

TUTORIAL
7.15

Introduction to 'Life'

This tutorial moves on to a new area of the W.I.L.D. outline: *Life*, and gives an introduction to that area.

Last time

We considered some factors that determine whether a group of God's people will be unified or fragmented. We looked briefly at what Paul told the Galatian and Ephesian churches about how their view of who they are in Christ plays into this...how the old things that once divided them are now irrelevant because of their new identity with Him. We thought about what kind of evidence we'd find in a church that has, or will have, contentions and divisions. We also noted how important it is for believers, right from the beginning, to associate the outward trajectory of the early Church with their own new identity as Jesus' witnesses. And we noted the fact that individuals and groups who are being taught effectively from God's Word will be wrestling with what it means to be relevant witnesses in their immediate circle of acquaintances and that they'll increasingly associate themselves with God's global purposes.

W.I.L.D. highlights important areas to think about

We started out on these Module 7 tutorials by reminding ourselves of the three main metaphors or pictures that God, the Author, has built into reality and used in His Narrative to describe the Church or the Ecclesia of His people: Building, Body and Bride. We know that Jesus Christ is keen for us, like all believers, to participate with Him in His purposes, and so we want to:

- understand how He is building the Church so that whatever we attempt to construct fits with His project,
- share His concern for the Body so that we can contribute effectively to its health, growth and maturity,
- experience something of His love for the Church so we can help to prepare the Bride for His coming.

To do that, we need to engage everything of who He's made us to be - our minds, our wills, our emotions - and to align them with His perspective, intentions and what He's passionate about. This happens as we know Him

better through His Narrative - His Word - as we walk in real dependence on Him, as we glean from the experience of others, and as we use the resources, abilities and gifts He provides. The W.I.L.D. framework we're introducing here doesn't replace any of that, but it helps to highlight important areas to keep in mind: as we plan how we can be effectively involved in His work; when we come across proposed methodologies for sharing Truth and church planting; or when we need to assess a situation in which God's Word is already being shared by ourselves or others.

Defining *Life*

So far we've considered five questions for "W" (*Word*) and "I" (*Identity*) respectively. Now we want to move on and do the same with "L" (*Life*). But what exactly are we talking about - what do we mean by *Life* when we use it as one of four lenses through which we consider the impact of Truth on an individual and a group of believers?

Attempts to define life from a semantic (i.e. its meaning as a word) or from a scientific perspective always feel unsatisfactory; they fall far short of the reality. The effort is doomed by the absence of an objective vantage point from which to define something so profound, something so fundamental to...well, to life. And there's something faintly absurd about someone who has been given the gift of life (at least physical life) trying to define it without any reference to the One who is both Life and the Life-giver. Those rather feeble efforts usually try to explain life by contrasting something that's alive, with objects that are dead, or that consist of only inanimate matter. They tend to focus on the processes all living organisms have in common: they react to stimuli, digest, reproduce, and pass their traits on to their offspring, they take in energy, undergo chemical transformation (metabolism), etc. As accurate as these observations may be, they are only descriptions of some of the characteristics of life, not the thing itself. They don't get to the heart, the living soul. They leave us cold because they fall so far short of what we see around us and feel within ourselves. They don't do justice to the dignity and enormous value that we understand God gives to life...when it is the life of His image-bearers, and especially those who have been restored through Christ to a relationship with Himself.

Life as defined in God's Word

So, as we look at the third of our four W.I.L.D. "lenses" to focus on more key aspects of how God works and how we can best contribute, we remind ourselves that any true understanding of what life truly is must begin and end with God. Speaking to the intellectuals in Athens, Paul said about God, that "He Himself gives life and breath to everything" and that "in Him we live and move and exist." (Acts 17:25–28). Certainly in the very succinct Genesis record of God's creation, we glimpse a picture there of vigorous, vibrant, verdant life bursting out everywhere, from single-celled organisms, bacteria, fungi and

plants right up to the dazzling complexity of animals. All of this brought into being and energised by the power of God's act of creative communication, His Word. What had been "formless and empty" was now ordered and full of life. The *form* (the universe and the laws that govern it) has *function* (movement, sound, beauty) and *fruit* (the outcomes that God intends).

Adam and Eve

Then, as the climax of creation, He forms a different kind of being, a man, and the first in a race that is to bear God's image. But this shape, lying there, is nothing more than a complex amalgamation of the fundamental elements of creation - electrons, atoms, and minerals that form cells, bones, muscles and organs. Yes, brilliantly constructed, and with amazing potential, but nothing more. That is, until God, in a very direct and personal way transmits - "breathes" the Narrative says - life into this still, cold body. And now *it* becomes *he*: a living, breathing, moving, thinking, speaking, and acting man, a person. The *form* (his physical body) now has *function* (the ability to reason, decide, respond, impact his environment, communicate) and the capacity to produce *fruit* (to hear, relate to, and choose to honour and worship God).

Of course Adam and Eve later chose a different path, the way of death, of separation from the Source of Life. They fell for the great deception - that they could use the gift of life for their own ends, directing it towards outcomes (*fruit*) of their own choosing, without guidance from God, and that the result would be a better, more fulfilling existence. The consequences for them and all their descendants, who also gladly choose the same lie, is a *form* of human life, with some residue of the *function*, but with none of the *fruit* that He intended.

The Children of Israel

We don't have time here to do more than trace the very outline of God's gracious response. How He provided temporary solutions, forms and functions (the sacrifices, the Law, the Tabernacle and Temple, the Levitical priesthood etc.). A provisional connection, accessed by faith, was established between God and man so that, although corrupted by sin, human life could have value and purpose. The life-restoring link was certainly forged between God and individuals, but by choosing the nation of Israel, He also demonstrated the value He places on Him being the energising force for groups of people who will follow Him. In fact, His commitment was so complete that He came to live among them as a community.

But the constrictive conditions of the Covenant that made His presence possible, also meant that the flow of life was not a free and easy one; it was constrained by elaborate *forms* and repetitive *functions* that were as much about distance and death as they were about access and life. And often the flow was all but blocked by their unfaithfulness. The *forms* were there to remind them of Him, and they legalistically fulfilled the required *functions* of the

Law, but without His involvement these became empty religious rituals that didn't produce genuine *fruit*. Eventually He told them He was disgusted and sickened by them endlessly bringing offerings, fasting, burning incense, conducting ceremonies etc. when their lives were so obviously removed from His (Isaiah 1:11–15). He said they had a clear choice “between life and death, between blessings and curses.” His heartfelt cry went out to them, “Oh, that you would choose life, so that you and your descendants might live!” (Deuteronomy 30:19). Although during that Old Covenant period there was always a handful of individuals who understood their need for Him as the source of life, the times when the whole nation chose Him as the focus of their corporate existence were rare. The inevitable result was that they were severely hampered in their ability to be a channel of God's life to the other people groups around them as He intended.

The Lord Jesus Christ

The history of God's quest for human beings who'll humbly depend on Him for every aspect of their existence reached a climax with the arrival of His Son on the earth. Here, finally, was someone whose *form* was typically human, but whose every *function* - from an underlying worldview through to values and behaviour - were shaped by God's Spirit. He provides us with a model for a life guided by God, but He is far more than that. He is also the avenue for that life. In fact He *is* that life! He asserted this in the clearest terms and, after spending three years with Him, His closest friends and followers on earth had absolutely no doubt that this was true. One of them would later say, “...We saw Him with our own eyes and touched Him with our own hands. He is the Word of life. This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen Him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that He is the one who is eternal life...” (1 John 1:1,2).

But the life that comes from Him cannot be superimposed on anything else. It's not just a matter of changing forms and functions. That's like trying to load the latest software onto a twenty-year-old computer. It just won't work. Everything has to be replaced - the hardware, the operating system, everything. Using far more powerful and compelling imagery than that, Jesus made this point when He told the Pharisee Nicodemus that for someone to experience the eternal life that Jesus offers, they have to be reborn by an act of His Spirit. This takes place when people believe in Him - in Jesus - and in the death that He would die on their behalf (John 3).

This brings us to something hugely important about His life - the kind that is directly linked to God - it's the opposite of self-focus, self-indulgence and self-protection. In fact, when someone experiences it most fully, they become willing to sacrifice, even to die, to give others access to it. Paul of Tarsus, who'd also been a Pharisee, would later tell a group of believers that they needed the perspective of Christ who willingly gave up the outer form of His existence as God to take on the form of humanity, the role of a slave and the destiny of death (Philippians 2). Jesus Himself said that the love of life for its

own sake results in its loss. He used the image of a seed that will sit in a stagnant, lifeless form, with all its potential fruit locked away, unless it is planted and dies in the soil. Only then can it produce what God wants, “a plentiful harvest of new lives” (John 12:24–25).

He, of course, willingly invested His life and, as the rich crop of human lives began to be harvested as a result, it became clear that not only were they individually linked to God, but that He also intended to have a connection to them as a Group. Unlike the basis of the first relationship He’d forged with a people - Israel - this one would not be conditioned by the restrictive forms and functions of the Mosaic Law that spelled death (2 Corinthians 3:6). Because Jesus Himself forms the conduit for this new life, there are no restrictions other than the compelling “Law” of His love and grace. His Spirit coming so dramatically to “indwell” the brand new Ecclesia guaranteed the direct, permanent link to God from the beginning.

God’s Word itself

A major part of the Spirit’s role in the Church would be to orchestrate the completion of God’s revelation, the “word of life” as Paul called it (Philippians 2:16). This would not be, is not, just objective information, OR religious dogma to be manipulated by the powerful, OR text to be interpreted at will, OR a cosy dialogue with the Divine. Having been inspired or “breathed out” by God’s Spirit is evocative of Him breathing life into Adam, and by extension, the human race. His Word carries within it His own living, sovereign power (2 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 4:12). Any attempt we make to define the new life that Jesus has won for us as individuals and a Church has to take into account the role of His Word. It is the scalpel God’s Spirit uses to carve away the layers of lifeless *form* and dead *function* that people and cultures hide behind. Exposed, He convinces them that they stand guilty before a righteous, holy Judge (John 16:8). Then, in the receptive conditions of faith, He uses the Word to implant completely new life and nurture it towards health, maturity and productivity (Ephesians 2:5).

This needs to be highlighted because the kind of *Life* we hope to find or want to contribute to - i.e. what we’re trying to define in this part of the W.I.L.D. outline - simply doesn’t exist without the powerful living impact of God’s Word. But as we’ve also noted, because God has always chosen to involve His faithful people in His purposes, the Spirit does not generally wield this amazingly potent force without their involvement. This ties in with another thread we see woven into His Narrative: although God acts miraculously - and Him producing life through His Word is most definitely a miracle - with only rare and notable exceptions does His activity clearly circumvent the laws He embedded in His Creation. So the supernatural activity of God’s Spirit as He brings life through His Word takes place in partnership with His children as they share clearly in the “normal” medium of human language and against the backdrop of people’s everyday lives.

Life produces fruit

The same principle holds true for the *fruit* of the life we should be looking for in any situation where Truth is being shared. As we noted before, under the Old Covenant God was not interested in the Jew's religious activity for the sake of it; in fact, it disgusted Him. *Form* and *function* are only legitimate when they produce *fruit*. Using His famous vine analogy, Jesus made it perfectly clear that this *fruit* that is God's intention for His people is only possible when His life is flowing through them (John 15:5). Although still bearing the marks of sin in a world dominated by God's Enemy, their bodies *can* be used as instruments to do what is right for the glory of God (Romans 6:22). This is a miracle that can happen when believers are gathered in a church building together, but it can also happen any day of the week in kitchens, classrooms, offices, factories, tennis courts, village huts, dusty streets and rice fields.

The *fruit* that the Spirit wants to produce in God's people is only possible as they tap into the awesome power of Christ's resurrection, but the results are rarely dramatic and eye-catching. His authentic *fruit* - things like love, kindness and self-control - are usually the result of choices that result in small acts of generosity, the right responses made, tongues being held, encouragement given, the needs of others put first, the courage to speak His name in hostile environments, the discipline to keep moving forward no matter what. These are the true miracles that are the product of Christ's life being lived out. And when these "living sacrifices" are combined, when a group of God's children are gladly offering their minds, arms and legs, their time, creativity and money to Him as a collective act of worship and service in the real world, they add up to much more than the sum of the parts. He is able to use their combined gifts, talents and experiences to produce *fruit* through them as they share His life-giving Word in the local community and beyond.

So as we project what the genuine life of an individual believer or a church should look like, or as we try to recognise it in an existing situation, we need to ask Him for His eyes to see. We need to learn to:

- Picture how appropriate *form* can serve legitimate *function* that produces genuine *fruit* according to His perspective, not according to our own assumptions.
- Detach ourselves from our own formative, cultural church background so when we see *form* that is familiar to us we don't take that as *prima facie* evidence that true *Life* is present (or if we see a different form to assume that true life is not present).
- Look beyond unfamiliar *form* so that we don't unconsciously assume that it is wrong or, on the other hand, blindly accept its validity just because it looks innovative, exotic or "indigenous".
- Understand how the Spirit uses God's Narrative - His Word - communicated clearly and cohesively, to equip His children in the long-

term process of shaping *what* they do and *how* they do it according to His purposes.

- Recognise the often small, seemingly unspectacular but authentic fruit of God’s Spirit in the lives of individuals and groups of His children, and celebrate them for the miracles they are.



DISCUSSION POINTS

Introduction to ‘Life’

1. Consider each of the points below and discuss the obstacles to each and how they might be overcome.
 - Picture how appropriate *form* can serve legitimate *function* that produces genuine *fruit* according to His perspective, not our own assumptions.
 - Detach ourselves from our own formative, cultural church background so when we see *form* that is familiar to us we don’t take that as prima facie evidence that true *Life* is present.
 - Look beyond unfamiliar *form* so that we don’t unconsciously assume that it is wrong or, on the other hand, blindly accept its validity just because it looks innovative, exotic or “indigenous”.
 - Understand how the Spirit uses God’s Narrative - His Word - communicated clearly and cohesively, to equip His children in the long-term process of shaping *what* they do and *how* they do it according to His purposes.
 - Recognise the often small, seemingly unspectacular but authentic fruit of God’s Spirit in the lives of individuals and groups of His children, and celebrate them for the miracles they are.