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A Healthy Church at the Foundation

There are plenty of different resources with plenty of different methodologies on how to achieve, grow, build, or become a healthy church. These materials offer a varying number of principles based on research into the methods and practices of some of the world's most progressive and influential churches. Though these resources can be helpful, the path to church health can be greatly simplified by getting back to the foundation. The best way to examine the foundation of church health is to go back to the beginning: the first establishment of the church which can be found in the New Testament scriptures. These historical documents provide the framework on which the Christian Church was built as well as insight into the elements that fostered the movement's health and longevity. New Testament scripture clearly supports sensitivity to the Holy Spirit, empowering discipleship, and sincere love as the three foundational elements for improving church health.

What is Church Health Anyway?

Merriam-Webster's Online Medical Dictionary (http://www.merriam-webster.com/medical) defines health as "the condition of an organism or one of its parts in which it performs its vital functions normally or properly." How does this apply to the church? In 1 Corinthians 12:12 (New Living Translation), Paul states, "The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ". Therefore, health in the church means that the body of Christ, as one unit and individually, is performing its "vital functions" to fulfill its divine purpose.

Paul continues in his letter to the Corinthians to describe the role of the Holy Spirit in creating unity throughout all of the body's different parts: "We have all been baptized into one

body by one Spirit, and we all share the same Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:13). This unity is essential for the body to function properly. Though each part of the body, or each person within the Church, serves a different role, they must be focused on one goal, or vision, to ensure the proper results. Another bodily essential for well-being is that each individual part is functioning properly and within its given purpose. Paul explains that each part of the body is given a specific purpose which is necessary for the body to function.

> If the whole body were an eye, how would you hear? Or if your whole body were an ear, how would you smell anything? But our bodies have many parts, and God has put each part just where he wants it. How strange a body would be if it had only one part! (1 Corinthians 12:17-19)

In order for the body of Christ to be healthy, each of its members must not only be allowed to fulfill their function, but empowered to do so to the best of his or her ability. Finally, Paul instructs the Corinthians on how the body of Christ should treat each part of the body. The parts of the body which seem less honorable should be treated with the most care. They should be protected and nurtured. In the same way, the parts of the body that seem less important or purposeless are, in fact, the most necessary and should be treated with respect and dignity. This creates harmony throughout the different parts because it requires all of the members of the body to care for one another (1 Corinthians 12:22-25).

Clearly, all three elements: sensitivity to the Holy Spirit, empowering discipleship, and sincere love are vital to maintaining a healthy church lifestyle. Each of these elements was mentioned by Paul throughout his letters to the early churches, but more importantly, they can be

witnessed in the very beginnings of the Christian Church, the book of Acts. The apostles and early Church displayed all three of these elements just as Christ had before them.

Sensitivity to the Holy Spirit

Building and maintaining sensitivity to the working and leading of the Holy Spirit is paramount to a healthy church lifestyle. Evidence of the power of this characteristic can be found throughout the book of Acts as well as in the life of Christ and sprinkled all throughout the scriptures. In fact, the Holy Spirit is referenced in more than seventy verses in the book of Acts alone (White, 2014). The book of Acts begins with Jesus explaining to his apostles, through the power of the Holy Spirit, what effect the promised gift of the Holy Spirit will have on their lives and ministry once they receive it (Acts 1:2, 8). “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Jesus encourages his disciples to wait for this gift that will give them power to leave the safety and security of their homes and declare the gospel to the entire world (White, 2014). Later, after having received the gift of the Holy Spirit, these men went on to create what we now know as the early Church body. The Holy Spirit was the very catalyst that began the entire Christian church movement, and since then his role, though too commonly overlooked, has never diminished in importance or impact. The influence of the Holy Spirit in the beginning of the Church is just one example of the significance of the Holy Spirit in the health of the Church. Acts 4:29-31 recounts an event in which Peter, John, and a number of believers, while praying for boldness to continue preaching the gospel, were all filled with the Holy Spirit and “continued to speak the word of God with boldness.” The very next verse goes on to describe the “full number of those who believed” at that time as being “of one heart and soul” (Acts 4:32).

It is clear from these examples alone that the benefits of being led by the Spirit are monumental in having a church body that is not only healthy but growing and effective, but these few instances do not even begin to cover the expansive benefits a church body can experience when it surrenders to the working of the Holy Spirit. Galatians 5:22-23 lists nine other benefits: "But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control". All of these characteristics can be very influential in building unity within the church body. Even still, the Holy Spirit also is the source of all spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:4). These gifts include the following: words of wisdom, words of knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, tongues, and interpretation of tongues (1 Corinthians 12:8-10). All of these benefits have the ability to greatly impact a church's effectiveness in evangelism and discipleship. By the leading of the Holy Spirit, a church can clearly understand its unique purpose and vision, and it is only by staying in step with the Spirit that a church can achieve these goals. Stephen Macchia states in his book entitled *Becoming A Healthy Church* (2003) that "the healthy church actively seeks the Holy Spirit's direction and empowerment for its daily life and ministry." A church will thrive when all of its leaders, core members, and volunteers are all being led by the Spirit.

Knowing that remaining sensitive and responsive to the Holy Spirit is crucial to the health of every Christian and the Church as a whole, Paul challenged the Galatians in his letter to them saying, "since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives" (Galatians 5:25). He also instructed the Ephesians to "pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests" (Ephesians 6:18). The best way to be sensitive to the Spirit of God is to pray in the Spirit on all occasions and listen to the voice of the Spirit as

he directs one's movements. If the church will listen to the Holy Spirit he will do most of the work for them. The Spirit will provide direction for the church. He will provide strengthening, encouragement, and comfort (1 Corinthians 14:3). Leaders of the church should encourage the believers to exercise their spiritual gifts and project the fruits of the Spirit. Pastors need to provide space and opportunity for the Holy Spirit to speak in the corporate worship setting so that the church body might experience the fullness and freshness of complete health and well-being.

Empowering Discipleship

The need for empowering discipleship can be easily identified in Jesus' command to his disciples as recorded in Matthew 28:16-20 (New International Version): "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Contrary to popular belief, the purpose of this command was not evangelism to create believers in Christ, but rather *discipleship* to create followers of Christ. Jesus' ministry was a primary example of empowering discipleship. Jesus' call to his disciples was not simply "follow me" but "follow me…and I will make you fishers of men" (Spader & Mayes, 1991; see also Matthew 4:19). Jesus was going to train them to be ministers and disciple-makers. Spader and Mayes (1991) describe Jesus' efforts to equip a team for ministry as "no mere afterthought but a fundamental aspect of his strategy." Jesus realized that the only way to expand the reach and depth of his ministry was to increase the number of people able to do the work of ministry (Spader & Mayes, 1991). Jesus did everything he could throughout his time with his disciples to multiply himself into them. The example of Christ proves the importance of empowering discipleship in the work of the ministry. In fact, Spader and Mayes (1991) make the bold claim that "it is impossible to grow in our ability to fulfill the Great Commission without equipping

others to minister." Church leaders need to intentionally strive to create disciples in order to effectively follow the example and instruction of Jesus Christ.

Paul also understood the importance of empowering others to do the work of the ministry for health and growth in the church. During his time in ministry, Paul trained numerous people in their ministries. He lived a lifestyle worth multiplication and encouraged others to follow his example as he strived to follow the example that Jesus Christ left before him (1 Corinthians 11:1 New Living Translation). Timothy's ministry is one of the most well-known examples of Paul's discipleship. In one of his letters, Paul goes so far as to encourage Timothy to begin training others for ministry. He instructs Timothy to find faithful men and teach them all of the things Timothy learned from Paul so that they, in turn, might teach others (2 Timothy 2:2). Not only did Paul demonstrate the principle of empowering discipleship in his own life, but he encouraged the local churches to do the same. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul explained the importance of discipleship within the church setting saying,

> So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature (Ephesians 4:11-13)

These instructions clearly outline not only who in the church is responsible for equipping the body of Christ, but also the importance of empowering discipleship for the strength and maturity of the Church.

The equipping of God's people for ministry is essential for growth and maturity in the church. If churches want to be completely healthy, they must equip and empower their believers to use their skills for ministry. Carl Wilson (1976) writes of churches: "If they do not train believers other than the pastor to evangelize and build disciples, their expansion stops." Pastors seeking health in their church must make empowering discipleship a foundational goal of their ministries. Pastor Scott Wilson (2013), Lead Pastor at The Oaks Fellowship, writes about the three levels of leaders in the church: there are workers who do the ministry, there are equippers to build others for the work of the ministry, and there are multipliers who develop generations of leaders to equip each generation after them. Too often, the pastoral staff of the church functions as workers in the ministry. They operate at full capacity, trying to do all of the work, and as long as a church operates in this way, its ministry will be limited by the capacity of its leaders (Wilson, 2013). However, if the church can go through the process of changing their culture into that of empowering discipleship, its ministries will be able to grow exponentially. Health will abound in the church body as each member is trained and empowered to exercise their God-given functions to the best of his or her ability.

Sincere Love

The importance of sincere love in the life of a Christian is undeniable. If it was not for the extreme love of Christ, to the point of death on a cross, the church and its ministry would be pointless. Not only is God's love the reason Christians believe, it is the very thing that enables people to love at all. "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). God is love- this concept is displayed all throughout the scriptures. The relevance of love for ministry is sure, but what exactly is the role of love for the church? At the very beginning of the Church, believers were meeting together in their homes, eating together with "glad and sincere hearts, praising God and

enjoying the favor of all people" (Acts 2:46-47). Then later, the author of Hebrews encouraged the believers to not give up meeting together so that they might "spur one another on toward love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10:24-25). The early church was founded in love. It is not simply something to be experienced, but rather a call to action. In the book of John, Jesus issues this mandate in a clear and powerful way: "As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35; see also Spader & Mayes, 1991). Love in the ministry of the church is vital to successfully exemplifying the life of Christ and effectively leading lost and hurting people to the transforming love of God. Love is intended for the growth and strengthening of the church body and all its parts. There is restorative power when the church loves truly and deeply.

Romans 12:9 gives the one and only condition for the church to experience complete health and vitality: "Love must be sincere". There can be no hidden agendas, no selfish ambition. "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." (1 Corinthians 13:4-7) Sincere love is so unlike the love that the world knows, therefore it is powerful. Works without love are fruitless (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). However, works powered by sincere love can work miracles not only in the lives of unbelievers, but within the church body as well. Sincere love will allow a church to thrive in every aspect of its ministry.

A Comparison

The evidence supporting sensitivity to the Holy Spirit, empowering discipleship, and sincere love as the foundational elements for improving church health is comprehensive and concrete. However, there are a number of different resources, books, articles, etc., that also state that they have found the keys to creating a healthy church environment. Many of these references are backed by a significant amount of research and are quite beneficial. These resources do not necessarily conflict with the three foundational elements for improving church health that were previously explained. By taking a brief look at just one of these resources, it will become evident that these seemingly conflicting resources actually support sensitivity to the Holy Spirit, empowering discipleship and sincere love as the foundation upon which all other qualities may be built.

Christian A Schwarz (1996) identifies "eight essential qualities of healthy churches" in his book, *Natural Church Development*: empowering leadership, gift-oriented ministry, passionate spirituality, functional structures, inspiring worship service, holistic small groups, need-oriented evangelism, and loving relationships. These eight elements are the product of a research project conducted by Schwarz (1996) along with some of his colleagues. One thousand churches from 32 countries across all five continents participated by having 30 members of their church complete a questionnaire, resulting in 4.2 million responses for analysis (Schwarz, 1996). The list of participating churches included "large and small, growing and declining, persecuted and state-subsidized, charismatic and noncharismatic, prominent models and entirely unknown churches" (Schwarz, 1996). This study was by far the most comprehensive of any research project into the causes of church growth. The result of this study: eight universal church growth principles.

As previously stated, the first two of these eight principles are empowering leadership and gift-oriented ministry (Schwarz, 1996). “Leaders of growing churches concentrate on empowering other Christians for ministry” (Schwarz, 1996). These principles clearly correlate to the need for empowering discipleship as mentioned before. If leaders in the church truly strive to be multipliers that develop generations of leaders for ministry then their leadership will naturally be one that empowers believers to use their talents to further the ministry. The role of the church is to help each believer identify which specific gifts he or she have been given and find the appropriate place for him or her in the work of the ministry (Schwarz, 1996). Accomplishing this role is the very mission of empowering discipleship.

Sensitivity to the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential for church growth. This foundational element of church health can be supported by two of the “eight essential qualities”: passionate spirituality and inspiring worship service (Schwarz, 1996). It is the passion and enthusiasm for worship and experiencing the presence of God that impacts the growth and health of a church. Living a life led by the Spirit and experiencing the work of the Holy Spirit in a corporate worship experience foster both passion and inspiration within the life of a believer. Without the presence of the Holy Spirit in a worship experience, it is simply a performance of musicians and orators. Sensitivity to the Holy Spirit allows every believer to experience inspiring worship and ministry throughout his or her everyday life, not simply on days of corporate worship. In Schwarz’s (1996) study, he states that the quality of the passionate spirituality characteristic is evidenced by “examining the prayer life of the Christians surveyed.” According to this measure, churches whose congregations were filled with people who passionately prayed on a regular basis exhibited greater health. Congregations that are constantly striving to remain connected to the Holy Spirit, will exhibit this very quality.

The “essential qualities” of loving relationships and need-oriented evangelism both flourish out of the foundational element of sincere love within the church body. As previously explained, when a church engages in sincere love, following the model of Jesus Christ, it builds encouraging and strengthening relationships with its fellow believer as well as engages in meaningful and caring relationships with non-believers.

The final two of the eight “essential qualities” from Schwarz’s (1996) study are less obviously related to the three foundational elements, however, the correlations still exist. The first of these qualities is the use of holistic small groups. According to Schwarz (1996), holistic small groups are “the natural place for Christians to learn to serve others with their spiritual gifts.” Being such, it is clear that holistic small groups are a great ministry to assist in empowering church members to use their God-given gifts for the ministry as well as disciple through teaching them how to apply Bible passages to their everyday lives. In addition, holistic small groups are a wonderful opportunity for the expression of love between believers and the building of unity within the church body. Last, but certainly not least, is the quality of “functional structures” (Schwarz, 1996). Schwarz (1996) describes the core of this quality characteristic as the development of structures within the church that promote continuous multiplication of the ministry. He claims that “leaders are not simply to lead, but also to develop other leaders” (Schwarz, 1996). The purpose behind this characteristic correlates directly with empowering discipleship in its mission of multiplication within the church. Creating functional structures within the church in order to better manage and assess its progress and effectiveness in this area is a natural and insightful way to build upon the foundational principle of empowering discipleship.

Through thorough exploration of the life of Christ, the model of the early Christian church, and numerous New Testament scriptures, it is evident that sensitivity to the Holy Spirit, empowering discipleship, and sincere love are the foundational qualities for improving church health upon which all ministry should be based.

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