

## HEALTHY CHURCHES Are **HEALING CENTERS**

"Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall; Humpty Dumpty had a great fall", so spoke Mother Goose. In reality, brokenness is a common, deep-seated feeling which haunts all of us at one time or another. We are all broken people in a broken world, awaiting the "King's Men" to put us together again. Despite all our best efforts, we still feel like last year's model. This sense of inadequacy often proves to be a crippling liability, if we are not members of a healthy, growing church family.

Fortunately, God's mission for us in the world does not wait until the reassembly process is completed. He sends 'us out into the world as 'salt' and light', even as He seasons the salt and trims the wick. Healthy believers recognize the growth process as a natural one, and 'welcome each other', receiving one another as 'all under construction'. If a church would truly become a 'hospital for sinners' and a 'classroom for the unlearned', attempting to make healing and beauty a goal, what should characterize it?

A church can emphasize many things that are good, but these are not necessarily the keys to changed lives. Among the wrong emphases, we may include: (1) Personalities, gifts, skills, abilities, or charisma of the pastors; but pastors come, go, change... (2) Programs, ministries, the institution itself; but often the program becomes an end in itself with loss of integrity and compromise of principle to see 'the church succeed'. As has been well said, "Use your church to build your people; not your people to build your church"... (3) Positions and theological distinctives are emphasized - sovereign grace, free-will, premillennial, pre-tribulation, anti-liberal, etc. - but what of lives changed ... (4) Often a church will magnify and emphasize its peculiarities what it is for or against, and approves or disapproves but the issue is WHAT BUILDS TRUTH INTO LIVES! What are the Biblical 'marks of distinction' of a New Testament Church. Reducing church life to the bare essentials, what are the nonnegotiable priorities and ingredients in a healthy church?

(1) This church will be characterized by a HIGH VIEW OF GOD. That is, this body will make God the only 'hero' of the Bible and supreme 'focus,' becoming a true worshipping church. This is so basic and assumed in the Scriptures, that it is often neglected or ignored in the church. Churches that do not make God their 'focus', find their religion actually built around 'beefing up their own self image' (Rom 10:2-3). God is a God of revelation; if it were not so, we would never have known Him. He has revealed Himself in the 'body of Christ' (in 1:14) and now in 'the church which is His body' (Eph 1:22-23). Rather than seeking to 'establish our righteousness', we can only protect ourselves against sin by 'taking God seriously' (Pr 9:10). Only as we are overwhelmed by a clear understanding of God do we ever face our sin honestly and experience cleansing (Jas 4:8-10; Ex 3; Isa 6; Job 42). Obedient living is actually a 'fruit' of worship. (Lev 18:19, 'for I am the Lord'). Sanctification is the result of focusing on much more than disciplines, principles, character qualities, rules, and regulations; it is the result of focusing on God! (2 Cor 3:18). Actually, in meeting Him all our cares, problems, and turmoil melt away (Lk 10:38-42).

(2) This church will be characterized by THE ABSOLUTE PRIORITY OF SCRIPTURE. The Bible is continually under attack. Liberals deny inerrancy; but their attacks were answered long ago. Modern charismatics believe the Bible, but give greater credibility to extra-Biblical revelation, that is 'God talks to me!' Psychology comes along saying, 'The Bible is a great thing, but insufficient to meet the needs of modern man'. Finally, fundamentalism cries, 'The Bible is true', but in practice we often hear 'I believe' or 'We believe'. People do not need just our interpretation of our application - they need clear Revelation! Pastors do not exist to give 'pep talks' or 'warm and fuzzy thoughts about God', or to be our 'problem solvers'. God calls pastors not to thrill, nor charm, nor entertain, but to acquaint men with the 'mind of God'. In other words, pastors are "called" to -- bring people

under the authority of Scripture!

(3) This church will be characterized by a HIGH STANDARD OF HOLINESS. The modern church has lost the 'basis and purpose' of Christian fellowship! The Bible declares the church to be a fellowship (relationship) that 'stimulates us to righteousness' (Col 3:16; Hb 10:24). A healthy church must be committed to church discipline and self-purification (1 Pe 4:17). God often rebuked N. T. churches just for what they 'allowed or permitted' (Rev 2:14,15,19). If we preach 'against sin', yet 'never confront and call to accountability' those who clearly violate the Scriptures, preaching will soon become 'unrelated to life' and/or 'irrelevant', and no young person or convert will listen. What we do with the: "Admonish one another... rebuke one another ... reprove one another ...exhort one another" passages has more bearing on the holiness of our church, than 'hard preaching'

(4) The church must be characterized by a STRONG EMPHASIS ON DISCIPLESHIP (Acts 2:41-44). We must cease to be content with 'attendance'. I am not sure that something happens within them, 'just because they are there'. Further, we must distinguish swelling from growing. If I bump my head, it swells, but I not grow because it is larger! Most churches are as one has said, 'like basketball games without hoops' --we run back and forth and dribble and dribble until we are tired; then we go home! People must be committed to more than showing up for the game! Every member/believer should be committed to 'become a disciple of Jesus Christ' (Jn 8:31-32). Well did Lorn Sanny of the Navigators state, "Only a disciple can make a disciple". The church has lost credibility, authority, and influence because churches and individual believers are not committed to become 'imitators' of Christ and 'little Christs' (Christians) mirroring the person of Christ and echoing the message of Christ. (2 Tim 2:2). God's design for the church was never to have many spectators finance a few professionals, but rather to bring every member to full maturity. (Tit 2:3-5,6-8)

(5) This church will be characterized by LED BY A PLEURALITY OF GODLY LEADERS. After all, is not the purpose of the church to 'raise up Godly leaders' (Eph 4:11-12)? In every age and dispensation, leaders raised followers to become their peers and even replace them (Moses/Joshua; Elijah/Elisha; Paul/Timothy). God has always mediated His rule to people through Godly leaders (Abraham, Noah, David). In the Scriptures, the Divine pattern is a 'team of Godly men' (1Thess 5:11-13). However, there is all too often much confusion regarding this team. For example, where a man gets his paycheck (church or employer) is certainly not the test of spirituality, as Paul's own life affirms (1 Cor 9:11; Ac 18:3). Nor, is 'preaching' the litmus test of spiritual superiority, as is seen in the case of Paul and Barnabas, his disciple (Ac 11:26ff).

Preaching is an expression of giftedness, not necessarily maturity nor character, nor spirituality! Peter spoke (Ac 2:14; 5:29); John wrote (I-III John; Revelation); James was a gifted administrator (Acts 15). Within the leadership team there will be a variety of gifts, callings, personalities (Rom 11:29). However, this team must focus on the unified basics and lead in perfect harmony (Ac 2:1,46). To this team, called in some circles pastors and deacons and in other churches, elders, God gives authority to minister and lead (I Tim 3:3-5; 5:17; I Th 5:12-13; Hb 13:17). This God given authority is in ministry, not management. Management often becomes a necessity to better facilitate ministry; however, authority here is constitutionally and congregationally given, and often after wisdom, grace, and good decision making are evidenced!

(6) This church is characterized by an ACTIVE, AGGRESSIVE, MINISTERING PEOPLE (Eph 4:10-11). Many churches are places where people go to watch things happen -- this is totally unBiblical! We must 'mobilize our forces' to use their 'spiritual gifts' (Rom 12:6-8). Each member is distinct, like a snowflake, and therefore, has

a distinct and specific function, purpose, and contribution that he/she alone can make. Without the ministry of every part, the entire body does suffer in some way! The church is literally filled with people who can do a better job in many areas that I or other team leaders could ever do. Andrew Fuller once said, "God gave pastors, not to do for the church what the members are unwilling to do for themselves, but for what they cannot do for themselves." The strength of a church is seen in the variety of personalities and the diversity of spiritual gifts contributing toward the basic and necessary spiritual goals!

(7) This church is characterized by the presence of AN INTENSE, LOVING SPIRIT, AND PERSONAL COMMITMENT TO EACH OTHER. Call it 'charity', or 'love one another' or 'bearing one another's burdens', but the most basic ingredient in the mood and atmosphere of this church is not their intolerance and impatience, but their tolerance and patience. Karl Menninger, the noted psychiatrist, once wrote: "Love is the key to the entire therapeutic program of the modern psychiatric hospital". People just simply care not how much we know, until they know how much we care! One of the interesting things that we find in Matthew 18, is how our Lord pictures the Christian as a child. Two marks of a 'child' in this passage are the 'humility of a child' (his desire not to offend) and the 'sensitivity of a child' (how easily they are offended). Spirituality is not proud, cruel, insensitive, running roughshod over one another, but loving one another, bearing one another, serving one another.

(8) This church is also characterized by her STRONG DEVOTION TO THE FAMILY. There is clearly a lack of commitment to God's ideal design for the family in our culture, as is seen in the divorce rate, single parenting, strained family relations, etc. Sometimes, it appears that the church thinks that statements like "I am not come to send peace but a sword... a man's foes shall be his own household" are actually meant to imply that the church is supposed to divide the family! On Sundays the family splits to different classes; on the

church calendar the family often splits to different activities! Billy Sunday, who saw some 300,000 walk the 'sawdust trail' also had his sons go to their graves as drunkards. Over his grave, someone said, "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own sons"! Far too many fathers have settled to one basis responsibility to their families -providing; but, can't orphanages and foster homes feed our children. Children need relation; and relation takes time! Love to a child is spelt "T-I-M-E"! The church's major youth ministry is 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to the father' (Mal 4:6) Wisely did Dr. Howard Hendricks of Dallas Seminary state, when he turned down a church for a family conference (a church pleading that they needed him NOW), "Friend, I mean you no ill, but my children need me more now"! His discernment and courage are exemplary.

(9) This church is also characterized by a **STRONG EMPHASIS ON EVANGELISM**. Evangelism is the true 'fruit and evidence' of the right ingredients in the lives of people in the church. It is not a cause, but an effect; it is not a root, but a fruit! Somewhere I was taught that every new convert ought to be involved in evangelism -- now... regardless ... in spite of ... don't cop out. Where do the process of 'mending and maturing' fit into the Divine plan for ministering? To receive a better return on some new converts, perhaps the church should make a deeper investment! Weak believers, steeped in erroneous philosophies, bound by sinful practices, whose lives are in shambles., certainly do not make the 'most effective ambassadors' (2 Cor 5:20)! Why do such professions as law and medicine require such long and intense training? Could it be that they wisely realize that new members will represent the profession and their 'mistakes' will have such broad and devastating results to so many. If we want more evangelism, we need to train better disciples!

(10) This church is finally characterized by a **WILLINGNESS TO CHANGE**. As Dr. Howard Hendricks states, "We must distinguish

between the changeable and the unchangeable". In many churches they cry the 'seven last words of the church' - "But, we've always done it this way"! Some may even ask, "Why do they transgress the traditions" (Mt 15:2) The issue in change is never 'Change for the sake of change'. However, many people fight good and healthy change that is in their own best interest and will result in deeper ministry in their own lives. We must distinguish changes in 'tradition' from changes in the 'truth'. Let me illustrate. When studying the Bible we must distinguish Biblical statements that are 'descriptive' (giving details and facts) from Biblical statements that are 'prescriptive' (give or mandate requirements). For example, does the Bible require that the church gather twice on Sunday? that they have two meetings on Sunday before noon and one after noon? How amazing over the years because of weather, holidays, the energy crisis of the 70's we learned to be flexible and PRACTICALLY ADJUST TO THE PRESENT NEEDS OF THE PEOPLE AND SITUATION! Again, that early church that never met on a Sunday morning (! in a Jewish culture, the work week began then!) also did not have the security of shrine or sacred building. In fact, history affirms that no Christian could or ever did own or build a 'church building' until the year 232 A. D. What changes would occur if we realized that the church is people, not a building.. . it is ministry, not a church program or church calendar! Some people confuse the 'forms', which are changeable (e.g. programs, schedules, etc.) with the 'truth', which is unchangeable. Spiritual life must take precedence over structure and schedule. Programs and procedure exist only to serve and minister to people. Do we not realize that 'what goes on in the life of the Christian is more important than what goes on inside the church walls' (1 Cor 3:16-17; 6:19-20). To be 'alive', a church has adaptable programs and changing ministries TO MEET PEOPLE'S NEEDS!!