

“Nine Marks of a Healthy Church”

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Kindle Notes by Dave Kraft

It's hard to argue with numbers. Faced with attendance in the tens of thousands, mega-complex buildings, and budgets bigger than those of some small countries, it's not easy to question whether this is really such a good idea. “Of course it's a good idea!” the evidence seems to scream. “Look how BIG it all is!” But is size the measure of success? We all know the right answer is no, but I wonder how many of us truly believe it deep down—or how many of us know what to use to measure success in its place. There are things I work for that don't work out, and things I care about that nobody else does. It is in the nature of sheep to stray and of wolves to eat.

I guess if I can't deal with that, I should just get out of under-shepherding. Alan Redpath has said about the membership of the average American church that 5 percent don't exist, 10 percent can't be found, 25 percent don't attend, 50 percent show up on Sunday, 75 percent don't attend the prayer meeting, 90 percent have no family worship, and 95 percent have never shared the Gospel with others.

I thought of a statement by John Brown, who, in a letter of paternal counsel to one of his pupils newly ordained over a small congregation, wrote, I know the vanity of your heart, and that you will feel mortified that your congregation is very small, in comparison with those of your brethren around you; but assure yourself on the word of an old man, that when you come to give an account of them to the Lord Christ, at his judgment-seat, you will think you have had enough.

But it has become crystal clear that if we are to depend upon each other in our congregations, discipline must be part of discipleship. If we have a commitment to help evangelize an unreached people group abroad, why haven't we done a better job in trying to find members of this people group in our metropolitan area? Why aren't our missions and evangelism better integrated? As a pastor, I am certain that I need to realize that, under God, the local church is responsible for raising up the next generation of leaders. And such raising up of new leaders—for here and abroad—should be one of the goals of our church.

Guinness, in his provocative little book *Dining with the Devil*, has suggested that the problem is secularization. Guinness writes that even theologically conservative churches that self-consciously oppose secularism are nevertheless themselves often unwitting bastions of a secularized version of Christianity, and

that, “The two most easily recognizable hallmarks of secularization in America are the exaltation of numbers and of technique.”

Seminaries have been guilty of creating several generations of clergy and teachers who are fundamentally ignorant of the materials of the theological task and prepared to argue (in their own defense) the irrelevance of classical study to the practical operation of ministry. The sad result has been the loss, in many places, of the central, cultural function of the church in the West and the replacement of a culturally and intellectually rich clergy with a group of practitioners and operations-directors who can do almost anything except make sense of the church’s theological message in the contemporary context.

The purpose of too many evangelical churches has fallen from one of glorifying God simply to growing larger, assuming that that goal, however achieved, must glorify God. In such a day, we must re-hear the Bible and re-imagine the concept of successful ministry not as necessarily immediately fruitful but as demonstrably faithful to God’s Word.

If William Carey would be faithful in India or Adoniram Judson in Burma, it could not be because their immediate success showed them that that they were being obviously relevant. It could only be because the Spirit of God in them encouraged them to obedience and trust. We today, in the secular West, must recover a sense of satisfaction in such biblical faithfulness. Do our churches indicate a concern for anything beyond their own institutional survival and expansion?

MARK ONE: EXPOSITIONAL PREACHING

My main role, and the main role of any pastor, is expositional preaching. A preacher can take a piece of Scripture and exhort the congregation on a topic that is important but that isn’t really the point of that particular passage. We live in a strange day, when even Christians who claim to be born again and churches that claim to be evangelical ignore God’s Word.

MARK TWO: BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Americans create designer religions and smorgasbord faiths—“Oh, I’ll take a little of this from Hinduism, a little of this from Christianity, a little of this from my grandmother

*** THE GOD OF THE BIBLE IS A HOLY GOD**

*** THE GOD OF THE BIBLE IS A FAITHFUL GOD**

God is a creating God, a holy God, and He is also a faithful God.

*** THE GOD OF THE BIBLE IS A LOVING GOD**

*** THE GOD OF THE BIBLE IS A SOVEREIGN GOD**

When it comes to God's sovereignty. Are we willing to trust Him? Are we willing to acknowledge, finally, that we are not God...that we are not the Judge...that we are not the ones to say what is fair and unfair? Are we willing to put our whole lives in God's hands and to truly trust Him? That is what's really at issue in this discussion about the sovereignty of God.

MARK THREE: THE GOSPEL

MARK FOUR: A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF CONVERSION

We can join with Joan of Arc in her prayer, as she was asked a tricky, entrapping question by some judges: "Asked if she knew that she was in God's grace, she replied: 'If I am not, may it please God to put me in it; if I am, may it please God to keep me there.'" John Newton, "I am not what I ought to be. I am not what I wish to be. I am not what I hope to be. Yet I can truly say, I am not what I once was. By the grace of God, I am what I am." Jesus taught clearly that we must act, but He also taught that we can act only if God's actions are behind our own. Who calls on the name of the Lord? Those whom the Lord calls!

The New Hampshire Confession of Faith, Article VIII: We believe that Repentance and Faith are sacred duties, and also inseparable graces, wrought in our souls by the regenerating Spirit of God; whereby being deeply convinced of our guilt, danger and helplessness, and of the way of salvation by Christ, we turn to God with unfeigned contrition, confession, and supplication for mercy; at the same time heartily receiving the Lord Jesus Christ as our Prophet, Priest and King, and relying on Him alone as the only and all sufficient Savior. Notice what this statement says about conversion. We turn because we are "deeply convinced of our guilt, danger and helplessness, and of the way of salvation by Christ." And how does that turning happen? It is "wrought in our souls by the regenerating Spirit of God."

God is calling us to talk to a bunch of corpses! That is how the Bible describes our natural state: We are spiritually dead, as we saw in Ephesians 2. So how can those who are spiritually dead ever turn to God in faith? They can do so only if God gives them life. As Tozer expressed it, "Human nature, as we know it, is in a formative state. It is being changed into the image of the thing it loves."

MARK FIVE: A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF EVANGELISM

I'm convinced that one of the distinguishing marks of a healthy church is a biblical understanding and practice of evangelism. Here's what one of America's most popular television preachers said not long ago:

I don't think that anything has been done in the name of Christ and under the banner of Christianity that has proven more destructive to human personality, and hence counterproductive to the evangelistic enterprise, than the unchristian, uncouth strategy of attempting to make people aware of their lost and sinful condition. In case you're wondering, that was Robert Schuller.

According to the Bible, evangelism may not be defined in terms of results or methods, but only in terms of faithfulness to the message preached.

At the great Lausanne gathering in 1974, John Stott said that "To 'evangelize' . . . does not mean to win converts . . . but simply to announce the good news, irrespective of the results."

Who can deny that much modern evangelism has become emotionally manipulative, seeking simply to cause a momentary decision of the sinner's will yet neglecting the biblical idea that conversion is the result of the supernatural, gracious act of God toward the sinner?

MARK SIX: A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

MARK SEVEN: BIBLICAL CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Our purpose in church discipline is positive for the individual disciplined, for other Christians as they see the real danger of sin, for the health of the church as a whole, and for the corporate witness of the church to those outside.

MARK EIGHT: A CONCERN FOR DISCIPLESHIP AND GROWTH

A healthy church is characterized by a serious concern for spiritual growth on the part of its members. In a healthy church, people want to get better at following Jesus Christ.

MARK NINE: BIBLICAL CHURCH LEADERSHIP

It is a serious spiritual deficiency in a church either to have leaders who are untrustworthy or to have members who are incapable of trusting.