

THE SEVEN ESSENTIALS OF A HEALTHY CHURCH - PART 2

Ephesians 4:4-6

This is a copy of the sermon preached by Dr. Paul Mims, Pastor, Cornerstone Baptist Church, January 15, 2012

Last Sunday, we studied the seven essentials for unity in the Body of Christ that are required for a church to be healthy. Today, we are looking at the seven essentials of belief that are required for a church to be healthy. When a church is healthy there are some dynamic things that take place in the lives of the worshippers. Before we look at the beliefs that cause a church to be healthy, let's look at what is and is not happening in worship. This week, the Barna Research Group released a survey on "What People Experience In Churches."

Connecting with God

Connecting with God is perhaps the most important outcome facilitated by churches. Most people (66%) feel they have had "a real and personal connection" with God while attending church. However, that means one-third of those who have attended a church in the past have never felt God's presence while in a congregational setting. Also, when asked about frequency, most of those who have attended church describe these encounters as rare. One-third of all adults in the country report connecting with God at least monthly (35%) via a congregational setting. Among those who attend church every week, 44% said they experience God's presence every week and 18% do so on a monthly basis.

Experiencing Transformation

The survey also probed the degree to which people say their lives had been changed by attending church. Overall, one-quarter of Americans (26%) who had been to a church before said that their life had been changed or affected "greatly" by attending church. Another one-fourth (25%) described it as "somewhat" influential. Nearly half said their life had not changed at all as a result of churchgoing (46%).

Gaining New Insights

One of the most significant gaps uncovered by the research was the fact that most people cannot recall gaining any new spiritual insights the last time they attended church. Asked to think about their last church visit, three out of five church attenders (61%) said they could not remember a significant or important new insight or understanding related to faith. Even among those who attended church in the last week, half admitted they could not recall a significant insight they had gained.

Feeling Cared For

Another aspect of the research was to explore whether people feel connected with other human beings at church. The study revealed that nearly seven out of 10 respondents (68%) said when they attend church they feel "part of a group of people who are united in their beliefs and who take care of each other in practical ways."

On the other hand, one-quarter (23%) of those with church experience selected the description that church feels "like a group sharing the same space in a public event but who were not connected in a real way." One in 11 (9%) said they were simply "not sure."

Helping the Poor

Finally, the study examined whether people believe their church prioritizes caring for the poor outside of the congregation. The survey asked respondents to consider the budget, activities, and encouragement of the church they usually attend and to rate how much of an emphasis is placed on

serving the poor. In total, 40% of adults with church experience said caring for the poor was emphasized “a lot,” while 33% indicated it was “somewhat” of a priority.

Does Church Size Matter?

Many heated discussions occur about the optimal size for a church, but this data suggests that church experiences do not differ all that much based on the size of the church. For the most part, attenders of small, medium and larger churches described similar outcomes from their church engagement. Looking at moderate differences, attenders of mid-sized churches (defined as those with 100-299 adult attenders) were slightly less likely to report positive outcomes from church than were those attending larger and smaller congregations. Also, those attending larger churches (300+ attenders) were more likely than average to say they had gained new spiritual insight and understanding and that their church clearly prioritizes serving the poor.

Generational Experiences

Another noteworthy research finding is that older adults generally report the most favorable experiences at churches. This is not altogether surprising, but the level of disaffection of young adults is striking. The youngest generation—a segment Barna Group labels Mosaics, ages 18 to 27—is significantly less likely to describe positive outcomes while attending congregations. In particular, there were significant gaps between young adults and older adults when it came to feeling part of a group that cares for each other, experiencing God’s presence, knowing the church prioritizes assisting the poor, and being personally transformed.

Denominational Experiences

Barna also compared the experiences of Catholics, mainliners and non-mainline attenders. To control for differences in participation, the analysis of these data was limited to those who are “practicing Christians” —that is, those who go to church at least monthly and who say their religious faith is very important in their life. The research revealed that practicing Catholics generally had less positive outcomes in their congregational experiences than did Protestant attenders. Statistically speaking, non-mainline Protestants were only distinct from mainline Protestants in their likelihood of gaining a new spiritual insight at church.

What does all of this tell us? It is obvious that some churches are healthy and some are not. By healthy, I mean, a congregation unified in the power of the Holy Spirit and fulfilling their mission based on precious personal beliefs. A church can be healthy and not be perfect because there is no perfect church. We want the optimum worship experience for everyone who attends Cornerstone. We also know that the way that a person comes to worship with a prepared mind and heart determines the outcome. It makes all the difference when the seven essential beliefs are held by the worshippers. Here they are as stated in Ephesians 4:4-6.

ONE BODY

The body is the local church which is a part of the invisible body of Christ composed of believers of all time who were saved between New Testament times and the time when our Lord comes again. Coming to church takes on a different meaning when the worshipper realizes that he or she is not just attending a social gathering. When one feels a part of the early Christian believers who blazed the trail for the gospel in their day and a part of the great world wide body of Christian believers today, it lifts one out of a limited concept of the church and gives a thrill to be a part of something so gigantic and so eternal. Although we are aware that there will be no organic unity of the world wide church, we are also to believe that the Body of Christ is One made up of millions of parts. We are to rejoice when any part of

the Body of Christ triumphs over evil and are saddened when any part gives in to the pressures of Satan. In Ephesians 1:22,23, it is spelled out: "And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."

ONE SPIRIT

In I Corinthians 12:12,13, we read, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and were made to drink of one Spirit." At the time of Salvation, all believers become full members of the Body of Christ and the Holy Spirit comes to indwell each one. In Romans 8:9 it is stated, "You however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ."

ONE HOPE

We have staked our destiny on Christ. We have all accepted by faith that the gospel is true, that salvation is real, that eternity is coming, and that we have a living hope that will carry us one and all triumphantly through life and gloriously into the next. This pledge is given to each believer and sealed with by the Holy Spirit. In Ephesians 1:13-14 we read, "And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession to the praise of his glory."

ONE LORD

Christ cannot be divided. This speaks of Christ as Head of the Church who gives directions and assignments to each part of the body. In I Corinthians 12:5 we read, "There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord." Acts 4:12 says, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." Ignatius, the pastor of the church at Antioch, was the first one to be fed to the lions in the Roman Coliseum because he would not say, "Caesar is Lord." Polycarp, the pastor at Smyrna, was given the choice to say, "Caesar is Lord." But he would not say it to save his life. Just one simple sentence would save his life, but he would not give Caesar the right to be lord of his life and he was martyred. So devoted to our Lord we must be that no other person or power occupies the throne of our hearts.

ONE FAITH

One Faith means the Christian Belief doctrines that are included in the New Testament in the fulfillment of the Old Testament. Through the ages various kinds of syncretism have tried to be blended with Christian doctrine. This is the idea that Christianity is not the only way to God. There are many paths to God, they say, not just one. So take a little bit of Hinduism, some of Shintoism, Buddhism, and the other isms as the New Age Movement has done and apply it to Christianity and you have something for everybody. This means that you can belong to that kind of group or so-called church and not have to believe anything in particular. Not so! The doctrines of the New Testament cannot be blended with any other religion or compromised in any way.

ONE BAPTISM

As he sent his disciples out to evangelize the world, Jesus said, "...baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." This refers to the water baptism by which all new converts give their testimony of their spiritual death to the old life, burial of the old life, and being raised to walk in a new life in Christ. But the Baptism that Paul is talking about here is the supernatural placing of the

believer by the Holy Spirit into the Body of Christ which is the true church. When you received water baptism, we placed your name on the church membership roll, but the Holy Spirit placed you in the church of the ages. Although there are different modes of baptism among Christian churches, this baptism by the Spirit into Christ's body is the same for all of us.

ONE GOD

Although God is manifested as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Trinity, the Bible teaches that God is "One." Paul says in I Corinthians 8:6, "...for us there is but one God, the Father, through whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live." In our text, Ephesians 4:6 he says, 'One God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.' This speaks of the Fatherhood of God as our Creator and Redeemer. He is in control over all, he works through all, and is in all. When we pray we are taught to address the Father in the name of the Son and through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Three are never at cross-purposes. They are One in Spirit, One in Ministry, and One in control of the world. That is why we are safe in his arms!

Aristides, a second-century apologist for the Christian faith, wrote this to the Roman emperor Hadrian about believers in his day:

"They love one another. They never fail to help widows; they save orphans from those who would hurt them. If they have something, they give freely to the man who has nothing; if they see a stranger, they take him home, and are happy, as though he were a real brother. They don't consider themselves brothers in the usual sense, but brothers instead through the Spirit, in God." Let every one of us say, "Whoever belongs to Christ and loves and serves him is kin to me." So when we gather here each Sabbath we come with a seven-fold oneness: One Body, One Spirit, One Hope, One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, and One God and Father of us all.

Praise be to his Name!