

THE “WE” WE WANT TO BE

The most important growth is not a “me” thing but a “we” thing. by John Ortberg

What do you say when someone asks you: “How’s your church going?” I always get a little nervous around that question. Sometimes it’s because I think I am not doing as well at my job as I should be. Sometimes I wonder if this is pastor talk for “How big is your church?” Which in turn can be pastor talk for “How important are you, and can I gain status by hanging around you?”

But there are other ways of thinking about the question. When we hear the phrase spiritual formation, we usually think about individual lives. That’s not a bad thing; Paul says he labors and struggles “to present everyone mature in Christ.”

However, Paul wasn’t writing to an individual at the time. Most of the New Testament books are letters to congregations; to corporate bodies; to groups, not individuals. They do the work of spiritual formation: they diagnose malformation and prescribe remedies. Their primary target is not an individual or two but the church.

Paul is exasperated that the congregation at Galatia has deserted the gospel; Paul is troubled that the congregation at Philippi is not struggling to bring about the resolution of conflict; Paul perceives that the congrega-

tion at Corinth is confused and unconcerned about the right and wrong practice of sexuality.

The classic examples of congregation discernment are the letters to the churches in Revelation. In each case the diagnosis of what is going right and what is going wrong is laid out with exquisite care and skill. In each case the road to health is clearly marked. This assessment of spiritual health is done at the congregational level.

It’s a good thing to discuss the spiritual formation of individuals. What is badly needed alongside of that is a thoughtful, concrete way of discerning and addressing the spiritual formation of congregations. For we are not just a collection of bobble-head saints.

If I’m a member of a gym, it may not matter much to me what kind of shape other people are in. I’m interested in my fitness. I don’t have a strong investment in the fitness of other people. In fact, I don’t mind a little flab in the bodies working out around me. It makes me feel better by comparison. I use the fitness center to get my body in shape. The fitness center is a tool for individuals.

The church is not a spiritual fitness center.

The church is not a tool.

The church is a body. It is the body. It is Christ’s body.



GOT MATURITY?

The mystery of the body

Ironically, if we speak about spiritual formation purely in individual terms, we will not even be able to form individuals well. Part of what is needed for our formation is membership in and submission to and compassion for a community larger than our individual selves. If you love the body of Christ, you are concerned for the health of the whole body. It does no good to have a thriving kidney if the heart is a time bomb.

I went through an exhibition about the human body last week with a friend of mind. It's an exhibit that has traveled the country, featuring parts of actual bodies arranged so we can see each system in its brilliant detail. The nervous system alone took a year to dissect.

I was impressed, but my friend is a doctor and he was so energized I finally had to drag him away. The body's capacity to receive nourishment, grow, heal, reproduce itself, send messages, and cope with the outside world is breath taking.

It struck me, as we marveled over organs and skeletons, that we are given another body that is an even greater and more mystical gift: the body of Christ.

The body is an instructive metaphor. We're not simply a random assortment of individuals. We are greater than the sum of our parts. Together we form a new organism. It has a health or an illness beyond the function or dysfunction of the individuals. The body has certain patterns and habits and tendencies that call out the best or the worst in those who make it up.

Whole churches, for instance, can use fear or pride or anger to motivate people unhealthily; apathy can spread like cancer; congregations as well as individuals can "forsake their first love."

Thinking about the health of the body also has the advantage of reminding us that local churches are not simply "spiritual resource providers" that we shop around for like so many HMOs. The body doesn't so much exist for my sake as I exist for the sake of the body; together we are connected to the One who fills his body. It is hard to sever yourself from a body but stay connected to the head. (Dismemberment can be as ugly spiritually as it can be physically.)



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But sometimes when church leaders think corporately, we think of the organization selfishly: we want its performance to make us feel good. The church is corporate, but it's not a corporation. Paul doesn't say that there are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers "so the charts can all go up and to the right,

budgets can increase, and staff can expand." The individual and the corporate help define each other. In eastern religions, a single human is sometimes compared to a drop in the ocean; when you die you simply go back into the great sea. Christianity would not use this metaphor; personhood has integrity; a person is a center of consciousness that will not lose her identity; the body must always honor the member just as the individual must honor the body.

So let's consider spiritual formation under the body metaphor. It is not creative or original, but it is biblical.

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Breathing

From ancient times breathing has been associated with Spirit; Hebrew and Greek each employ a single word that covers both breath and spirit. The sure sign of the Spirit coming on a body is that the body begins to breathe—it comes alive.

All spiritual traditions return to breathing. Many who meditate will still their minds by focusing on breathing. Periodically people complain about how boring breathing is. If you

ever feel that way, try a little experiment: tape your mouth closed and pinch your nose securely so that no air can get through; in about 60 seconds you will find yourself positively fascinated by breathing.

When our first child came along, we were petrified that we would mess things up. My wife would bring a mirror along on a car trip, and periodically she would stick it under our daughter's nose while she was sleeping just to make sure that she was still breathing.

If your congregation stopped breathing, how could you tell?

I preached some years ago at a church that is Catholic, charismatic, and mostly African American. It was a Sunday in June, 90 degrees, no air conditioning, and the service went three hours long. The high point of the service was not the preaching. (I can say that with some authority as I was the one doing it.) It was the offering. People came forward to give as they were singing and worshipping God. But they didn't just walk. They danced. Many of them had few resources. But there was a kind of defiant joy on display. It was as if they were saying—"Nothing, not even poverty, can keep me from trusting the Spirit of God or knowing the joy and strength of generosity."

What demonstrates the spirit of a congregation is not its level of outward demonstration. I grew up in a Midwestern Baptist church filled with mostly Swedish people—we were not a dancing people. You could tell the extraverts in our church because they looked down at your shoes when they were talking to you.

Spirit cannot be measured by how many hands get

lifted during worship; or whether or not people stand spontaneously during a song. But there ought to be joy somewhere.

The presence of the Spirit is best detected by the fruit of the Spirit. Looking at how people behave when the parking lot is jammed and traffic can't get out quickly is a wonderful way to see how the fruit of patience is ripening.

With vitality comes the willingness to try to walk, even if it means falling. How strong is the impulse for new ventures in our church? How willing are people to take ministry risks? To trust? To forgive? Do we celebrate first steps and fall-downs and getting back up as ardently as parents who are delighted to see their little rug-rats go upright?

Vision

Vision is fundamental to the health of your church, but I'll tell you right now it's probably not the kind of vision you're thinking about.

Dallas Willard was asked by Gordon Cosby of Church of the Savior why so many churches and movements end badly, and his answer was so brilliant they made it into a little booklet.

It all begins with a vision. A Francis of Assisi or a John Wesley is gripped by a vision that will not let them go. But it is not a vision of what they're going to do. It is not a vision of a preferred future. It is not a vision of human activity. It is a vision of what already is. It is a vision of God, and how good he is, and how wonderful it is to be alive and a friend of such a Being.

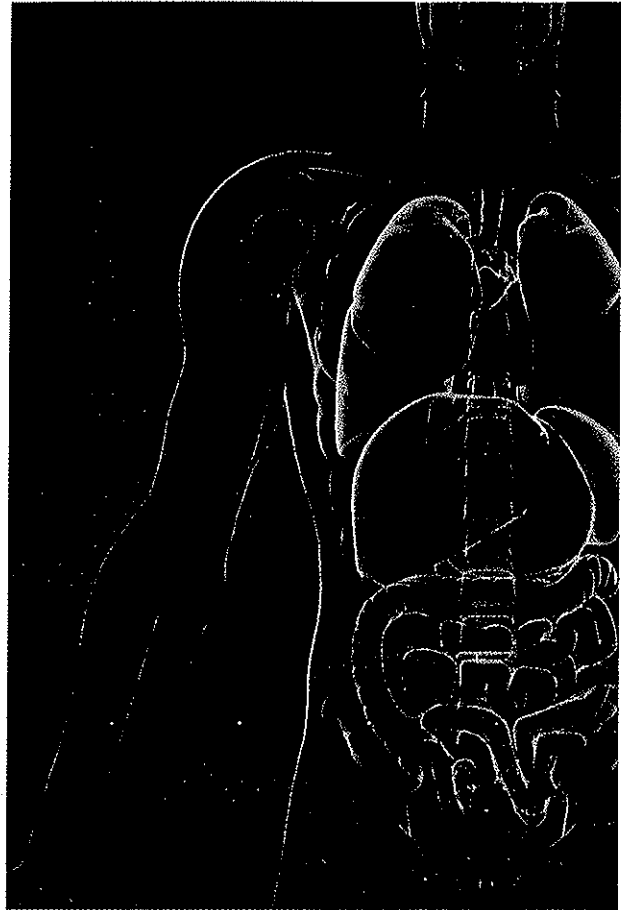
Out of this vision flows a desire to do good things for such a God. And sometimes these activities may lead to results that look quite remarkable or impressive. And then other people may gather, and some decide they'd like to be involved in such activities because it might give them a sense of significance. People begin to pay more attention to what they are doing than to the reality of God.

At this point the mission replaces the vision as the dominant feature in peoples' consciousness. Once this happens, descent is inevitable. For now people are living under the tyranny of Producing Impressive Results.

The number one "vision problem" with churches today is not (as is widely held) leaders who "lack a vision." The real problem is when our primary focus shifts from who God is (a vision that alone can lead to "the peace of Christ reigning in our hearts") to what we are doing.

How do you diagnose the mission-replacing-vision sickness?

- People in leadership feel constant pressure and inadequacy.
- Goals, numbers, and techniques replace the goodness of God as the most frequent topics of thought and conversation.
- Leaders view themselves as constantly



having to motivate and hype and whip up enthusiasm in the church for doing and giving. You will sometimes hear people say "vision leaks"; a more accurate statement is that "mission leaks" when it has replaced the vision of God as people's dominant inner reality.

- People's sense of esteem or excitement depends on "how church is going."
- A church's identity gets rooted in its success.

This drift from vision to mission is inevitable, though not irresistible. The only cure is to diagnose it, and to rediscover the beauty of the vision of God. Of course, that begins with the leadership. The vision of God is not a tool leaders can use to get the church to function better. It is freedom from the need to perform for the whole church—beginning with the leaders.

Blood

Circulation means getting nourishment and oxygen into the tiniest recesses, and removing what has become toxic. It is so critical that large muscles in your body actually produce 2.5 million red blood cells per second. And you're not even tired.



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When blood isn't circulating properly, toxins build up in the body. Energy gets lost. Entropy sets in. This can happen so subtly it isn't noticed.

Sin likewise builds up in the body of Christ. We get used to it.

Is unresolved conflict commonly tolerated? In one church two prominent women leaders (call them Eudonia and Syntyche) are looked up to as leaders, teach rival Bible classes, but do not like each other. Everyone knows they do not like each other.

People not liking each other is one of the banes of churches today.

Does the language of the culture reflect a laxness around sexuality? I think of a man I know—a gifted church leader—who in conversation and stories and judgment was constantly pushing the boundaries of sexuality. He was getting the wrong kind of charge out of being "free" and "earthy" and "non-pious." In reality, he had problems with impulse control, but no one challenged them. It caught up with him in tragic ways.

Are "hidden sins" building up? In one church the senior pastor loves to preach about the dangers of pride and the need for everyone to be aware of their depravity. He is quite certain that his theological system is the only one that can adequately stamp out pride, and ironically is enormously proud of how right he is. He often used to preach on the "sin of Nebuchadnezzar" where God humbles the mighty king. However, the actual charge that Daniel gives to the king is that he is to renounce his wickedness by dealing justly with the poor and oppressed. Sins involving the poor don't end up on the radar screen or the conscience of this church.

Is regular confession a feature of your church, of small groups? Does it happen in appropriate ways in teaching and preaching? Throughout history, whenever there have been fresh outpourings of the Spirit, they are always accompanied with a renewed practice of the confession of sin. In confession we come to know each other, and the body gets freed of its toxins.

Skin

Skin is what separates your insides from the outsides. When skin is working right, it keeps out what can be harmful, but allows certain substances to pass through—like perspiration when your body gets too hot, or moisturizer when your skin starts to make an alligator look smooth.

When the body is unhealthy, we start letting in

what we should keep out and keeping out what we need to allow in.

In Ernest Kurtz's history of Alcoholics Anonymous, he writes of a time when founder Bill W was getting carried away by requests for interviews and articles that were making him famous. Some friends pulled him aside and told him if he kept walking down this road, he would end up drinking again or dead. Out of this conversation grew two rules that would shape the 12-step community:

- No one would make money from AA. All proceeds from writings would go to the movement.
- No one would become famous from AA. From this time forward, "Anonymous" took on a new meaning. It didn't simply mean that you could keep your attendance at AA meetings confidential; it also meant that no one could use AA to become prominent. From that point people became Bill W or Doctor Bob.

They reckoned that their sickness was so dire that they had to find a way to protect their community from the dangers posed by wealth and celebrity.

It is striking how hard monastic communities worked to protect themselves from the same forces.

It is striking how often contemporary evangelicalism is driven by those same forces of prominence and promotion. They are often the rewards held out for successful ministry.

At the same time religious communities are often prone to keep out what actually ought to be allowed in. Most

often this is because of judgmentalism that takes a posture of superiority and contempt.

A friend of mine is involved at a small church in Alabama. He had a long talk with a person in a same-sex relationship, who is not currently a believer and has had bad experiences with the church but is searching. "I'm hungry for God, though I don't know what I think about it all. Would my partner and I be welcomed in your church?"

No, my friend had to say. I'm sorry. Probably not.

Nourishment

Paul had lots to say about milk versus meat. I grew up in circles where the phrase pastors dreaded to hear above all else was: "I'm just not being fed." It's the ecclesiastical equivalent of "I just want to be friends," but with an outer coating of guilt covering a rich

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chewy nougat of rejection.

Sometimes it gets put this way: "I want to go deeper." Going deep is a good thing. After all, who wants to go shallow? But what does it mean to go deep? How can we tell if the body is being nourished?

Jodi Dickerson is a teaching pastor who gave a great piece of advice for church leaders: let's define "deep." Too often, "deep" is shorthand for "Give me more and more teaching venues where I can hear increased amounts of exegetical information packaged in a highly skillful presentation. Dazzle me with how some familiar Bible passage actually means something different from what everybody always thought it meant because we've found out that the root of a key word is similar to another root somewhere in the Minor Prophets."

It's hard to pull that off week after week.

When we speak of being fed or going deep we are often referring to information. But perhaps information is not the primary source of nourishment. Perhaps the primary source is the presence of God. Maybe we go deepest with God when we express love in the costliest ways. It may be that an undue equating of spiritual maturity with information-reception is indicating a sickness, not a health, in our body.

Muscles

Muscles are what enable a body to work. Muscles are about serving. Just as muscle tone is one of the key indicators of physical health, so readiness-to-serve is a diagnostic indicator in the church.

Paul diagnoses this at Corinth, where people are all fired up about showing off their spiritual gifts, but have divorced this from the serving that flows out of love. "Now I will show you a more excellent way," Paul says, and perhaps the most beautiful reflection on love ever written in human history flows out of his concern for the formation of a congregation.

When I was at Willow Creek, Bill Hybels often used to say that the place to start once any problem has been identified in the health of the body was to face it head on in the preaching ministry of the church. "We will teach our way out of any problem."

Years ago there was a time when the church seemed to be getting flabby around serving. Volunteers were harder to come by. People wanted boutique opportunities designed to contribute to their sense of fulfillment and talent. So the church did a 13-week series on the New Testament's teachings around servanthood and the priesthood of the believers. If they're going to reach their full potential, muscles have to get shocked every once in a while.

What the body is all about

When I was growing up we used to sing a song about the body in Sunday school: "Oh, be careful little eyes what you see,

Oh, be careful little eyes what you see,

For the Father up above is looking down in love,
So be careful little eyes what you see."

The following verses were "be careful little hands what you do" and "be careful little feet where you go."

I never liked that song.

It sounded ominous. It sounded like the kind of Sunday school song that George Orwell would write.

But Rich Mouw suggested it could be interpreted another way. It could mean that little eyes should be careful to see what Jesus would see when he looks on our world; that little feet should go to those places of loneliness and suffering where his feet would go; that little hands should do the acts of love and compassion that his hands would do.

Perhaps the body of Christ becomes beautiful when we all help each other be the eyes and feet and hands of the one we follow.

Over the last five years, our church has sent scores of people to Ethiopia. On one of the trips, Frank had to twist Hardwin's arm to get him to go. Hardwin is a busy doctor who has many demands on his time. But in response to Frank's relentless persistence Hardwin went. And had his life changed.

He sent me an email last week of what happened to him when he stood in the room with HIV/AIDS sufferers in Addis, and a woman who was drawing her last breaths held his hand and blessed him in Amheric. He wrote about how his attitude toward the people who come to his ER had been forever changed.

Whenever we reach out to love anyone who is suffering, he said, Jesus is there.

That's the body at work. That's the "we" we want to be. ①



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