

**LIFE-GIVING CHURCH**

Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life.” He indeed rose from the grave, and He is the supreme life-giver.

Several weeks ago, I began a series of messages on “Life-Givers.” I’ve spoken on life-giving parents, spouses, children, and last week I spoke about the great value of life-giving friends. A life-giving friend is one who knows all the stuff about you, but still likes you anyway. Such a friend helps you when you’re down (see Eccl. 4:9-12) and will fight to protect you or your reputation.

Of course, the truest friend we can have, the model for all good and genuine friendships, is Jesus. And He says, *I am with you, always*, Matthew 28:20. He knows everything about you, and loves you just the same. Today I am talking about life giving churches. These churches are filled with friends of Jesus ... who become life-giving friends like Him.

**What is a Life-Giving Church?**

I imagine all of you this morning could formulate an answer to that question. Would your answer express something of the true purpose of church? Or would your answer express your desires for how you’d like church to be for you? These are the questions we must ask ourselves. Those questions get at the heart of what it means to be a church. Here’s a few answers to that question, heard over the years:

1. Care of Church Members. Some say, or expect, or act as if, a true life-giving church is one that above all cares for the church members. This was a concern for the early church. Acts 6:1-4 tells how the early church ensured that the needy among them – especially widows and orphans - were taken care of. *Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world*, James 1:27. They cared for the needy, but without detracting from the primary purpose of church; which is to spread the good news of new life in Jesus Christ.

When this view (care of members) becomes the defining characteristic of a church, members come to expect the church and staff to be their chaplain and on-call comforter, while missing the greater purposes of God. If care-giving of members is the prime focus, the church will die.

BTW – fellowship is not socializing ... fellowship is Bible study and praying for one another ... like our small groups. Now that may include a meal, but the meal isn’t the only thing. This appeared in a church bulletin from Australia: “Thursday night potluck supper. Prayer and medication to follow.”

2. Helping The Poor. In one church where I served there was a woman who seemed to believe that the church’s primary purpose was to gather food and clothing for the poor and homeless. A worthy endeavor, indeed. In Old Testament times this was a concern: *He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says the Lord*, Jeremiah 22:16. This O. T. mandate applied to those poor who were part of God’s covenant community. In modern times, many churches have

expanded the concept of charity, to a concern for the poor in the entire community. We remember Jesus' words, *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor*, Luke 4:18 (Isaiah 61:1).

A concern for the poor is biblical and part of our Methodist tradition and begins with charity, but should also include opportunities to help the poor improve their lot, both materially and spiritually. Let not our eagerness to fill hungry stomachs, blind us to the need to fill hungry spirits. If feeding the poor becomes the prime focus, the church will die.

**3. Social Justice Causes.** Some Christians and congregations act as though their greatest purpose is to advocate for "social justice." Doesn't Scripture say, *...let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream*, Amos 5:24?

Our Methodist tradition advocated for reforms in law and society. John Wesley said, "We proclaim no personal gospel that fails to express itself in relevant social concerns; we proclaim no social gospel that does not include the personal transformation of sinners." That last part is crucial because justice is really experienced by individuals, each of whom God loves, and wants to redeem from sin. Causes and concerns can easily sweep us away. But the life-giving church knows and practices this truth: our only real cause is Jesus Christ and new life in Him.

**4. One Message, One Mission.** I propose that the life-giving church is the one that proclaims one message and continues on one mission. Among His disciples Jesus asked, *"Who do people say the Son of Man is?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."* Matt. 16:13.

*(Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter [meaning rock], and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it,"* 16-18.)

**One message: Jesus is the Son of God.** St. Paul wrote, *For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified*, 1 Corinthians 2:2. In Jesus Christ we know God's purpose in creation and the destiny humanity. God indeed sent his Son to walk among us, teach us, and willingly die on the Cross as atonement for the sins of all people. His body was laid in the tomb, but He rose from death and lives forever more. The story of Christ remains relevant today because it is true. Though people and nations have withered like grass, those who believe in Christ have stood firm on that which is enduring: *... you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven*, Matt. 26:64.<sup>1</sup>

**One mission was given by Christ Himself:** *Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you,'* Matt. 28:18-20.

### Life Giving Markers

Yes a life-giving church will care for its members, help the poor, and work for justice, but there are some indicators of a truly life-giving church. Here's a few (this is not an exhaustive nor exclusive list).

1. **Proclaim** one message and live one mission. Jesus Christ must be the true head of the church, or you don't have a church. A life-giving church exists to worship God through Jesus Christ and equip members to be on the mission field with Jesus. Worship comes before service. *Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence, I Peter 3:15.* Hey, we've got to tell others about Christ.<sup>2</sup>

2. **Encourage** personal commitment to Jesus. *Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved, Acts 2:21.* A genuine and personal relationship with Jesus issues in genuine service for and with Him. "Authentic religion," combines head and heart in worship and service of God.

On June 2, seven young people were confirmed as members of the church. They did not commit to "their Christian heritage," or a vague notion about God, or some family tradition. Those ideas don't last. They committed to the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, confessing Him as their personal Savior. It is God's solid action in the person of Jesus Christ that builds a firm foundation for their lives *...we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, Galatians 2:16.* [See also Rom. 3:21-24; 8].

3. **Recognize** the authority of Scripture in matters of faith. "Every doctrine must stand or fall by the Bible," said John Wesley. He referred to himself as a man of one book, meaning the Bible. He said, "It is dangerous to depart from Scripture ... most of the controversies which have disturbed the Church have arisen from people's wanting to be wise above what is written, not contented with what God has plainly revealed there." [See II Timothy 3:15-16.]

4. **Teach** the love of God in Jesus Christ. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life, John 3:16.* People need to know that God loves them in spite of their sin and has provided a way out of sin. Beginning with little children, this is a message begging to be heard. Did you hear about this announcement in a church bulletin? "For those of you who have children and don't know it, we have a nursery downstairs."

Seriously, children these days are growing up in an era of sexual license that is taking root in the culture at all levels. The whole gamut of sexual practices is being mainstreamed – with identity confusion abounding – and even pushed on children ... I mean who would have ever envisioned drag-queen story hour at an elementary school? Pride is the deification of self. Glorification of sin is never life-giving. Affirmation of sinful behaviors is not love, nor is harsh judgement. We are to be a loving lifeline to those who are in sin (and isn't that the case for all of us?)

In this context a life-giving church cannot simply condemn sinful behaviors and disparage confused and hurting people. We have something precious to offer ... we can offer a life-giving alternative to the broken, decaying, and ultimately deadly offerings of the woke culture. In the grace of Jesus Christ, broken, hurting, sinful, lonely people can find solace. In a relationship with Jesus, broken, hurting, sinful, lonely people can find a new and true identity as one redeemed into God's holy family. In His family – and let us practice being His family here – we can live lives of humility and honor.<sup>3</sup>

There are other indicators of a life-giving church that can be added to this list. I think the watchword for us is this: remain focused on Christ and His purpose for church.

## Life Giving Church Members

The only way possible to live the Christian life is through the Holy Spirit within us. *I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing*, John 15:5. Practice daily devotions that lead to devotional living. A life-giving church is authentic – seeking always to practice the preaching. I love this one: “Don’t forget next month’s Prayer & Fasting conference. Registration is \$50 and includes meals and snacks.” Or how about this one? “The peace-making meeting originally scheduled for today has been canceled due to a conflict.” So, we gotta ask ourselves, “If every member was like me, what kind of church would we have?”

St. Paul writes: *For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does*, 2 Cor. 10:3. Life-giving Christians will be immersed in the culture, but remaining fixed on our heavenly home – “in the world, but not of it.” Remember that quote from James? *Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world*, James 1:27. Notice the second part of that verse: *to keep oneself from being polluted by the world*.

Don’t ask a fish to describe water ... it’s very difficult for us to see how the culture we swim in has shaped how we see the world. Live in another country for a while, then come back to the US and you’ll begin to understand. The life-giving church should be the thermostat of culture, not just another thermometer. Spiritually reborn people, relying on the Holy Spirit, will begin to see the world from God’s perspective. Our challenge is always to read Scripture in a way that helps us “read” our culture – not the other way round. We don’t want to be like the frog in the kettle who doesn’t notice how the water is gradually heating up. When it’s boiling it’s too late.

We must know who we are and where we are going. *Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which are against your soul*, 1 Peter 2:11. [See also 1 Corinthians 7:31; Galatians 3:22]. The Scriptures tell us of God’s purpose in creation and of human destiny. It is a message of life that is vital to human society, for when the soul is restored in a disfigured culture, then life-giving relationships have a chance to flourish, and society is healed. The health and vitality of this congregation emerges when we share this spiritual medicine. Here’s another church bulletin blooper: “Our Low-Self-Esteem Support Group will meet Thursday at 6:30pm. Please enter through the back door.”

“Salvation lite” - something that feels good for the moment, or follows the tide of culture – does not last or transform lives. Churches decay when people cling to their picture of church or the shifting tides of culture, rather than cling to Christ Himself. Only the genuine article cures the sin-sick soul. Salvation is not found in feelings about God or a variety of spiritual paths, but in the concrete actions of a loving Father who gave us the real thing in Jesus, that He might heal our flesh and blood hurts, and sins in a specific way. This is the God to whom we say, “Thy will be done.” That, my friends, is a true salve for the soul.

***May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Rom. 15:5-6 [See also Eph. 4:29; Heb. 10:24-25; I Peter 3:8; Gal. 6:10; Heb. 2:10-12; I Peter 4:17]***

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<sup>1</sup>Jill Carattini, "A Slice of Infinity" at Ravi Zacharias International Ministries, Atlanta, GA.

<sup>2</sup> Our First Church mission statement says: "To bring people to the transforming power of Jesus Christ through membership in his family and to equip the members for ministry in the church and the world."

<sup>3</sup> Garry Ingraham, Transforming Congregations, June 2023.