



In the context of spearheading a campus church planting movement, I have been thinking a lot about what life is. What makes something living? Specifically what makes a church living? If something is not living, does that make it dead? Don't you have to be alive first in order to be considered dead? Questions like these.

Biblically, God has got a lot to say about life. For example:

John 1:4 In Him was life; and **the life** was the light of men.

John 5:40 And ye will not come to Me, that ye might have **life**

John 6:33 For the bread of God is He which cometh down from heaven, and gives **life** unto the world.

John 6:63 It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.

John 10:10 The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: **I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.**

John 20:31 but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have **life in His name.**

1 John 5:12 *He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.*

Obviously from these passages LIFE is found in Jesus Christ and having relationship with Him. But how do you tell if a believer is alive or a church is alive? I believe biology, the study of life and living things, may give us four key principles determine whether something is actually alive spiritually. Scientists have identified four characteristics that describe all living things. And these characteristics hold true biblically for the spiritually alive follower of Jesus and the Church.

For something to be biologically alive it must meet the following four criteria:

1. It must have a functioning metabolism that utilizes nutrients and processes waste.
2. It must grow.
3. It must reproduce.
4. It must be able to adapt and respond to stimuli.

Let's look at how these apply to the believer and the Church:

METABOLISM

Metabolism is the process whereby an organism breaks down, utilizes and assimilates nutrients needed for health and life and processes and gets rid of waste products. We individually and corporately need to be able to metabolize the Word of God and biblical truth so that it becomes a part of who we are. We also need to filter out the junk we are exposed to and get it out of our lives.

In many places, the metabolism of the Body of Christ is off. We have a hypoactive or slow metabolism that leaves us sluggish and overweight-- stuffed on the things of good information and the latest tantalizing trend but never breaking down truths into applications where God's Word become part and parcel of who we are becoming. There can be a huge chasm between what we intellectually know and what we functionally are. Hearing God's Word biblically ALWAYS

was to be accompanied with obedience and application. Or we have a hyperactive drive that never lets us just be still and know HE is God.

A healthy metabolism also gets rid of waste products. We are exposed every day to a lot of toxins and junk. Some of the toxins are internally self-produced from areas of our lives and hearts that are not yet healed and whole or temptations we fall under. Others are ingested from external sources: TV, movies, media, office scuttlebutt, the atmosphere. Most often these toxins gain entrance through our eyes and ears. A healthy metabolism can process a limited amount of such and deal with it so it is gotten rid of. As we walk with Jesus and are being fed with the nutrition of His life-giving Word, our spiritual metabolisms should be able to get rid of the poisons we come in contact with before they actually do lasting damage.

GROWTH

If you had a newborn baby and that baby never grew, you'd be worried right? Yet in how many places is it considered status quo to see a life get born into the Kingdom and remain an infant for 20 years warming a church pew. It is not normal. It is not biblical. And with no growth, there can be no life.

Living things GROW. They develop. They get larger and more complex to a point. Healthy people in the natural grow physically, mentally, emotionally and socially. Churches as the Body of Christ should be no different. Church growth is traditionally spoken of in the growing-larger dimension of numbers. Churches should also be growing in community, in intimacy with the Lord, in understanding of His Word and ways, in strategic outreach, in interaction with the world around them with the goal of bringing the Kingdom. A healthy church develops in complexity as the relational matrix expands. Yet how many church bodies stop growing at pre-K levels or teenage levels or young adult levels of growth and never make into maturity in the Lord corporately.

The church's maturity is not characterized by buildings and programs but by the maturity of the leaders and the people that make UP the church. A church can only mature as far as its people do. A church can only go as far as its members are willing to go. Discipleship is a critical element of church growth. I am not against numerical growth. But along with growth in numbers a continuing maturation and development of the members present must be cultivated. Numbers alone do not equal biblical church growth.

REPRODUCTION

Living things REPRODUCE. The first commission given to man in the garden was to "be fruitful and multiply". The literal translations of those two words from the Hebrew could be "grow and reproduce becoming numerous". And beloved you can only reproduce what you are. Banana trees do not grow apples and multiply into apple orchards.

Healthy churches reproduce and multiply themselves. They plant churches. Believers are discipled to disciple others who will in turn disciple others. Everything is geared toward growth in God and reproducible discipleship that can be continuously multiplied. One of the things most lacking in the Body today is a biblical understanding of mentorship. Mentors that truly know how to reproduce what God has given to them in others and then release them are in short supply. Mentoring has two biblical functions: maturation and multiplication. A fruit when mature has seeds that will multiply into other fruit trees of the same kind. Again I cannot stress this enough. You reproduce what you are. Leaders, this is a sobering thought for us.

Here is the key. A dysfunctional church that does manage to reproduce itself for the most part will either reproduce dysfunctional offspring or disabled offspring. Now God can intervene and heal and transform. But you reproduce what you are. Why not let Him do the work in you individually and corporately so that what and who you are is a living, healthy representation of what and who He is. Then that which you multiply into others will be functional and whole.

RESPONSE/ADAPTATION

Biologically speaking, living things respond to environmental stimuli and change. They adapt and adjust. Now I am not speaking about compromise. We are NEVER in any way to compromise the truth of the Word, ways or character of God to adapt to our environment. But we may need to adapt our strategies, methods and applications.

Many churches are just plain unresponsive. Needs change, opportunities change, issues change, culture changes and instead of asking the Lord for His response to the changing world all around them, they largely ignore it. God has called us to respond to the issues and needs our day, culture and generation with HIS Word and ways from the place of His grace with the message of His truth.

Controversies can be opportunities. Needs can become open doors to the Gospel of the Kingdom. Issues can become discussion points. Our message is not to change, but our platform of presentation just might. How can God's timeless truth minister and respond to the deepest heart cries of our hour?

ORGANIZATION

May I make a crucial distinction here?

THE CHURCH IS NOT AN ORGANIZATION. THE CHURCH IS THE BODY OF CHRIST.

The Church is an organism...period. That being said, all living organisms HAVE organization. The simplest one cell living creature has incredibly intricate organization. If the organization of the organism is out of place it can have deadly effects. But just because something is organized and even effective in doing tasks does not make it alive. A robotic piece of machinery is amazingly organized and more effective for some tasks than a human being but it doesn't make it living.

So are you building an effective machine and calling it Church or are you actually growing a living organism that is the Body of Christ? I am not against programs or being effective, but just because you have a thriving organization doesn't mean you have an organization that is living. You often hear believers talking about dead churches. I would have to differ with this terminology in how it is predominantly applied. For something to be dead, it had to die! And for a thing to die, it had to first be alive. Many of what some consider dead churches were never alive to begin with. Never at any one time did they exhibit metabolism, growth, reproduction and response. They are not dead because they were never living.

So can God take non-living items and cause them to come to life? If the valley of dry bones in Ezek. 34 is any example, absolutely so... Ezekiel, at the word of the Lord in a vision, called the bones to come together. They then had organization. And the flesh and sinew came on them. They looked pretty good even at this point. But only after he prophesied to the four winds and called for breath to enter them did they come alive. Biblically, breath, wind and spirit are usually the same exact word.

Without God's Spirit, there is no life spiritually. The good news is that if God could visit the valley of dry bones with His Spirit and breathe life into inanimate non-living, at times good-looking organization, there is hope yet for some corners of the Church.

However, why not just go for God's life from the beginning? Why not dare to take God at His Word and believe Him to do what He says? Why not just do what the Bible says and no more and no less? Have you ever looked to see what components of how we do church are actually IN the Bible? And how many things in the Bible are not actively functioning in our churches? It is a daring study and you might just find yourself at the crossroads of some changing paradigms. These are questions that have burned in my heart for almost 20 years since I was

about 8 or 9. I have cried over them, been frustrated by them, debated their importance and finally the asking of them has led to the understanding of church planting I now have.

I am not saying you necessarily need to abandon all you have ever known or throw out all your existing structure. But it may be a prudent thing to evaluate it in the light of what the Bible says about what church looks like. Are church buildings a biblical mandate? Do you have to have a choir? Where is the hallowing of the three point sermon? How about those service orders--spoken and unspoken? I am not saying any of these things are wrong. But are they the only way of doing things biblically or are they a product of the models we have been taught from our culture? And if so then, are they the best way of doing church for an unchurched generation that does not know any better than to take God at His Word unless we disciple them otherwise?

I am just asking some questions. I'm not here to give you the answers. But I do desire to provoke you to evaluate everything according to God's Word and be a Berean and go seek out Biblical answers not filtered through the lens of experience but that come from honestly asking Him how He desires His Church to be structured and run. Are you a well tooled machine or a maturing, multiplying, living Body? Do you have an intimate, ongoing, progressing, deepening relationship with Jesus? And when it all comes down to brass tacks: have you GOT LIFE?