

“How Do We Identify Church Health?”

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“The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.”

The text of a cable sent by Mark Twain from London to the press in the United States after his obituary had been mistakenly published.

Unfortunately, as the pastor of this fellowship, I sometimes hear talk about us struggling or even dying as a fellowship. I wish to assure you that struggle is normal, and dying we are not. Like Mark Twain, “The reports of our death are greatly exaggerated.”

There is an absolute deluge of resources available that believe they are the answer to declining attendance. They want us to believe that if we simply do $w + x + y = z$. They want us to believe there is a formula for church growth. I will begin this article by simply noting that there is nothing *in the New Testament* that will guarantee numerical growth. There is perhaps a lot that can be done to market the church or “sell” the church in order to grow numerically, but this is not the New Testament picture of a healthy church.

In this short read I would like to consider what is meant by church health and what that might look like. Let me begin by noting three initial thoughts.

1. There is a necessary and legitimate distinction between church growth and church health.

Church growth speaks of numbers, but church health speaks of maturity through discipleship. Please hear me out. I want a numerically large church, but I will not sacrifice church health for church growth.

2. Healthy relationships are not void of problems.

All relationships have problems, even healthy ones. In healthy relationships problems are addressed without attaining “critical mass” status. Critical mass is the scale or volume at which processes become self-perpetuating. In an unhealthy relationship problems take on a life of their own. In an unhealthy relationship problems escalate to significant explosions with much fall out. The elders and deacons are aware of various concerns and each group is addressing these concerns. If we are healthy we will be able to do this without significant fanfare.

3. Healthy relationships are not void of change.

All healthy relationships are dynamic. All healthy relationships grow and thus change. In healthy relationships there can be uncertainty as to the future, but such uncertainty does not mean instability. We have changed and we will continue to change.

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Think about those relationships where health is present. Think about those relationships that would be identified as unhealthy. There are certain dynamics present in both.

When we think of church health we must define such an idea by the New Testament and there is probably no better passage than Ephesians 4:7-16 [PLEASE READ]. From this passage let us consider five marks for identifying church health.

- A Biblical Structure for Elders, Deacons, and Ministry Expression (Eph. 4:7, 11 “apostles, etc.”)

There is a biblical structure that reflects the New Testament church. Elders are to be ministers of the word, prayer, and shepherding sheep whereby the saints are equipped for the work of the ministry. Deacons are to free the elders from administrating ministries, and the congregation is to engage in the work of the ministry that simply celebrates who they are wherever they are.

- A Biblical Relationship between all Members and the Larger Body of Christ that is Marked by Biblical Love (Eph. 4:14-16 “mature man. . . building up itself in love”)

The body of Christ is to be marked by humility, teach-ability, and charity. Charity or love is to be the defining characteristic of Christ’s body (John 13:34, 35).

- A Biblical Pattern for Expositing the Scripture through Exegesis, Biblical Theology, and Systematic Theology (Eph. 4:12 “equipping of the saints”)

The Word of God is to be the defining document for the making and maturing of Christ’s followers.

- A Biblical Message that is Christ-Exalting, Word-Centered, Global-Impacting, and Grace-Based (Eph. 4:13 “knowledge of the Son of God”)

This core value is the non-negotiable theme of the New Testament/Covenant church.

- A Biblical Understanding for Discipleship that is Marked by the Making and Maturing of Disciples Resulting in the Strengthening of Existing Churches and the Establishing of New Churches (Eph. 4:15, 16 “grow up”)

The question of whether or not you are a disciple was answered the day you were saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. If you are saved, you are a disciple. It is now for you to be clearly identified with the body of Christ.

May this short study encourage us and guide us as we celebrate the diversity of His body. May God turn our hearts toward Him. May He continue to knit our hearts together in our common pursuit of our uncommon God.