

## ESSENTIAL CHURCH, PART 4: DIVINE ACTIVITY

Daniel 1, John 6:63 (NASB)

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Years ago when I was about twelve years into pastoral ministry I hit a dry spot. I felt becalmed spiritually and in my ministry. I really needed to spend some time alone seeking the Lord so I called a pastor friend in Arizona and asked if I could crash with him for a week. He agreed and off I went to the Valley of the Sun.

We spent some time together hiking and seeing sights but a lot of the time I was on my own. Sometimes I was just recharging my personal batteries and other times I was eagerly seeking the Lord for a fresh sense of guidance and empowerment. At times like that I am asking God questions like: Am I doing the right things? What is really important? Where are the opportunities for effective ministry in this time and place? and Please God! Can you not give me a fresh blast of empowerment and wisdom so I can carry on?

The time drew near for me to leave. I had had a fabulous time of refreshment and fellowship but I did not feel like I was getting an answer from the Lord. I got up early so I could drive to Phoenix and catch my flight back to New York. As I was driving mechanically in the predawn darkness I began to have the sense that the Lord was speaking to me. A verse upon which I had been meditating as I had walked among the saguaro cacti kept rolling around my head. Thought upon thought began to burst into my mind. I pulled off on the side of the highway, switched on the dome light, and began to write things down on a 3x5 card. I jammed that card pretty full. And then it was time for me to keep driving.

It was like a giant searchlight had been switched on. I had heard my Father's voice--again. I felt like I was ready to go back, put the harness of ministry over my shoulders, and pull. The truths on that 3x5 card changed my ministry permanently. My first Sunday back I preached on it and I saw the look of enlightenment on many faces. Our church changed as a result.

It had to do with the *sine qua non* of church ministry. *Sine qua non* is Latin for "without this—not." It is a reference to the essential element in a thing. For example a marriage without love is not really a marriage, it is a domestic partnership. A medicine with no active ingredient is not a medicine, it is a placebo. A visit to the first chapter of the book of Daniel reveals to us this *sine qua non*, and then we will travel to the gospel of John to encounter our Lord Jesus laying it out in no uncertain terms.

### THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENT IN DANIEL'S LIFE AND MINISTRY

The God of Israel had spent centuries disciplining and warning his people that if they kept acting as if they were not his people he would eventually give them what they wanted. Sadly, they paid him little mind and so the Lord sent the armies of Nebuchadnezzar, King of the Babylonian empire, to overrun Israel. Rather than pillaging everything at once and removing all of the people Nebuchadnezzar began by cherry picking. He took only a portion of the sacred articles of the Temple, and we pick up the story with what he took next: **"Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, the chief of his officials, to bring in some of the sons of Israel, including some of the royal family and of the nobles, youths in whom**

was no defect, who were good-looking, showing intelligence in every branch of wisdom, endowed with understanding and discerning knowledge, and who had ability for serving in the king's court; and he ordered him to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. The king appointed for them a daily ration from the king's choice food and from the wine which he drank, and appointed that they should be educated three years, at the end of which they were to enter the king's personal service. Now among them from the sons of Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. Then the commander of the officials assigned new names to them; and to Daniel he assigned the name Belteshazzar, to Hananiah Shadrach, to Mishael Meshach and to Azariah Abed-nego" (Daniel 1:3-7).

The king was seeking raw talent which he could shape into useful members of his administration. He was no doubt selecting fine young men from every nation which he had conquered. He set them up to eat his food and study with his wise men. He also gave them new names and did everything possible to make them become Babylonian.

Daniel and his friends could do some of this without compromise, but the meat and wine sacrificed to the false gods of Babylon were a big problem, as the text goes on to say: **"But Daniel made up his mind that he would not defile himself with the king's choice food or with the wine which he drank; so he sought permission from the commander of the officials that he might not defile himself. Now God granted Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the commander of the officials, and the commander of the officials said to Daniel, 'I am afraid of my lord the king, who has appointed your food and your drink; for why should he see your faces looking more haggard than the youths who are your own age? Then you would make me forfeit my head to the king.' But Daniel said to the overseer whom the commander of the officials had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, 'Please test your servants for ten days, and let us be given some vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance be observed in your presence and the appearance of the youths who are eating the king's choice food; and deal with your servants according to what you see.'** So he listened to them in this matter and tested them for ten days" (Daniels 1:8-14).

Daniel chose to walk by faith and in the holiness of the Lord, and so he could not consume anything dedicated to idols or the meat of any unclean animals. So he set up what looks almost like an ancient clinical trial with a control group. He and his friends would go on a restricted diet while the others would eat the king's calorie-laden food. There is no argument here for the benefits of vegetarianism, which nevertheless may be great. This is entirely about Daniel seeking to preserve a holy walk with the God of Israel. How it turned out is in the next verse: **"At the end of ten days their appearance seemed better and they were fatter than all the youths who had been eating the king's choice food"** (Daniel 1:15).

I am aware that commentators are split on whether there was a divine intervention at this point. Based on the information we have, the diet Daniel chose was restricted over that of the other students. It is theoretically possible for a vegetarian diet to cause rapid weight gain if it includes saturated fat and sugar. Plant foods, as a group, are naturally lower in calories. For example, unless the king of Babylon liked to eat vegetables for dessert, Daniel's diet did not include any desserts. But he text does not say that Daniel and his buddies grew slimmer and gained more definition in their muscle groups. It says plainly in Hebrew that they became both fitter and fatter on a vastly restricted diet in the span of ten

days.

And so I conclude that the evidence points definitively to divine activity. God loves to do such things to glorify his name! If his young Israelite men were being backed into defilement and their only out was to eat a restricted diet, he would make them fitter and fatter than any of the young men who were stuffing themselves on the royal diet. And this was not the only blessing he gave them for glorifying his name, as the rest of the chapter tells us: **"So the overseer continued to withhold their choice food and the wine they were to drink, and kept giving them vegetables. As for these four youths, God gave them knowledge and intelligence in every branch of literature and wisdom; Daniel even understood all kinds of visions and dreams. Then at the end of the days which the king had specified for presenting them, the commander of the officials presented them before Nebuchadnezzar. The king talked with them, and out of them all not one was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's personal service. As for every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king consulted them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and conjurers who were in all his realm. And Daniel continued until the first year of Cyrus the king"** (Daniel 1:16-21).

Daniel and his friends applied themselves to their studies for three years, never eating a mouthful of defiled food. God blessed their studies so that they became vastly superior to every other one of the young men who represented the cream of the crop of every nation the king had conquered. Everyone could see it, especially the king. Unless we are prepared to say that Jewish blood made these young men that much better than everyone else, we must see divine activity in the blessing of their work. Daniel, of course, received divine blessings beyond these. He received by direct impartation the ability to understand dreams and visions. And in a vastly understated sentence at the end of the chapter, we discover that God protected Daniel in the courts of pagan kings into his eighties, surviving four changes of ruler, two of which were by assassination, and then surviving the fall of Babylon itself to the Medo-Persian Cyrus! One may think of this as the long version of surviving the lion's den by the hand of the Lord.

In the same way, the *sine qua non* of church ministry must be not great programs, not great music or preaching, not large attendances or big offerings, but one thing alone. Just about everything else can vary widely, but divine activity is the definitive mark of an essential church. If God does not show up because we were trusting in ourselves in any way, it all comes to nothing. A. W. Tozer wrote: "I say that a Christian congregation can survive and often appear to prosper in the community by the exercise of human talent and without any touch from the Holy Spirit! All that religious activity and the dear people will not know anything better until the great and terrible day when our self-employed talents are burned with fire and only that which was wrought by the Holy Ghost will stand forever!" (*Tragedy in the Church: The Missing Gifts*, Harrisburg: Christian Publications, Inc., p. 30). And any church which sets itself to thrive by human talent will eventually produce two inevitable results: weariness and disappointment.

## JESUS SET THE STANDARD FOR AN ESSENTIAL CHURCH

This would be less compelling if Christ did not make this abundantly clear. And here is where I share with you the truths which rained down on me like a waterfall on the side of an Arizona highway in the dark. Jesus spoke these words to a group of grumbling disciples: **"It is the Spirit who gives life;**

**the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life"** (John 6:63).

Before we jump to the positive part of this statement, let's start with the life-changing impact of the negative: **"The flesh profits nothing."** Quiz yourself: Did your flesh contribute anything to your salvation? No. But after you trusted Christ, did you not, like everyone else, go on a self clean-up program where you strove to make yourself holy? How did that work for you? Have you been perfect since the day you believed? In practical sanctification as well as in salvation **"the flesh profits nothing."** How about ministry? Do you and I really think that **"the flesh profits nothing?"** This is most difficult for highly effective people to receive. For example, we all think that smart, well-spoken, motivated pastors are going to bring success to our churches. Now, I want men like that as much as anyone else. But unless those traits are accompanied by total and absolute trust in the Lord they will "profit nothing."

Daniel and his friends did not become fitter and fatter because vegetables are automatically better food, but because of the divine activity of blessing their faithfulness in the face of great pressure to compromise. They did not become vastly superior to all other students because of human factors, but because of divine activity. And in Daniel's life, he did not survive the intrigue of five pagan royal administrations because of superior human wisdom. His life is the story of divine activity. And *solus Deo gloria*—to God alone be the glory! That is the whole point.

Christ broke the positive component of divine activity in our lives into two parts: **"It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life"** (John 6:63). A verse which was crucial to the launching of The Christian and Missionary Alliance is found in Zechariah: **"Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit," says the LORD of hosts**" (4:6b). We learn first that the divine activity—the life—we desperately want to see in our churches comes only by the Holy Spirit of God. That is why personal sanctification is a prerequisite to the release of spiritual life among us. Daniel took his life in his hands to walk with his God in holiness. Are we willing to do the same thing? If we are not, we will be like the church Tozer described: effective on the outside, but inwardly exhausted and disappointed that God did not show up.

Secondly, we are told that divine activity comes by the agency of the word of God—specifically, that God's words are spirit and life. This word "spirit" seems to be a reference to something other than the Holy Spirit which was mentioned in the first part of the verse. This word can also mean "breath" or "wind." Have you learned what it means that God's word is so crucial to your life that it is like oxygen?

This week I did not know what I was going to preach. I could have gone several different ways. I always have background studies in my devotional notebook from which I can draw. I was feeling exhausted and a bit spiritually dry, so I wanted to rely on my pre-existing background studies to save work. But something happened which often happens to me. I turned to my next chapter of Bible reading and drank in what the Lord wanted to say to me. And then, as I was not thinking about preparing anything to teach, the truth of God's word in the first chapter of Daniel began to open up like a flower blooming. I felt like I was getting oxygen to my soul! And so you are getting this sermon rather than any other by the work of God to give life to me.

Are you giving oxygen to your soul by reading God's word on a regular basis, like breathing in and out? I invite you to embrace this simple discipline. It is the path to divine activity in your life and

in your ministry.

Early in my ministry I came across a church growth book being used in a local seminary. Like all pastors, I wanted growth. The book promised a revolutionary method which was guaranteed to bring growth to any church. That was tantalizing! As I read hungrily I discovered that this method was to assemble focus groups, prompt them with key questions about where the participants wanted the future of the church to go, and then...dramatic pause...just do whatever the focus groups said!

I was floored. It was an appeal for total reliance on human wisdom. I already knew where that path would lead—exhaustion and disappointment, combined with spiritual starvation. Been there, done that.

In an essential church, divine activity is normal. It is the *sine qua non*—"without this--not." This is the opposite of the managed church. I do not say that we should not have good organization, but organization without the life of God is worthless.

I invite you to reckon with me on the personal and corporate nothingness of human strength and wisdom. I invite you to seek with me the life of the Holy Spirit by walking in holiness, even if it puts you at odds with the whole world. And I invite you to draw breath for life from the word of God.

That's the path to an essential church. I don't want anything else. What do you want?