same is true spiritually. We need to establish routines of spiritual health in order to build our spiritual capacity. We see Jesus doing this in three ways but I'm afraid I'm going to have to leave that till next time.

Let's just recap what I've said today. Firstly, the new science of physical fitness says that the foundation of all fitness is built on increasing our **aerobic capacity**, that is, the capacity of our body to turn fat and oxygen into energy. This requires we exercise long but not hard and it requires also that we take significant rest so just going out and running 10 miles every day even if it is at a pace well without our limits will very quickly get us in anaerobic territory if we don't take rest.

The corollary to aerobic fitness spiritual is time with God – space for God – a spirit open and able to hear God. Just as a habit of

fitness makes it so much easier so we must develop a habit around spiritual fitness.

Finally this mean building these things into our life on a regular basis: Prayer, Fasting, solitude and silence.

Let's pray together...