



SPIRITUAL VITALITY

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ACTS 29
COMPETENCIES

Biblical Foundations

Spiritual vitality is the heart, center, foundation, cause and goal of all that we do as church planters and as Christians. Spiritual vitality is spiritual life, and spiritual life is the life we were created for. The thrust of such life is articulated with great glory and immense challenge by Paul in Philippians 1:21, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain". A church planter with spiritual vitality will be a person whose life is shaped by Christ's gospel.

The origin of spiritual vitality

The origin of spiritual life lies with God. Jesus goes straight for this theme in discussion with the teacher Nicodemus:

Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. (John 3:3-8)

To follow Christ requires a new life. We are as capable of deciding to follow Christ as a corpse is capable of playing the banjo. It is hard for wise and learned Nicodemus to grasp such humbling truth. It is hard for all of us, but it is the glorious wonder of the gospel that our salvation relies entirely on the effort and work of God, and in no part on our own abilities. We were dead in our sins (Ephesians 2:1). That is why we needed to be born again, to be given a new life. We were not only wounded, hurt or made sick by our sins. We were dead. Our heart was stone, incapable of life (Ezekiel 36:26).

Our spiritual vitality is given by the Holy Spirit uniting us to Christ, specifically in his death and resurrection: "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Romans 6:5).

Spiritual vitality is the life of those raised with Christ. It is a free gift to us, although costly to God. It cost our Father the blood of his Son. It cost Christ the horror of hell and death as he bore our sins in his body, suffering the wrath and judgment, the very hell, that we deserve as sinners, idolaters, lawbreakers and rebels. He died in our place, our substitute. As Jesus died we also, united to him, died to our old life.

When God raised Christ on the third day, we were raised with him: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3).

This new spiritual vitality was applied to us by the Holy Spirit in bringing about our new birth, with a new heart to live a new life. Spiritual vitality is a gifted life. It is the freedom of the Christian; it is following as a disciple of Christ. We cannot lose this life. Even death will not kill us; now it is gain, the doorway to Christ's welcome.

The fight for spiritual vitality

We cannot lose our spiritual life, but life is still a daily battle. God gives us life, freely and powerfully, and we need to live the life we are given. We cannot extinguish this new life, but strangely we can live as though dead (eg. Galatians 5:1). We are set free from slavery to sin, but we can choose to obey the old master even though he has no rightful power over us. Why slaves would choose to do this makes no sense; but then sin never did.

Spiritual vitality is more than the new birth, it is also the vigor and glory of the new life. This is where the battle comes, because we have a new heart but an old flesh. We *are* risen with Christ, but we have not yet inherited the fullness of this. We still wait for the day of resurrection, when Jesus returns and our bodies are "raised imperishable" (1 Corinthians 15:42, NIV). Until then we fight for spiritual vitality.

We fight, but we do not fight alone. When we were united with Christ by the Spirit it was as his Bride, as members of his body. We were not united to him as individuals, but as part of the church. We do not strive for life as individuals, but as brothers and sisters in a church. Spiritual life is family life, just as God's life is family life; Father, Son and Spirit living in eternal love.

The Bible is compelling on the communal nature of spiritual life, compared to the individualistic nature of sin. For example, in Colossians 3 we read:

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. (Colossians 3:5-10)

Here is that sin which originates in intrinsically selfish, individualistic ways of being. Lust and greed grow alone, in the darkness of my lonely sin. They will lead to me sinning against others, but the origin of the old life is selfish. It is expressed with others, but in ways that destroy community, undermine trust and know nothing of love. Contrast that with how Paul goes on to describe the new life:

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (Colossians 3:12-14)

This new self they put on is a communal life. You cannot live out any part of this new life alone. Kindness requires another to receive it, humility is a social virtue and so on. It is all rooted, held together and bound tight by love. We fight daily, and we fight together, to live the life Christ has saved us for.

The heart and nature of spiritual vitality

The heart of this new life, and so the fiercest point of the Devil's attacks, is that very love. When asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus replied:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 22:37-40)

The heart of a spiritually vital ministry is love. We might think of a person with great vitality as one brimming with energy, new ideas and a zest for life. The spiritually vital person is brimming with love, warmth, truth and grace. Filled with the very love of God, such a person will be quick to laugh, quick to mourn the sin and suffering of the world, quick to pray, quick to give of his stuff or self, quick to speak of Christ and slow to even glance at her own interests.

Intriguingly, a spiritually vital person will be warm. We sometimes think of holy people as aloof or cold, but this is not how the Lord is! Colossians 3:12-14 makes clear that "God's chosen ones, holy and beloved" have "compassionate hearts" and wear warm clothes of "kindness, humility, meekness and patience".

If people think of Acts 29 churches, planters and teams as innovative, bold, and relevant, even as faithful and dependable but do not see in us the warm love of Christ, then we have denied our Lord. The church in Ephesus was a model of faithfulness in the face of suffering and heresy, and yet it was barely a church at all. Christ's warning should terrify those of us concerned for faithfulness:

But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. (Revelation 2:4-5)

The goal of spiritual vitality

The way we avoid such a terrible fate for our church plants is to bear in mind the goal of spiritual vitality. It is not earthly success. It is not growing our church or our reputation for faithfulness. It is not even primarily growing the kingdom through seeing the lost saved. The goal of spiritual vitality is to live, now and into eternity. Spiritual life is knowing Christ, and being found in him. The reason why this is the goal of spiritual vitality is that if we are truly alive in Christ, then he is our all. Spiritual life flows from and to Jesus Christ. Spiritual vitality

is a goal, the goal of knowing Christ. Just as my wife and I did not have children so that they would be singers or athletes, but simply to have and to love children, so Christ gives us life out of his love. The goal of spiritual vitality is not our goal. It is the Father's goal to save a people for his Son. It is Christ's goal to redeem his Bride. It is the Holy Spirit's goal to unite Christ to that Bride.

Spiritual vitality is worked in us by the Spirit. He gives the new birth, new heart and new, vigorous life. He continues to point our eyes to Christ so that we grow in him. There is no hard striving here, for surely, "...he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6).

Theological Reflection

Bringing this together, we can define our terms as follows:

Spiritual vitality is the new life that our Father has given us, through the death and resurrection of his Son, by union with Christ through the Holy Spirit. Further, it is the vigorous living of that new life, with our eyes on Christ and our hearts burning with love for God and neighbor. Finally, it is the eternal life that will come to fullness when Christ returns and we are raised to live with him in the new creation.

This means that spiritual vitality is essential to all other competencies, calls, character, fruit and gifting of a Christian. If we are not spiritually alive, we are dead and can only sin. If we do not allow the Spirit to direct our gaze to Christ moment by moment, we cannot serve him.

The nineteenth century preacher Robert Murray McCheyne put it well in a letter to W.C. Burns, who was caring for his congregation when McCheyne was away:

Take heed to thyself. Your own soul is your first and greatest care. You know a sound body alone can work with power; much more a healthy soul. Keep a clear conscience through the blood of the Lamb. Keep up close communion with God. Study likeness to him in all things. Read the bible for your own growth first, then for your people. Expound much; it is through the truth that souls are to be sanctified, not through essays upon the truth. Be easy of access, apt to teach, and the Lord teach you and bless you in all you do and say. You will not find many companions. Be the more with God.

The assumption McCheyne makes is that ministry is rightly done by a minister whose first concern is Christ, not the ministry. A church planter who spends much time with Christ will not be locked away in his study, rather he will be "easy of access". If you spend much time in studying theology it might make you distant and hard for normal people to understand. If you spend much time studying Christ, people will find you warm and accessible. Lord, let us be that kind of theologian!

Similarly, if you are close to Christ, you will want to expound his word with a deep commitment to truth and a deep desire to see souls saved and sanctified. This is the freedom of the pastor in Christ. Whether your church plant grows rapidly, or you close the doors after three heart-breaking years, your call is the same. Know Christ, see Christ, be captivated by Christ and you will serve him well.

The most challenging and liberating book I have read as a church planter is Martin Luther's short *Preface to the letter of St Paul to the Romans*. It was Paul's understanding of sin and faith, illuminated by Luther, that shocked me. Luther argues that anything that does not proceed from faith is sin. You cannot keep the Old Testament law by your effort. You can only fulfil the law by faith. To try to keep it by effort is to act out of unbelief. So if I go to pray with the church because I ought to as the pastor, out of mere duty, rather than because I trust and love God, then I sin. God may graciously use my sin, he may even bring blessing to me through my sin, but it is still sin. To serve Christ in righteousness means I must act in faith and love. We need care here, as there is a duty that springs from faith just as there is a duty that replaces faith. I think we know the difference. I can drag myself off the couch muttering resentfully about having to go out to the prayer meeting again. Or I can drag myself off the couch knowing that Christ has called me to this ministry and with a prayer for strength and energy on my lips. Faith can feel exciting, or it can feel desperate. The issue is whether we act out of faith.

We are commanded to act out of love. How, though, can we do this? The good news is that it is impossible. We can compel ourselves to be nice to people, to a degree, but we cannot make ourselves love. I cannot determine what I love. Yet this is what Christ requires. In John 13, Christ washes his disciples' feet. John makes it clear that he is motivated in this by love (v.1) and that he was doing this as a picture of his imminent death on the cross (vv.2-4). So when in verse 15 Jesus teaches them, "I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you", he means by the "example" that they should love one another enough to die for one another.

We cannot do this, but the Spirit can. We are called to a life of self-sacrificing *love*, not mere self-sacrifice. This is James' point in 2:8-9, that if you fail to love you are law-breakers. We are called to do what only the Spirit can work in us. We are called to love Christ, to love our brothers and sisters, to love our enemies. The Spirit will give us this love as he shows us Christ.

Cultural Engagement

To live like this is alien. The world cares about outer beauty, clothing, wealth, fame or success. If we are alive in Christ, loving one another, everyone will say that we are Christ's disciples (John 13:34-35). This will mean they persecute us, and it will mean that they ask us for a reason for the hope that we have (1 Peter 3:15). Peter says that to win such opportunities we simply need to "revere Christ as Lord" in our hearts (1 Peter 3:15, NIV). A church that has hearts full of Christ will live fearlessly for him and cause people to ask what is going on.

If you spend the rest of your life with your eyes on Christ, spiritually alive, then you will serve your Master well. You will disciple the church you plant to keep their eyes on Christ. You should cause unbelievers to ask, in awestruck confusion, where your hope comes from. Or you may see them turn from you, scorn you and marginalize you, as they did your Lord. But he will call you a faithful watchman when you enter the heavenly Jerusalem. You may well have a short life now, and you will surely suffer with Christ, but you will be glorified with him, and it will be a delight to you now and then.

Missional Significance

So how do you sustain this until Christ returns or calls you to him in death? And how do you pastor a church that is spiritually vital? There are many means of grace, but three are foundational: the Church, Prayer and the Word. If all we are, have and do is found in Christ, then we need him. We cannot work up his love in our hearts, we simply ask for it and the Father answers. We cannot work up love in our hearts, and sometimes we cannot even find the faith to ask for it, but our brothers and sisters can. If we live open lives, then our sins and failures will be met by grace as our church pray desperately with us and for us.

If our life comes from seeing Christ, then we need to see him in his word. The Holy Spirit wrote the Bible to show us Christ. If we would live for Christ, our church planters and core teams will be people of the word and prayer; our churches will be built around the word and prayer. Our churches will be communities where we study the scriptures together. When I go to the Bible study with the teenage lads, I should expect to be taught, by Christ and by them, as we sit together under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit. We cannot separate the church, prayer and the word. They are the bricks, sand and cement of a deep foundation in Christ. Without any part, the foundation would be weakened. If our churches are to have any missional relevance at all, they must be alive in Christ. Spiritual vitality must be our greatest desire for ourselves and our churches. We cannot live our spiritual life alone. We need the brothers and sisters Christ has drawn together. We need his family, for it is there that Jesus lives.

There is much we must consider as we plant churches. It is all meaningless if we do not take hold of the life Christ gives us. If we are alive in Christ, needing him always, dependent on his word and his Father's answering our prayers, then we are Christians. The Lord will be with us, and one day we will be with him. Between then and now we long to see churches planted, because we long to see Jesus worshipped, because we love Jesus. We love Jesus, because he first loved us.

Further reading and reflection questions are available at acts29.com/competencies.