

Marks of an Effective Church, Part 1

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

Code: 1306

INTRODUCTION

I have a great love for the church--not only Grace Community Church, but the church of our Lord Jesus Christ in general. I also have a great love for pastors and a desire that we all shape our churches into what God would have them to be. When I recall the words of the apostle Paul to take care of the church that Christ "purchased with his own blood" (Acts 20:28), I am sobered by that tremendous responsibility.

The congregation of the church I pastor has endeavored to be obedient to the Word of God. Although we are not all God would have us be, we believe we have a grip on some of the basics that make a church what it ought to be. We are often approached by the leadership of other churches asking us for help. They want to know why God has blessed us.

A. The Sovereign Choice of God

God has displayed proof of His power and presence again and again at our church. We've seen many people saved, lives changed, and families restored. Christians are maturing and reproducing themselves. And people come from many places to be a part of Grace church. God is doing marvelous things in our midst, and it may be only a preview of what He will yet do, should the Lord tarry. Others want to know why God has blessed us with such dynamic ministries. They teach the same Scripture, look to the same Holy Spirit, and worship the same Lord. But they don't get the same results. Why?

Perhaps the best answer is that God has sovereignly chosen to accomplish all He has at our church--we're just spectators. Although He works through men and women, Christ continues to build His church the way He wants to in spite of what we do (cf. Matt. 16:18). But beyond His sovereign work, we must submit to certain principles that will allow any church to be what the Lord wants it to be.

B. The Suggested Reasons for Growth

Size is not a factor to consider in judging the success of any church. Some churches blessed of God are very small, while some that are very large have little to no spiritual fruit. A church's spiritual life can't be measured by its numbers because it's easy to attract people. It's far more difficult to make disciples. Yet it appears as though churches across America are in a contest to build the biggest

churches. In fact, conferences are held across our country to teach people how to do that. I've never gone to one, and I don't intend to. Size is irrelevant to God.

Lesson There are reasons for a church's prospering spiritually and growing numerically that are important for us to understand. The following are key ingredients in any church that is successful by God's standards:

I. AN EMPHASIS ON GODLY LEADERS

A. The General Requirement

You cannot bypass the principle of having godly leadership and still receive God's blessing. Holy men and women must be in positions of responsibility in a church. Paul repeatedly said that Christ is the head of the church (1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Col. 1:18). As its head, Christ wants to rule His church through holy people. Unholy people get in the way.

It's amazing how most churches choose their leadership. They select people who are the most successful in business, who have the most to say, and who have the most money. I had a pastor confess to me that one of the problems he had in working with his board was that half of them were Christians and half were not. That is a serious problem because Satan and Christ don't cooperate! A man is not to be a leader in the church because he is the best businessman, has innate leadership ability, or is a super-salesman. He is to be a leader because he is a man of God.

God has always mediated His rule in the world through godly people. In the beginning, God mediated His rule through Adam. After the Fall it was through human conscience. After the Flood it was through government. Eventually God began to mediate His rule through the patriarchs, the judges, and then kings, prophets, and priests. In the gospel accounts He ruled through Christ. And now He rules through the church, whose leaders are representatives of Jesus Christ in the world.

The primary ingredient in church leadership is holiness. However it takes time to develop holy leadership. It took God forty years to make Moses into the leader He wanted. Joshua was an understudy of Moses for years before he was ready to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. It took years to prepare Abraham and David. It took time to get Peter, Philip, and Paul prepared for their far-reaching ministries. It takes time to make a man of God.

B. The Specific Requirements

When Timothy stayed in Ephesus, he had the responsibility of bringing the church to spiritual maturity. He knew he couldn't do it alone, and that he needed godly leaders. Paul had told him it was commendable for a man to desire to be a leader in the church--as long as he was the right kind of

man. A church shouldn't accept just any volunteers; it should look for godly men. Titus faced the same challenge in Crete, and Paul gave him similar advice. In 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 Paul gives a profile of the kind of people that are to be leading the church. They are to be:

1. Above reproach (1 Tim. 3:2)--Leaders are to be unblamable, having nothing in their lives for which they can be rebuked.
2. Devoted to their wives (1 Tim. 3:2)--They are to be one-woman men.
3. Temperate (1 Tim. 3:2)--They are to be spiritually stable, having a clear, biblical perspective on life.
4. Prudent (1 Tim. 3:2)--Prudent people are sober-minded--they know their priorities.
5. Respectable (1 Tim. 3:2)--Leaders are to have such well-ordered lives that they are honored for it.
6. Hospitable (1 Tim. 3:2)--They are to love strangers, opening their houses to those in need.
7. Able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2)--That phrase is translated from the single Greek word *didaktikos*. It is never used to speak of the gift of teaching or the office of a teacher. It is not saying every leader must be a great Bible teacher. It is saying he must be teachable as well as being able to communicate biblical truth to others. The word conveys not so much the dynamics of his teaching as his sensitivity to others. He teaches with a meek and gentle spirit.
8. Self-controlled (Titus 1:8)--Leaders are not to be addicted to alcohol or drugs of any kind. They need to exercise self-control.
9. Not self-willed (Titus 1:7)--They should not be self-centered. A church can't have people in leadership who are concerned only about themselves. The most important thing about church leaders is that they be concerned about the people they are shepherding.
10. Not quick-tempered (Titus 1:7)--Those in leadership cannot have a volatile temperament; they must be patient.
11. Not pugnacious (Titus 1:7)--This literally means "not a fighter." A church doesn't want someone in leadership who solves problems with his fists.
12. Not contentious (1 Tim. 3:3)--This attitude corresponds to the previous physical reaction. A contentious person likes to compete and debate.
13. Gentle (1 Tim. 3:3)

14. Not materialistic (1 Tim. 3:3)--Church leaders must be free from the love of money (but that is not to say they should be free from money itself).

15. Managing their household well (1 Tim. 3:4)--Church leaders are required to keep their children under control with dignity. Many people keep their kids under control, but not many do it with dignity.

16. Having a good reputation among unbelievers (1 Tim. 3:7)--What does the world think of church leaders? As they interact with the unsaved world, their integrity should be above reproach.

17. Loving what is good (Titus 1:8)

18. Just (Titus 1:8)--Church leaders are to be fair.

19. Devout (Titus 1:8)--They must also be holy in their daily lives.

20. Not new converts (1 Tim. 3:6)--They are to be spiritually mature.

Those are the qualifications given in Scripture for leaders in the church. They indicate the kind of people God wants to lead His church. If a church doesn't have people who measure up to God's standards, there will be problems at the very beginning. In fact, having godly leaders is so important that when an elder sins, he is to be rebuked before the whole congregation (1 Tim. 5:20).

To Flee or to Follow?

From a negative perspective, Paul told Timothy that the "man of God" must flee pride, materialism, discontentment, and disputes (1 Tim. 6:11). But from the positive side, he is to follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, and meekness as he fights the good fight of faith (vv. 11-12). In the leadership of the church there must be a plurality of godly men.

II. AN EMPHASIS ON FUNCTIONAL GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

A church must have functional goals and objectives or it will have no direction. If you don't know where you're going, you won't know when you've arrived. A church that lacks direction will have no sense of accomplishment. We can't be like the man who jumped on his horse and rode off madly in all directions! There must be some direction to what we're trying to accomplish. Can you imagine a baseball game with no bases? After hitting the ball, you wouldn't know what to do. People need goals and clear-cut objectives. It's been well said that the reason so many of us feel we're doing so well is that we don't know what we're doing!

A. Recognizing Biblical Goals

We must first recognize the basic biblical goals of the church: winning people to Christ and helping them mature. Underneath those overarching goals are more specific ones, like unifying families, preventing divorce, and educating children in the things of the Lord. Those are just a few of the many biblical goals we have.

In addition we must have functional objectives. They are the stepping stones we use to accomplish biblical goals. It isn't enough just to say we must learn the Word of God. We must go a step further and provide steps to attain that goal. For example, if we want to win people to Christ, we might preach about the responsibility of the believer to evangelize and offer classes in evangelism.

B. Responding to God's Direction

Some goals and objectives we set are never fulfilled because God has different plans. Proverbs 16:9 says, "The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps" (NASB). It's God's prerogative to divert us from our plans.

In Acts 16 the apostle Paul was trying to enter Bithynia, having already been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak in Asia. But the Spirit didn't let him speak there either. Since he was prevented from going north or south and had already been east, he headed west. Then he received a vision confirming his decision to continue west to Macedonia (vv. 6-10).

Later in his ministry, Paul wrote to the Roman Christians, saying he would visit them on his way to Spain (Rom. 15:28). We don't know if he ever got to Spain, but at least he had that as a goal. Some goals and objectives are realized, and some aren't, but all of them must be submitted to the Lord's direction.

Functional goals and objectives are essential. A church can't be nebulous in its direction. The people must know where to go and how to get there.

III. AN EMPHASIS ON DISCIPLESHIP

A. Determining the Church's Responsibility

A church must make a concerted effort to teach people the Word of God to bring them to maturity. Everyone is to be involved in that process: the teaching pastor is to perfect the saints, and the saints are to do the work of the ministry that the Body of Christ may be built up. We are all to be involved in the process of discipling people. Paul instructed Timothy to pass on what he had learned to faithful

men who would "be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2). Older men and women are to teach the younger ones (Titus 2:3-5). Even young men are to be examples to others (Titus 2:6-7). A Christian who isn't discipling someone is a contradiction. He ought to be reproducing his life in the lives of others.

A church should emphasize discipleship. The design of the Christian church is not to have a professional preacher financed by laymen who merely act as spectators. Every Christian should be involved in edifying other believers.

I was once asked about when I did my pastoral visitation, which many pastors have traditionally done in the afternoons after studying in the morning. Where does the Bible say that a pastor is to visit others all afternoon? One of the few things it does say about visitation is in the book of James: "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction" (1:27). Who is to be involved in pure and undefiled religion? Is it just the preacher? No. Every Christian is. If you have someone to visit, do so. Likewise if I know someone who needs to be visited, I'll do the same. There's no sense in my visiting those whom you ought to visit, and your visiting those whom I ought to visit. As a pastor, I don't believe I'm called to be the official visitor. Visitation--and the related ministry of discipleship--is everyone's responsibility.

B. Delineating the Discipling Process

1. Teach biblical truth

The Greek word translated "disciple" (mathetes) means "learner." If someone is a learner, that assumes someone else will teach him. Discipling Christians means teaching them biblical truth. When I disciple people, I give them books to read and tapes to listen to that deal with biblical topics I want them to understand. Besides teaching from the pulpit, I teach them biblical truths on a personal level from the Word of God.

2. Apply Scripture to life

You need to make the Bible come alive to the person you're discipling by making it practical. He must know how to apply biblical truth. You'd be amazed how many people learn principles that they never put into action. I ask questions that get the disciple to think through his own set of circumstances from God's perspective. I want him to interpret life spiritually. For example, a man I was discipling was panicky over the world situation. But as he began viewing the world from the standpoint of a sovereign God and not from that of a desperate human, the problem disappeared. Then he was excited to see what God was doing in the world. Biblical truth must be taught, and then translated into appropriate attitudes and actions.

3. Solve problems biblically

Biblical problem-solving is a key to effective discipling. People learn best when they have a need to know. A good example is the way people listen to the stewardess giving safety instructions before takeoff. No one pays any attention to her--except those who are on their first flight--because they've heard it all before and don't expect they'll need to know it. However, if you looked out the right side of the plane and saw flames coming from the engine just as the stewardess said, "Please take your emergency card," everyone would grab them. And if there weren't enough cards, someone would get trampled trying to find one! The change in interest comes from suddenly having a need to know.

You always learn best when you have to know the answers. Effective discipleship involves giving someone biblical answers to problems he has and teaching him them how to apply them. You can't just lecture; you've got to know enough Scripture to give your disciple answers when he needs them.

You may think you don't know much. Yet there are bound to be people who don't know as much as you. Find one of them and begin to disciple him. It is an unparalleled joy to see your disciples mature and grow. A Christian ought to be sharing the life he has received from God with others.

IV. AN EMPHASIS ON PENETRATING THE COMMUNITY

A church that is effective and successful will have a strong emphasis on penetrating the community. The Bible makes it clear we're to reach people for Christ.

A. The Model of the Early Church

1. Inside Jerusalem

In the first few chapters of Acts we see that the early church blitzed their community. On the Day of Pentecost, 3,000 people were saved, who in turn moved through Jerusalem like wildfire. That church grew so fast that the Jewish leaders said to the apostles, "Ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine" (5:28). Their message had penetrated the entire community.

No One Gets to Heaven by Watching a Christian For many Christians, the nearest they come to penetrating their community is driving to church in a car that has fish sticker on the back window! We come to church and say, "I've done my duty to God." We try to live our testimony rather than speak it. But no one ever got to heaven just because someone lived their testimony in front of him. Sooner or later you've got to explain the gospel.

2. Outside Jerusalem

The early Christians didn't isolate themselves in a corner and talk about doctrine. They got out and saturated their communities with the gospel.

Acts 17:3-4--Paul entered into the Thessalonian synagogue, "opening and alleging that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead And some of them believed ... and of the devout Greeks a great multitude [believed]." They proclaimed the truth to their community and the people responded. That is characteristic of every successful church throughout history.) Acts 16:5--Paul, Silas, and Timothy established the churches of Phrygia and Galatia "in the faith, and [they] increased in number daily.") Acts 14:1--"It came to pass in Iconium that they went both together into the synagogue of the Jews, and so spoke, that a great multitude, both of the Jews and also of the Greeks, believed." Paul and Barnabas confronted both Jews and Gentiles with the gospel.

Acts 13:44--"The next sabbath day came almost the whole city together to hear the word of God." The Christians of Antioch were so busy that when it came time for preaching, nearly the whole city showed up. That was typical of the early church.

B. The Methods of the Modern Church

A church can reach the community in several ways.

1. The program approach

a) Exemplified

Some people go wild on programs of evangelism. I attended a banquet where a church was presenting its evangelistic program for the year. It was centered around a football theme. Goal posts and a scoreboard were set up in the auditorium. When anyone got saved, they kicked the ball over the goal post! Furthermore, to motivate people to evangelize, five footballs were hidden in the homes of five unsaved families. Whoever found a football won a prize. The church also had a hot-dog stand set up. They even gave out sweaters to the kids who brought a certain number of people to church. I couldn't believe all the gimmicks they were using!

b) Evaluated

I can't help but think that giving people ulterior motives for winning someone to the Lord is the worst possible way to evangelize. Consider the feelings of the unsaved people who were brought in part so church members could win prizes!

After that incredible event, I was asked to speak to a group of pastors about the biblical directives for the church. I used the football program as an illustration of what not to do in evangelism. As I spoke, I noticed that there wasn't much of a reaction. Several days later, I received a letter from the pastor of the church that held the evangelism banquet. It said: "Dear Reverend MacArthur, I suppose if you had known that I had been in that class, you wouldn't have said what you said about our program. Secondly, I know you wouldn't have said it had you known that the hour before, I had presented the program to the same group of pastors you spoke to." My heart started beating faster when I read that! I immediately called him to confirm my love for him and apologize for offending him. However, I told him that I still stood 100 percent behind what I had said and that I wouldn't change my opinion of that type of program.

2. The personal approach

The church doesn't need manipulative programs. If you try to motivate people to do things for selfish motives, what they do won't honor God. I'm not against having a visitation night or door-to-door evangelism, but the best way to penetrate the community is to have Christians who reproduce themselves in their everyday lives. Then you don't need a program. Which would you rather have: a week of revival meetings once a year or a congregation evangelizing 365 days a year? Obviously the latter. Evangelism ought to be going on all the time. And it's important that we do it on a personal level.

V. AN EMPHASIS ON ACTIVE CHURCH MEMBERS

Something's wrong with a church where the staff does everything. The pastoral staff's job is to equip the saints to do the work of the ministry (Eph. 4:12). The ministry of the church extends to all believers. Romans 12:6-8 delineates some of the different spiritual gifts God has given Christians to use in the church: "Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; or ministry, let us wait on our ministering; or he that teacheth, on teaching; or he that exhorteth, on exhortation; he that giveth, let him do it with liberality; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness." Until the church realizes that every member must minister his gifts, it never will be what God wants it to be.

There's a story about baseball pitcher Dizzy Dean, whose career ended because his toe got hit by a line drive. That injury ruined his throwing motion because when he came off the rubber to pitch, he had to compensate by turning his foot the wrong way. Consequently he began overextending his arm, which eventually ruined it for pitching. That same principle is true in a spiritual sense in the church. Where there are non-functioning members, there will be adverse effects somewhere else in the Body. All the saints must be involved in ministering the gifts God has given them.

We don't want to recruit people to run programs; we want to mature saints who will do their ministries. I've talked to many pastors who become discouraged because their programs keep falling apart. I decided a long time ago that I wouldn't promote programs; I would help the saints mature so they could develop their own programs. Then they'll have the internal motivation necessary to carry them out.

When people in my church say to me, "We need such-and-such a program in our church," I say, "Good, if you feel that way, go ahead and do it." After giving that response for a few years, finally no one asked about starting a program unless he or she was very serious. The church should emphasize that every individual believer needs to minister. Church leadership shouldn't try to force their members to do something they aren't motivated or gifted to do. Rather, the leadership should develop its members along the lines that the Spirit has gifted them. Aggressive, active, ministering people make for a successful church.

Focusing on the Facts

1. Why can't a church's spiritual growth be measured by the number of people who attend it?
2. What basic principle must a church follow to receive God's blessing?
3. Unfortunately, how do most churches choose their leadership? Why would a mixed group of saved and unsaved church leaders make a church ineffective?
4. How has God mediated His rule on earth in the past? How has He chosen to rule now?
5. What was Timothy's responsibility in Ephesus? How was he to accomplish that?
6. Explain what it means for a church leader to be able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2).
7. Why must a church have functional goals and objectives?
8. Identify the two basic biblical goals of the church. How do biblical goals relate to functional objectives?
9. Assuming that we do everything in our power to accomplish our objectives, how can we be prevented from realizing their fulfillment? Give an example from Scripture.
10. Who is to be involved in the process of bringing young Christians to spiritual maturity? Explain.

11. What are three essential elements in the process of discipling others? Describe how to do each one.
12. What happened as the Jerusalem church penetrated the community following the Day of Pentecost?
13. What two methods of penetrating the community are used by the church today? Which one is preferred? Why?
14. What is the potential disadvantage of having a yearly revival meeting?
15. According to Ephesians 4:12, what is a church's pastoral staff responsible to do?
16. What happens when members of a church do not minister their gifts to the rest of the body?
17. When will church members have the internal motivation to carry a program out?

Pondering the Principles

1. Although you may not presently be a leader in your church, you should still be following the same advice Paul gave to Timothy. Read 1 Timothy 6:3-12. What things should you be fleeing from? Are there some bad habits or ungodly attitudes you should eliminate through the cleansing power of the Word and the Holy Spirit? Concentrate on pursuing "righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, [and] meekness" (v. 11).
2. Proverbs 16:9 says, "The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps" (NASB). Do you make unilateral decisions apart from the guidance of the Holy Spirit? Have you made plans that don't seem to be coming to pass as you had expected? Could it be that the Lord is redirecting your steps for a reason that is not yet clear to you? The Lord said, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8-9). Praise the Lord that He is infinitely wiser than we are, and that He will accomplish His will in our lives as we yield ourselves to His control.
3. If you are not already discipling someone, see if you can identify a Christian in your sphere of influence who could benefit from your spiritual maturity. Are you willing to share your life with that person as you teach him or her how to solve problems biblically? Since learning takes place best when there is a need to know, you will need to be available in crisis situations. Discipling isn't easy, but the joy and sense of accomplishment it brings are more than worth the effort.

4. How are you penetrating your community? Is your evangelism limited to the bumper sticker on your car or your moral lifestyle? There are many people who don't know Christ, yet lead moral lives. Godly living is important in evangelism, but it isn't enough. Words that confront unbelief and explain the need for divine forgiveness must follow your godly actions. You need to communicate the simple gospel truths that were necessary for you to come to faith in Christ. If you want to know more about effectively communicating your faith, read some books on evangelism or take an evangelism training class. The best education, however, takes place in your daily life as you share the gospel. Pray for sensitivity to the opportunities God brings to you this week.

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