

Near Death Experiences

Haggai 1

Sometimes people have near death experiences. There's an organisation called *The International Association of Near-Death Studies* and a website www.near-death.com. People nudge death or die and are brought back to life and we are fascinated by their experiences.

Those who experience NDE often struggle to find adequate words to describe their experience. They often feel deeply changes in their attitudes toward life, work and relationships.

The Bible says the whole of humanity is having a near death experience. As we look around we might get an illusion of hope, but really there's no hope. Our bodies, which are still alive, are quickly closing in on death and decay. Death is a certainty for us all. In fact our bodies are doing their best to catch up to our spiritual deadness.

This is the natural condition of humanity. This is our birth condition and its not a pleasant diagnosis. There's no neutrality at birth no matter how beautiful I'm sure you looked. People are not yet physically dead and already spiritually dead.

But God rescues us from death. We call this the “good news”, the “gospel”. Eph 2.4–5, “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved”.

God raises the dead. He gives rotting corpses new life. He transforms dead relationships into living ones. God makes us “alive in Christ”. When we were dead in our sins God made us alive with Christ and then, and according to verse 6 in Ephesians 2, he raises us up with Christ to be seated with him in the heavenly realms.

Many churches have near death experiences. It's an unfortunate speciality of our denomination. But sometimes the patient is too far gone. The near death experience declines and the congregation ceases and dies.

The cancer of liberalism is aggressive;

the tumour of tradition erodes the soul;
the secular business model is like cholesterol in the veins. Either way—choose your death—
the church eventually dies.

But in his mercy, God breathes new life into churches of his choosing—churches which have one foot in the grave. Sometimes, humanly speaking, there is enough glow in one ember although many have been extinguished. And with this one ember, God does a mighty work. He Spirit blows on the remaining ember and he fans it into a flame.

It's no secret that this church had a near death experience. The doors almost closed. The music almost ceased. The 130 year celebrations last year may have easily been a wake. Some of us weren't here when the doors were threatening to close. For others, the memories are very clear.

No-one wants another person to have a near death experience. Those who were here would not wish it on anyone else because being close to death hurts. As Christians, we're on about life not death. So when a church declines it can be a tearful, painful process even with the best medication. It's a place that no-one wants to revisit.

Too often we don't appreciate life until we understand death. A funeral is a great dose of reality. A near death experience gives a person a fresh view of life. 60 minutes recently did an article on the two men who cheated death in the Beaconsfield Gold Mine. Brant Webb and Todd Russell have never been the same.

Kerry Packer once said to a parliamentary inquiry,

Last year I suffered a major heart attack and died. I didn't die for long but it was long enough for me. I didn't come back to control John Fairfax. I didn't come back to break the law. And I certainly didn't intentionally come back to testify before a parliamentary inquiry.

A church should never be the same after a near death experience. And those of us who have joined this church on the upward swing can be assured that no-one wants to return to the operating table.

Thom S. Rainer has written a book which helps us think through the unpleasant issues. And, I think, right here we need to be reminded of 2 Tim 3:16–17, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful

for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work”.

I expect that Scripture will move us to reflection: teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that this church will grow to be a powerful witness for Christ.

The book which Rainer wrote has the “attractive” little title *Autopsy of a Dead Church*. He takes us back to Scripture and it should not surprise us that Scripture describes the dying church for the simple reason that God doesn't want churches to die.

Indeed recognising the warning signs enables a quick diagnosis and helps keeps churches alive. So Rainer subtitles his book, *12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive*.

So firstly we turn to the **dying church** and then we will consider the **dead church**. And then I promise we shall end today on a **positive note!**

The dying church

Church decline is usually slow unless there is a major, single catastrophe. More often it can be described as a *slow erosion*.

The net loss of a person here-and-there;
a change in theological emphases;
a shift in leadership which is barely noticeable.

Slow erosion is the worst type of decline because it “creeps up” on you. The members have no sense of urgency to change. They see the church on a regular basis and they don't notice the slow decline that is taking place before their eyes.

The decline of the Presbyterian Churches in the Southern Highlands may be generally described as slow erosion, at times given momentum by single events. The decisions of individual sessions, differing theological positions and a challenging social landscape conspired to render less effective the witness of this church.

God's response to such decline is swift and illustrated in Haggai 1.

In 520 B.C. a remnant of Jews returned to Jerusalem from a long exile. They returned to a

devastated town, but they began to rebuild. The first thing they needed to rebuild was the Temple for this was the obvious reminder that God must be the centre of their lives.

They began by laying the foundation. But then they stopped working on the Temple and began to rebuild their own homes. Their personal comfort outweighed the presence of God. For ten years they did not work on the house of God. For ten years they were in spiritual decline.

Imagine the Temple. Dirt accumulating on the foundation. Vines and overgrowth beginning to cover it. Watch the decline.

Then God speaks. He wants to know why the people did not notice the decline. God wants to know why they stopped building the Temple.

Haggai 1.2–4, “This is what the LORD Almighty says: “These people say, ‘The time has not yet come for the LORD’s house to be built.’ “Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: “Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your panelled houses, while this house remains a ruin?”

God was angry. His house must be rebuilt. It cannot lie in ruins.

Haggai 1.9, ““You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?” declares the LORD Almighty. “Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house”.

Over 2,500 years ago, the people of God had neglected building the house of God. It seems as if slow erosion was a problem with them too. God didn’t like it then and He doesn’t like it now.

What are the other symptoms of a dying church?

As a church dies *the past becomes the hero*. Most of us look back to the past with fond memories. We talk about the “good ol’ days” when I was fit, got that promotion, or married the person of my dreams.

Declining churches think this way.

“Oh for the days when we only sang hymns. We weren't pressured with outreach because people came to us and converting people was the Minister's job. We miss the days of reverence which is lost on today's generation. If only we could return to these wonderful days”!

Thom Rainer makes this frightening observation:

The most pervasive and common thread of our autopsies was that the deceased churches lived for a long time with the past as hero. They held on more tightly with each progressive year. They often clung to things of the past with desperation and fear. And when any internal or external force tried to change the past, they responded with anger and resolution: “We will die before we change”.

And they did.

Hear me clearly: these churches were not hanging on to biblical truths. They were not clinging to clear Christian morality. They were not fighting for primary doctrines, or secondary doctrines, or even tertiary doctrines. As a matter of fact, they were not fighting for doctrines at all.

They were fighting for the past. The good old days. The way it used to be. The way we want it today.

For sure, there were some prophets and dissenters in these churches. They warned others that, if the church did not change, it would die. But the stalwarts did not listen. They fiercely resisted. The dissenters left. And death came closer and closer.

As a church dies when the past becomes its hero.

Such churches don't look outside themselves. They become a cloister. And here's our next point: *The Great Commission becomes the Great Omission*. “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28.19) becomes “stay and insulate our church from an ever changing world”.

The glory of the Lord has departed!

And so money is directed inwardly rather than reaching outward into the community. As numbers decline and people age, the minister becomes a personal caretaker. Almost all his time is spent visiting the members, counselling the members, attending functions with the members, preaching what the members want to hear.

Finances reflect where treasures lie. Funds to reach beyond the church are the first to go. Listen to Jesus,

“One thing you lack. Go, sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me. At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth” (Mark 10.21–22).

As a church dies it churns through ministers until they find one willing to accept the view of the membership. There is a *leadership spiral* (next point). A dying church has little regard for the men God sends its way if they do not co-operate with the desires of the core membership. Now the

church rarely prays together and has no clear purpose outside personal agendas.

A denominational response

In summary, in a dying church the various organs begin to fail and death is inevitable. But God, in his mercy, may offer life-support to a failing church. Sinful, frail people do not save themselves or churches. It is God who is rich in mercy. Jesus describes the church as “my church”. Matt 16.18, “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it”.

The church will never be defeated. Society might kid itself into believing it can wipe out the church, but it can't. And although many local churches have died and will die as a result of sinfulness, the collective number of saved saints will increase. The church will grow until its appointed number which is more than the stars in the sky.

God takes no pleasure in the death of any church. He warned the church in Haggai's time and the prophet called the church to rethink its direction. Our denomination has steps in place to revitalise a church.

Ministry and Mission changes a declining church's status from a “pastoral charge” to a “home mission station” which is like putting an oxygen mask over the patient's face (**slide 1**). Or its like inserting a cannula into a patient's arm making it easier to administer life support.

Presbytery appoint an “emergency session” which is intended to prevent a large stroke killing the patient. If a church hasn't the resources to provide its own leadership then it either closes or gets a transplant from other churches.

A church with an emergency session can feel as though its having “an out-of-body” experience because, quite literally, its leadership is “out of town”.

An emergency session is designed to be temporary until the church can again provide its own leadership.

There's another denominational response to a declining church. Presbytery appoint an “interim moderator” who becomes the minister of the church because the church can no longer afford or find an ordained man.

None of these responses are ideal and nor are they intended to be. What they are designed to do is buy time, to allow time to plan a church recovery. Time to pray and think and repent and turn to the Scriptures. Time to commit the future to God and possibly accept that death might be a just outcome.

The dead church – dying with dignity

I didn't want my parents to die. But they died. No-one wants his or her church to die. No-one wants to lose a church in which they have invested so much time and energy. But churches die—individual congregations die.

A dying church is of little benefit to the kingdom unless it dies well. Rainer offers four generic responses to dying with dignity.

Sell the property and give the funds to another church, perhaps a new church that has begun or will soon begin. You can be assured that the death of your church helped another church to live.

Give the building to another church. New churches are starting by the thousands [...] One of their greatest challenges is to find a place where they can meet.

Merge with another church, but let the other church have the ownership and leadership of your church. In simple terms, you are allowing the healthy church to take over your church. That is sacrificial. That is a way to die with dignity.

Rising from the ashes

Well, I said I'd end on a positive note.

As we noted earlier, the universal church will never die. Jesus made that abundantly clear, “On the rock I will build my church, and the forces of Hades will not overpower it” (Matt 16.18). Christ's church will rise victorious and so will you if you continue following the Lord Jesus. You may get beaten around the ears, even by religious leaders, but this did not deter Jesus from submitting to his Father's will.

1 Thess 4.3 says, “It is God's will that you should be sanctified” and the important thing is to be in a church where this can happen and where you can encourage others to do the same.

We can be thankful to God for those who endured and persevered through recent hard times. We wouldn't be here today if it weren't for their faithfulness and dogged determination to see this

church continue into the future. As we look to the past we can see with hindsight that God has overruled and ordered events to bring us to our present position. Through the disorder of our lives God is working for our good according to his sovereign will and purposes.

There's much to do as we move into the future. As a church transitions to full health, there will be challenges and obstacles. But already there is much to be thankful for. May we echo the words of Samuel in 1 Sam 7.12, "Thus far the Lord has helped us".

Prayer

Heavenly Father, open our eyes that we might see our church as You see it. Let us see where change needs to take place, even if it is painful for us. And use us, we pray, to be an instrument of that change whatever the cost. Amen.