



## Editor's Note

It is always a temptation for religious publications to orient their material toward the big audiences. A large readership seems the only hope for survival. And as a general rule, this is probably true. But what about all the little groups in obscure places that are dying a slow death of attrition with few seeming to care? Are there words of encouragement for them? Of course there are, because in the Lord there is always hope. And thus the current series on "alive-ness" in the church. It may not be

for everybody, but some elders are taking up the challenge and purposing with the Lord's help to become more relevant to the needs of people. If you're blessed to be in a healthy, growing church fellowship, why not include in your prayer life, a struggling church in your community? We have already seen that great things come from small prayers! And further, why not send them a copy of one of these articles?



### Problem Solving

## Thoughts on Local Church "Alive-ness" (part 3) *by Jack Spender*

In previous articles on the "alive-ness" of a local church fellowship, we laid the foundation of the need for honesty about our present condition, and the willingness to change. Next we began to consider Acts 2:42 as a foundation verse for evaluating the meetings of any church gathering. Last issue, we began to think about apostles' doctrine, or what we would call Bible teaching. We will complete that in this article.

Incidentally, it has been brought to my attention that some elders who read ESN are not treating this series as articles to be read, but as a study guide for their particular situation. Praise the Lord! The exhortation they give: "Be very practical." This is always a good reminder. Thus, in order to get the most benefit from the material to follow, let me suggest four things to keep in mind as we move along:

#### Understanding "Alive-ness"

1) Alive-ness is not a cause, it is a result. If it's lacking, there are some things to check. We are not manufacturing it; we are removing obstacles that hinder it.

2) Alive-ness is most likely to flourish when the following important areas of church life are healthy: Content, structure, and climate. "Content" refers to the nature and quality of what is provided for the flock when meeting. "Structure" refers to the tangible (physical) setting in which the content is provided, and is much more important than many people realize. "Climate" as we have already noted, refers to the intangible setting and includes things like unity, acceptance, attitudes, warmth, and yes, even the feelings and perceptions of people. Such things affect the freedom of the Holy Spirit to work.

3) True spiritual alive-ness is a wonderful thing! It is marked by a holy excitement that God is at work by His Spirit in

our midst, and people are finding food for their souls and healing in their relationships. It is to be distinguished from the carnal excitement that results when the church becomes like a social club competing with the world's thrills.

4) Alive-ness depends upon an understanding that it has pleased God to make all of this a cooperative work, i.e., both God and man working together (II Cor. 6:1). Any who have questions about this should study, for example, John 11, noting the things the people had to do (vs. 34, 39, 44) and the work which only God could do (vs. 43). Don't make this complicated! We see it every Sunday as we prepare our meeting place and arrange the symbols on the table so that the Lord will do what He alone can do; move in the hearts to turn remembrance into worship.

To summarize: Alive-ness in the church is a result, not a cause; there are things we can evaluate and work on to encourage a genuine (not carnal) result. Waiting for God to do what He has told us to do, will not work. We must act. Now we return to our study of the Bible teaching aspect of Acts 2:42.

#### Principles from Nehemiah 8

In Nehemiah 8, we have the record of a revival among God's earthly people Israel, and some things that contributed to it. The setting is different but the principles are timeless, so we'll refer to it as we evaluate the content, structure, and climate of local works today.

As to *content*, elders are to feed the flock of God, which means they must ensure that the sheep are getting real food. There must be milk for the young and some meat for those more mature. Sound teaching, both topical and expository, based on all Scrip-

*(Continued on page 3)*

## Leadership Character

# The Master's Master Principle

by David Dunlap

The teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ stands in stark contrast to the principles of the world. Indeed, that which the world holds in high esteem is usually regarded of little value by Him. Our Lord's teaching was considered revolutionary. Consider just a few of His principles: Concerning our fellowmen He says, "Love your enemies;" concerning taxation He said, "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's;" and regarding persecution, "Bless those that curse you and despitefully use you." However, the greatest of our Lord's teachings may be found in the area of leadership:

"Whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all" (Mark 10:43-44). Most people have no objection to being a "boss," but servant-leadership holds little attraction for them. In the modern world, the term "servant" has a very lowly connotation, but not so with the Lord.

Throughout the Bible we find this same principle. For instance, we do not read, "Moses, My leader," but "Moses, My servant." Many of the Bible's greatest leaders were called servants: Abraham, Moses, Joshua, and David, among others. In fact, the word "leader" occurs only six times in the Bible—three times in the singular and three times in the plural. In contrast, the noun "servant" is used over 800 times, and the verb "to serve" is used over 300 times. More than fifty times in the Old Testament, King David is called a "servant of the Lord," and Moses is called a "servant" over forty times. Although the term "servant" has a connotation of lowliness and insignificance in our contemporary world, our Lord raised it to an essential principle of spiritual leadership.

Our Lord viewed the church as a body of believers who would serve

one another. The apostle Paul expressed the same idea: "Through love serve one another" (Galatians 5:13). And of course, our loving service is to stretch out beyond the walls of the church to the needy world around us. But unfortunately, it is usually the few who serve the many. Our Lord knew that such a principle would not be welcomed in

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the world; however, nothing less would be required of those who desired to rise to New Testament leadership. Sadly, jealousy, envy, and criticism are often more common. A former professor of theology at Wheaton College, Dr. Merrill Tenney (1904-1985) writes, "...the disciples' minds were preoccupied with dreams of elevation to office in the coming kingdom. They were jealous lest one of their fellows should claim the best place. Consequently, no one of them was likely to abase himself by volunteering to wash the feet of the others. They were ready to fight for a throne, but not for a towel!"<sup>1</sup>

The Lord's disciples wanted the crown and not the cross, they wanted to be masters and not servants.

Servant leadership in the New Testament church comes at great cost. To esteem others as "better" than ourselves, and to look not every man to his own things, but every man on the things of others, (Philippians 2:3-4) doesn't come easily to us. Yet the Lord Jesus Christ only said once that He was "leaving an example" and that was the example of washing the feet of the disciples (John 13:15)—an example of servant-hood. No theological school or leadership course can confer this kind spiritual leadership

on His people.

Finally, the best and most effective leadership is humble servant-leadership. Have you ever noticed that nearly all the leaders (or servants) God raised up were men or women who didn't seek after the position? There is hardly a single effective leader who was not thrust into the position by the inward pressure of the Holy

Spirit and the need of the situation at hand. Such were Moses, David, Samuel, the prophets, and the apostle Paul in the New Testament. There is hardly a single godly, effective leader from the time of the apostle Paul to the

present day who promoted himself or selected himself for leadership.

No. Rather, I believe that it is just the other way around. The man who is ambitious, self-assured, and self-confident is surely disqualified as a biblical leader. The true leader will have no desire to lord it over Christ's people, but will be humble, gentle, and self-sacrificing. He will be as ready to follow as to lead. Yet when the Spirit of God makes it clear that he is to take greater leadership, he is ready to serve with all that is in him. This is the kind of leader God seeks and this is the kind of leader we need.

Endnotes 1. Merrill Tenney, John – The Gospel of Belief, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1976), p. 199



## Thoughts on Local Church "Alive-ness" (continued from page 1)

ture, Old Testament and New Testament, both doctrinal and practical, not choked by competing items, is essential for health and growth. Alive-ness will not be present without it.

In Neh. 8:1, we note that the content was "the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had commanded..." and the gathering included "all the people." It may be appropriate to hold a class for the little ones of the church, but youth - especially in the teenage years need to hear the same ministry as their parents, and be included in discussions about God's message for the day while returning home from the meeting, and at the dinner table. Many blame schools and colleges when their young people go off to school and never return to assembly fellowship. But the problem usually begins in the early years when they are not interacting with the adults about the messages on the Lord's day, and coming to understand why we believe what we do, and why we meet as we do.

As to **structure**, we note that the people assembled in a suitable place, and to improve communication, we read in verse 4: "And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood which they had made for the purpose." This shows that those in leadership anticipated and provided for clear communication. Those who lead in the assembly must evaluate every detail that affects the communication of the Word: seating, lighting and sound control all have a part to play. Many now use audio/visual aids, which can be a help if they are servants and not masters; if they edify rather than entertain, and if they don't discourage people from bringing and consulting their own Bibles.

Supporting items such as music, hymns, announcements, prayer, special music, etc. may all have a place, but elders must be watchful that these things do not compete for time with the message. People have a limited attention span. It's good to ask, "What is getting their first and best attention in the first half hour of the meeting?"

As to **climate**, we now come to the part that is critical to understand. The complaint is heard often: "We provide good preaching in a comfortable setting but still there is deadness." Once again, we are not interested in artificial or emotional "alive-ness," but rather, by giving patient attention to a healthy spiritual climate, we may encourage an environment in which "alive-ness" may flourish.

How? Here are some important principles illustrated in Nehemiah 8.

1) We must be convinced that God wants to speak to His people! In 8:1 we see that the people assembled specifically to hear the Word of God. The purpose was not entertainment it was education! The elders and mature believers must believe this and work toward it. Wherever possible, distractions and competing items should be eliminated.

2) We must be convinced that the people need to understand the Word that is spoken. In verses 7, 8 we read that, "they caused the people to understand the law." How did they do it? They read distinctly, giving the sense or meaning, and "caused them to understand the reading." In order for this to happen today, there must not only be good teaching, but provision for people to ask questions, participate in discussions, and hear testimony of God's work! This happens best in informal settings. Many find midweek meetings in homes a helpful tool. Small churches may use different approaches. It's OK to be creative, which may mean stepping outside our "comfort zone" or traditions. If something doesn't work, admit it, and try a different approach. Listen to the people to understand how they learn best. But be sure they are getting help with questions about the meaning of, and problems they are experiencing in real life application of the Word.

3) We must expect a response to the Word. This is clear from Neh. 8:9-12. The message produced a work in the heart of the people. But people are sheep, and need guidance from older believers. Nehemiah was a good leader and told them appropriate ways to express their obedience. Note the link between understanding and celebration; "to eat, to drink ... and make great mirth," and then service "to send portions." (vs. 12).

### Making it Practical

What will all of this look like in your local fellowship? Fortunately, churches are living things with great diversity in size and people, so the outworking will be different in every group. But one thing is for sure, you will recognize "alive-ness" when you see it; no one will have to point it out!

Don't hide any of this from the people. Be open about the needs you

have as a group, and your willingness to change, so that all can pray together. Involve the saints in discussions about the items already covered above. If you don't like some of the terms, use your own! But by all means avoid being defensive about the content, structure and climate of your gatherings.

It's amazing what practical insights come from the Scriptures when studied in this way. One of my favorite examples is the Lord's feeding of the 5000, found in all four gospels. Think about it for a moment.

**Content** - the people were given a substantial feeding of both spiritual and physical food.

**Structure** - they sat down on "green grass"; ideal for families to eat together in groups of 50 and 100 - ideal to move around so that none are overlooked twelve designated men, known to the crowd, handing out the food

**Climate** - An atmosphere of compassion for the people; like sheep Joyful acceptance of what a young boy provided. Thankfulness for what God would do with it. Abundant provision: "Have all you want". Freedom from harshness; Don't worry about crumbs or leftovers

No wonder the people made a long journey on foot the next day to seek more of this!

Can we have a compassionate, joyful, thankful, generous, "don't worry about small problems" attitude in our Bible hour "feedings"? Why not? If those who lead are following the example of the Lord Jesus, and if the people are sensing the miracle of God meeting needs, why should we not expect it? And here is the wonderful part: Sheep may be "dumb" (as some people say), but they know where the food is, and they respond to shepherd care. In such an environment, it won't be very long until someone says: "Look at all the Alive-ness!"

Remember a paraphrase of Mark 2:27: "The meetings were made for man, and not man for the meetings." And after the sheep have been fed, there will be a wonderful variety of responses. This will lead to our next study on fellowship.



## Wives' Corner

# Sara's Story

by Elizabeth O'Neal

It was a day pretty much like any other for me at work, and it was also a time in my life when I was trying to come to terms with some hard things that just did not seem to make sense to me, or even be consistent with the Lord's promises or character. I was talking with Him frequently about them, complaining not a little, and freely offering Him suggestions about how I thought they could be better handled!

On this particular day one of the patients on my assignment (as a pediatric nurse) was an adorable little three year old girl named Sara recovering from heart surgery. She had been born with a defect that not so long ago would have considerably limited and shortened her life. Now, however, with advances in knowledge and techniques, with a few surgeries as she grew, she could look forward to a pretty normal life. One of these staged procedures had just taken place, gone perfectly, and she was doing well. Today it was time for the tubes in her chest to come out---a good thing---and to get a blood sample to check some other markers of her progress.

Sara had great parents. Either Mom or Dad was with her constantly. And so, as we began to do what needed to be done, Mom was holding her tight and doing her best to reassure her. Sara would have none of her mother's com-

fort however, and protested loudly and vigorously as we proceeded. "Mommy, make them stop!" She clearly could not understand why her mother, who she knew loved her very much, would not only let these big strangers frighten and hurt her but actually help them hold her down! If she let them do this to her, what else might she allow? And the fact was that legally Mom could have made us stop, but she knew that these things had to happen in order for her daughter to grow up healthy and strong. She would have loved to explain to Sara that in coming years she would be very grateful these things had happened, but of course, she just wasn't able to understand at this developmental stage in her life. Despite being as bright a child as could be, she was still only three.

Even as I was leaning over the table that day, I could sense the lesson for me: "You're a little bit like Sara, you know. I'd love to explain to you what I'm doing right now, but just as she is limited by her "three-ness", so you are limited by your humanity. Just as Sara will someday be glad for these things that gave her a chance to grow up, so someday you'll be able to understand things you just can't right now. Trust Me here, I know it hurts, but there's a good reason for it." Just as Sara had to hold two seemingly

incompatible truths in her little head: "Mommy loves me very much," and "Mommy is letting them - even helping them - hurt me," sometimes we must also. Both statements were absolutely true.

That everyday event on a very ordinary day has become for me one of the most significant points of reference in my life. On so many days since, when I am hurt or perplexed, I remember Sara's story and am reminded that my Father is still holding me, and is accomplishing His purposes. I think He is still giving parables...



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**Contact Info:** *Elders' ShopNotes*, c/o 112 Doolittle Dr. Bethany, CT. 06524 USA; email: [alan7s@yahoo.com](mailto:alan7s@yahoo.com) Phone: 203-393-0078.

Publisher/Editor: Jack Spender  
Editorial assistance: Ruth Rodger  
Layout, Technical Asst: Sherri Jason

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Note: All words referring to God have the initial letter capitalized. While the original languages of the Bible do not use capitalization, this is the convention in some translations but not in others. So at times there may be inconsistencies in usage in ESN articles.

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