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Because Context Matters

A Passion for the Priesthood of ALL Believers... ...and the Robust Exercising of Their Spiritual Gifts

Previously in this “*Unintended Consequences*” series we looked at the importance of a properly crafted church vision/purpose statement. We also observed how easy it is for biblical worship to be co-opted by entertainment worship. More recently we noted six essential spaces that the church needs to provide for fruitful, sustainable discipling to occur. This month let’s focus on the oxygen that must permeate all aspects of church life – **a passion for the priesthood of ALL believers (PB) and the robust exercising of their collective Spiritual Gifts (SG).**

The thesis of the Reflection is that the PB and SG’s have an intrinsic affinity for one another. They travel together like Siamese twins. If one is missing, the other is likewise invariably missing in the reality of Body Life. When that occurs, fruitful discipling becomes seriously constrained/quenched. Some historical context on PB and SG is helpful in setting the stage for developing this thesis.

Revisiting the first-century Body of Christ, we find a lay-driven church empowered by the exercise of spiritual gifts (SG). There were no seminaries or denominations to mint and certify pastors. SG’s were so widely used (unlike the rampant disuse of today) that Paul had to deal with various abuses. As a result, whenever the people of God gathered for an *agape* meal, they looked at each other and mused: *We are the Church.*

Change commenced after 325 AD when Constantine’s mother visited Israel and decided that edifices needed to be built to commemorate aspects of the Apostles Creed. As a result, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem were constructed. One hundred and fifty years later, there were hundreds of these edifices across the Roman Empire. Profound implications for Body Life arose as the people of God no longer looked at each other out of *We are the church* lenses. Rather, they changed their vocabulary to reflect a new way of seeing themselves: “*We go to church.*”

This transition from organic church to organizational church was re-enforced by the overlapping dynamics of the demise of the Roman Empire along with the concurrent rise of the historic Roman Church. As the Empire declined and eventually disappeared, the organizational church ascended. In that transition, the Pope took the place of the Emperor. The Cardinals became the equivalent of Roman Prefects (regional governors). Bishops replaced Senators, and priests the place of the Roman orators. Basilicas (Roman Administrative Centers) became churches.

While everything seemed to change; in essence, nothing changed. This is well captured in the quote, “*When Christianity took Rome, Rome took over Christianity.*” As a result, the “church” quickly became a bureaucracy with a corresponding hierarchy, and clericalism was birthed. Now there was the pulpit and the pew – us and them – from the perspective of the clerics. A basic tenant was the pulpit always knows best because the pew is illiterate, ignorant and

can't be trusted. In the midst of this profound transition, "*the Priesthood of ALL believers*" and the full flower of SG's were quenched. Consequently, the Historic Church lost its Body Life focus, becoming more concerned with maintaining clericalism and the bureaucracy rather than the (discipling) needs and SG's of its people.

The first to recognize this loss of focus was a monk named Benedict. His diagnosis was that the church had become so focused on itself that it no longer "*touched the lives*" of people. Benedict's response was to create the Benedictine Order (565 AD) to do just that – touch the lives of people.

Fast forward to the Reformation where the focus of the Reformers was on clerical abuse and flawed theology. The five *solas* was the Reformers' response to correct the theological ship. A reclamation of "*the Priesthood of ALL believers*" and a resurrection/rediscovery of SG's was not part of the Reformers' focus.

Post Reformation, little focus was been given to SG. Underscoring that reality, more has been written about SG since World War II than in the entire history of the church. Perhaps, because of the relative "newness" of this spiritual dynamic, possibly 10% (my empirical assessment) of today's Western Evangelical church has embraced SG's and woven it into the fabric of Body Life as part of a philosophy of ministry. (I continue to be amazed at the number of church goers who glaze over when asked: "*What SG's have been entrusted to you?*")

Looking across Western Evangelicalism today, seminaries and clericalism are alive and well. A robust embracing of SG's in church life is still mostly conspicuous by their absence. While SG and PB are periodically given lip service or passing mention from the pulpit, the transformational power of SG is still mostly missing. As a result, the church is like a powerful V-8 engine trying to run (sputter) with only a few cylinders firing. This has debilitating (discipling) results; e.g.

- In a typical church, the 80/20 rule is alive and well – 20% of the pew does 80% of the work of the Kingdom. That means 80% of the congregation sits on their hands and muse...*is that all there is.*
- Correspondingly, I would hypothesize only 20% of the pew has any idea what their SG's are. Accordingly, we have burned out pastors trying to do too much of the ministry with too little pew support.
- Seminaries implicitly still labor under the premise that they are developing church managers (or CEO's) rather than raising up shepherds whose role is to facilitate getting every member engaged in ministry at the point of their spiritual giftedness as part of a collective sense of being on mission.
- Too many male believers retire from their careers and flounder as to what to do rather than relishing the fact that they are now (finally) freed up to devote themselves full time to the pursuit of their SG's.
- Most congregants do not have a sense of calling and would therefore say their vocation is their profession. Personally, when those spiritual gifts entrusted to me came into focus, my vocation was changed to teaching the Scriptures, and sales and marketing (my profession) became my (tent making) avocation.
- Churches that mention SG's periodically, maybe even offer an occasional SG workshop, often wind up frustrating their members who want to pursue their SG's because the church doesn't offer follow through by organizing its various ministries around SG profiles. Furthermore, they don't provide mentors and training experiences to help people use, develop, and refine their respective SG's.

More observations could be added but with similar results. The Church has failed to heed Paul's exhortation, *now concerning the spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not desire you to be ignorant, rather informed and knowledgeable* (1 Corinthians 12:1, blend of translations).

If 90% of an effective therapy is rooted in a sound diagnosis, what does a church fellowship look like that has 1) re-purposed clericalism, 2) embraced the PB and their congregant's SG's with a passion, and 3) reshaped its philosophy of (pew) ministry accordingly? Hint: discipling breaks out by spontaneous combustion! We will focus on that phenomenon in Part Two of this Reflection.

Ponder

- 1) How would you answer the question: What SG's have been entrusted to you?
- 2) Similarly, how are you regularly using those SG's?
- 3) When was the last time you heard a Sunday morning message on the nature, role, and purpose of SG in Body Life?
- 4) Ever been to a SG workshop? If so, what was the follow up and follow on?
- 5) What do you most resonate with in this Reflection? Most disagree with?