

Systematic Theology
Recognizing a Healthy Church
Selected Scriptures
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For those of you who may be visiting with us, you find us in the middle of a study on Sunday evening, a three year study actually, of the great doctrines of the Bible. We began with what the Bible says about itself and we went on to look at what the Bible says about God, and then, what the Bible says about salvation. We find ourselves now in the middle of a study, what the Bible says about the church. Tonight we come to how to recognize a truly healthy church.

Some of the most graphic memories I have of my youth come from a series that my dad and I watched together on television, a series called *The World at War*. Some of you may remember that. It was a series of vivid portrayals of all of the events and happenings of World War II. And toward the end of the series they showed a video clip of the rescue of various men and women from the Nazi death camps. And as a relatively young person I remember those images like they were yesterday because I was startled at how human beings could treat other human beings; it was beyond imagination.

And in those various videos and pictures, no doubt you have seen some of them, there were pictures of American soldiers side-by-side. The rescuer, as you can see here, was a normal healthy man and the survivor weighed less than 100 pounds and looked barely alive. It really is truly amazing how God has created the body that it can sustain so much and still support life. It is true, as you look at these pictures, that both were alive and that is wonderful. But one, obviously, is strong and healthy and the other is desperately sick and perhaps even near death. As I looked at these pictures and as you do tonight, you need to realize that the same thing can be true of churches.

Churches can be, as we noted last week, true churches, they can be alive and yet at the same time there is a great difference between a sick unhealthy church and a strong healthy one. At the same time, it is important to realize that the difference between an unhealthy church and a healthy church is not quite as obvious to everyone as it is with the human body. Glance at the picture and you can see immediately, one is full of health and strength and the other is not. But it is not always that apparent to every believer. So we need to ask ourselves, how do you tell the difference? Two living churches, one healthy and one weak and sick and perhaps even near death, how do you tell?

Last time we looked at what constitutes a church. In fact, we began by asking three crucial questions. First of all, what is the difference between a church and a Christian gathering? And we noted what distinguishes a church from simply a group of Christians getting together. Secondly, we asked what is the difference between a true church and a false church? And essentially it comes down to this, is the true Christ proclaimed there, the Christ of Scripture, in all of His glory as He presents Himself? And secondly, is the true gospel of justification by faith

alone with all of the basic components that the Scripture sets forth for the gospel, are those preached and taught in order to bring the message of the true Christ and the true gospel? If so, then you have a true church. Without those you have a false church.

Tonight I want to answer, however, the third crucial question and it is this, what is the difference between a weak unhealthy true church and a strong healthy true church? So you have two churches that are truly alive but one is healthy and the other is sick and weak and anemic. How is it that we can tell the difference? Many of those who write about the church have a list of qualities or marks that distinguish vibrant healthy churches. What I want to do tonight is give you what I see as a biblical list. I believe there are seven marks that identify a biblically healthy church.

Now, my list is not biblical in the sense that I can take you to some place in Paul and show you this list. Nor is this list fully comprehensive. There are other things that perhaps you or others may rightfully add to this list. So, I am not claiming to be inspired here. But I do hope as you will see as we work our way through it tonight that it is nevertheless a biblical list. These are biblical priorities for this church and for every true church. And where they are present in great abundance there is a healthy church. And to whatever degree they are weak and unseen in the church, then that particular church is an anemic sick struggling church.

The first mark of a healthy church is that it is founded on the Scripture. Now I do not need to argue this at great length, but let me just show you several references. You understand this, this is absolutely foundational. In Acts 20 you remember, Paul speaking to the Ephesian elders as he is giving them what he assumes will be his last charge as he heads toward Jerusalem, he ends that charge with these words, “now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace,” referring to the Scriptures, “which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” He has told the Ephesian elders, listen, the thing you need more than anything else is the Word of God, the Word of the grace of God which is able to build you up and to give you an inheritance, to sanctify you as you have already been set apart or sanctified at the moment of salvation, positionally.

In Romans 16:17 he says, “Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them.” He says, listen, you there in the Roman church, take a look around and assess individuals, and ultimately it would be true of the church as a whole, who are walking contrary to the teaching which you learned. This is not a good thing, Paul says. Look for proximity and conformity to the Scripture.

In 1 Corinthians 2, and we won’t take time to turn there, but there Paul lays out to the Corinthian church the reality of this inspired text given to us by God where the apostles were given by God the responsibility and authority to combine spiritual thoughts and to present them in spiritual

words. In other words, Paul is there claiming verbal inspiration, every word given by God. And he tells the Corinthian church that this is the support and basis for their faith.

In 1 Thessalonians, to the growing but new little Thessalonian church, he says, “For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not *as* the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.” He says, listen, the reason you are a healthy growing church is because the Word of God was received by you, but more than that, it continues to perform its work in you who believe.

Second Thessalonians 2:15, “So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions.” Now this word does not mean traditions in the sense we think of, things passed down generationally that have no connection to the Scripture. He defines here what he means by traditions, “which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us.” In other words, in Paul’s definition traditions are the Scripture, what I taught you. And you embraced that and I want you to stand firm in it, you in Thessalonica. He continues in chapter 3 verse 14, “If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person, do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame.” You see, in the mind of Paul a healthy church connects to, follows, is founded on, the Scripture, and unhealthy churches stray from them, and unhealthy Christians stray from the Scriptures to their own shame and to their own demise.

First Timothy 3:15, as Paul writes to Timothy, his young son in the faith, he says, “I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God,” the family of God, “which is the church,” or the assembly, “of the living God,” which is, “the pillar and support of the truth.” The church and the truth are inseparably united and it is the church’s responsibility to be a pillar and support of the truth. So you can understand why it is so important that the church be founded on the Scripture.

Now what are the implications of this reality? What do you look for when you visit a church to see if it is truly founded on the Scripture? This is not a complete list either but these are things in our day to look for, the implications of a church that is truly founded on the Scripture. First of all, look for a full confidence in the sufficiency of Scripture. The stress in that church should be on teaching the Bible. If we are to be founded on the Scriptures, if that is foundational to a healthy church, then the emphasis in that church should be teaching and explaining the Word of God versus other techniques that are common today: drama, spirit dance, and the list goes on and on. The church is to be founded on the Scripture and when that is true, you will find a church that cares about teaching the Word of God.

There are a lot of articles that I have read in recent months about the theology of architecture and how with the Reformation there was a move to even center the churches with a pulpit. Before the Reformation, in the center of the church would have been the altar, the Roman Catholic altar, on which the mass was offered, emphasizing this sort of sacerdotal function as the key role of the

church, this sort of priestly function. But when the reformers came along they said no, absolutely not, look at the New Testament, the focus of the church is to be the Word of God. And so they put the pulpit front and center, or at least as the place of priority, the place where even visually it was the focal point. And that should be true in a church, whether the pulpit is front and center or not, whether it is wood or Plexiglas or wrought iron is not really the key issue. The issue is what is done from it.

And that brings us to the second implication and that is, the regular practice of expository preaching. If a church is truly founded on the Scripture, if it really believes the Word of God is its base, then it is going to endeavor to explain it as God recorded it. It is not simplistic to say that throughout the history of the church, when the church was on fire for God, when the church's doctrine was pure and sound, when many were being added to the church, there was only one kind of preaching that prevailed, the clear simple presentation of the meaning of the Scripture. A simple setting forth of the truth of a particular passage of the Word of God, in short, what we today call expository preaching.

Sadly, in our day, and you know this if you have visited many churches at all, in our day churches and preachers completely neglect this responsibility. Sometimes Saturday evening, somewhere in a period of 20 minutes to several hours, they devote themselves to creating an organized talk that has little to nothing to do with the Scripture. You know, the classic Saturday night special, and every bit as lethal as the handgun.

There are so many examples of this. I think of the one my good friend Chris Parkening shared with me. He had a friend in Los Angeles who attended a large church there that had traditionally been evangelical. And they got a woman pastor, of course there is a little problem with that in 1 Timothy, but beyond that, she got up to preach and she got up to preach on the gospel, but it was not just any gospel, it was the gospel of Starbucks. She had visited several coffee chains and she had found some of their mission statements intriguing, and she liked Starbucks' best of all, and so she presented an entire message without any reference to the Scripture, instead basically preaching, expositing if you will, Starbucks' mission statement and how that should be incorporated into the life of the church.

And on and on it goes, from the "tortilla of death," where some man throws tortillas into the audience, to driving cars on the platform, to you name it. Darrel Bennett told me recently about a visit he and Carol made to a Bible church in our area a number of years ago. The pastor's message that morning was about the benefits of physical exercise. Well, it seems a bit of a reach, I mean, the Bible does not have a lot to say about that, but there are a couple of sort of obscure references that perhaps you could say was a legitimate application, but the pastor did not even bother referencing those. He just talked about the benefits of physical exercise, and it was church. Where there is a church founded on Scripture there will be a concern about teaching it in

a meaningful way, setting forth the text of Scripture in a way that explains its original meaning and helps people apply it to life.

A third implication is there will be a deep concern about correct biblical theology. Listen, you want to run from a church? Ask the pastor where they stand theologically and hear him say, well you know, we are not really interested in theology, after all theology divides, and we are interested in bringing people together. There is a man who does not care about the truth. There is a church that does not care about the truth. Because theology is nothing other than organizing and systematizing the teaching of Scripture. Everybody has a theology. You may not know what yours is, but you have one. You have reconciled how the Scripture fits together and those who care about the Scripture care about what it teaches as a whole. Fourthly, if it is founded on Scripture, there will be an obvious effort to consistently practice the Word. Do you sense that they care about actually doing what the Scriptures teach?

Well, let's move on. Number two, and I wish there were a better way for me to say this, but I could not come up with one. Captivated, a church that is a healthy church is captivated by God's transcendence. You could say captivated by God, I suppose, but it is more than that. It is captivated by God's transcendence. You say, what is transcendence? That is not a word we use all the time. Here is what it means, being above and independent of the material universe, surpassing others, pre-eminent or supreme. Let me give you my thesaurus' run down on the word transcendent. This is what I mean, magnificent, extraordinary, unparalleled, unrivaled, unequaled, unsurpassed, incomparable, unique, superior, supreme, paramount, foremost, utmost, second-to-none. Is that how God is presented and held up in that congregation? Or is God just a guy you run into in the coffee shop?

How do we know that a biblical church is captivated by God's transcendence? Well, there are several of these that are throughout the New Testament, and it was hard for me to even decide where to go because there are so many places, but let me give you just a couple of texts that I think drive this home. In Ephesians 3, as Paul talks about the church he says that the very purpose of the church, this wonderful mystery he says that has now been revealed to him and that he is revealing to us, God did the church, He gave us the church, so that the manifold wisdom of God, the multi-colored, variegated wisdom of God might be put on display by the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

Listen, when we gather together there is something a lot greater than what is happening here going on. God is putting His manifold wisdom on display and not just here in the world, not just to somebody who wanders in, but even to those intelligent created beings that are above and beyond us in power and majesty. And it is impossible to think of that happening and denigrating the great God that we worship. Ephesians 3:21, Paul finishes that great chapter on the church and he says, "to Him," that is, to God, "be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all

generations forever and ever. Amen.” He gets carried away with himself and he says, this is what it is all about, lifting up the greatness and the majesty and the glory of our God.

But I was especially struck, as I studied this week, with how Paul continually addresses Timothy in his letter to Timothy. Remember, we saw already that he wrote Timothy to tell him how to conduct himself in the house of God, in the church, the church of the living God. And as he teaches his young son in the faith, what strikes me is how frequently in this really private letter, that by the inspiration of the Spirit and the providence of God has become a part of our canon, but it was a private letter to Timothy, his young son in the faith, and yet here Paul, in this letter, gets carried away with God and he wants Timothy to get carried away with the person of God as well.

In 1 Timothy 1:17, barely into his letter, he breaks out in this doxology, “Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.” Take that to your coffee shop. The two are not synonymous. By the way, I am not against coffee or even having coffee in the church. That is not the point. I am talking about an atmosphere that is sort of bred in some churches. There ought to be an atmosphere and an attitude of a viewpoint of a transcendent God, an unrivaled unparalleled supreme being, who has, in His great mercy and grace, condescended to us.

You catch this in Paul, I read it earlier, but we are talking, he says, about the church of the living God. You just hear him saying this to Timothy. This is nothing to trifle with. In 1 Timothy 5:21, “I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of *His* chosen angels, to maintain these principles,” of church discipline, actually, on elders, “without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality.” And these are just a few examples. How elevated Paul’s view of God was.

I want you to turn to 1 Timothy 6 and look at verse 13. As he concludes his first letter to Timothy he says, “I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things,” now, remember, this is a personal letter, folks, to Timothy, his young son in the faith,

I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate, that you keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which He will bring about at the proper time—He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen.

Do you see the heart of Paul? He was absolutely captivated by God’s transcendence and he wanted Timothy to be as well, and so should any healthy church.

Now, what are the implications if this mark is present in a church? Well, I think you will see it in private conversation. The people of the church will often speak of God and His Word. If there is a lack of this they will speak of God and His Word with an obvious lack of respect. You have heard the phrases and the words, the way God is spoken about and to. There is no sense of reverence, there is no sense of what you just saw in the Apostle Paul writing to his young son in the faith. It is slapstick religion, and where you find that, it is not a healthy church. It may be a true church, may teach the gospel of Christ, may embrace the true Jesus, but it is not a healthy church.

You will also see it in the corporate worship. When you look at the corporate worship, when you walk in, ask yourself, how important is it to this church to worship? You see, if a church is captivated by the transcendence of God, worship will be its chief priority. Let me say that again. If a church is captivated by the unparalleled, unrivaled, unequaled, majesty of God then its chief duty will be worshipping God. That will be its chief priority. Does that come through in what happens when the church gathers? Who is the focus?

You see, in many churches today the corporate gathering, the assembly, is about the people. You are here to get something. You are here to be entertained. You see, that takes the whole thing and dumps it on its head. As you hear me say many times, it is not about us. Certainly we benefit, we learn, we enjoy the fellowship, we grow, all of those wonderful things, but that is not the primary reason we come together. We come together to worship our God. God is the audience, you are not. You will be able to tell right away who the primary audience is; if the church has a man-centered worldview, it will have man-centered worship, and it will be an unhealthy church.

In terms of the worship, also ask yourself how involved are all the people in the church in singing and worshipping? If a church understands that God is the audience and that they are to sing to Him, it changes the way that they sing, it changes the way that they pray, it changes the way that they react to the teaching of the Word of God, because they understand who the real audience is.

There is a third implication, if a church is captivated by God's transcendence. You will see it in their view of God's sovereignty. You see, wherever God's sovereignty is downplayed, I will show you worship and a church that are not captivated with the transcendence of God. It is God's sovereignty and His greatness that elevates Him beyond everyone and everything else.

Thirdly, if it is a healthy church it will be centered on Christ. And again, this really does not even need to be argued, but let me just briefly give you a few points. Matthew 16:18, "I also say to you," Jesus said, "that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church." Underscore My church, it is Christ's church. So if it is a truly healthy church it will be centered where? On Christ. And again you see this over and over again. Look at Ephesians 1. Lord willing, after we

finish James, which will happen, I promise you, we are going to go to Ephesians, one of my favorite epistles and probably one of yours as well.

In the first chapter of Ephesians, I believe Paul lays out to us the divine mind. He lets us in on the divine eternal purposes of God and he lays it out in verses 3 through 14. And in this passage what resonates again and again is that He is working, God is working, in Him, that is, in Christ. Notice how often that phrase occurs. He says He has blessed us, verse 3, “in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him that we would be holy and blameless before Him.” “He predestined us to adoption,” verse 5, “as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself,” “to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved,” that is, in Christ. “In Him,” that is, in Christ, “we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses” and so forth. And on and on it goes.

What is the point? Paul wants us to understand that in the divine eternal plan Christ was forever to be the center, the mediator, the one that brought us to God. And all of the blessings He chose to bestow upon us happened to us in Christ. There is a great message there, several messages actually, in and of itself, in our union with Christ. But what I want you to see is that the church is about Christ. We have been joined to Him, and notice verse 9, “In all wisdom and insight He made known to us the mystery of His will.” God told us the mystery, that is, which used to be hidden but now is revealed, of His will. What is it? Well, it is what He purposed in Christ, “with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times.” And here it is, here is God’s will, the mystery of His will, “the summing up of all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on the earth.” Listen, He could not make it any clearer. We, as the church, Ephesus, you as the church, we are to be centered on Christ.

In Ephesians 4, in that image of a body, he says, “we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ.” Listen, how better could the Lord describe that Christ is the center of the church than to call Him the head of the body? When you and I look at each other, where do we look? We look at our faces, our heads, because that is the center of life. The church is to be centered on Christ.

In Philippians 3:3 Paul writes about justification and he says this, “we are the true circumcision,” as opposed to those Jews who wanted to claim to be God’s real people. And we are the ones, we who are true believers, glory in Christ Jesus. One characteristic of true Christians is that they glory in Christ Jesus. To glory about Christ or to glory in Christ is to have your confidence in Christ and therefore to boast about Him. True Christians give all the credit for all that they are, and all that they have, to Jesus Christ and what He accomplished for them in His finished work. True Christians boast in Christ Jesus, they are Christ-intoxicated.

You see this again in Colossians 1. I wish we had time to go there, I had planned to but I don’t have time. Colossians 1:18-29, where Paul lays out the reality that Christ is everything, and he

says at the end of that passage, “We proclaim Him,” “so that we can present every man complete in Him.” Church is to be centered on Christ.

For thousands of years before Copernicus, Ptolemy and his disciples taught that our entire solar system revolved around the earth. Now, the Ptolemaic system was helpful in some regards. It could predict the hours of sunrise and sunset. It could chart the movement of the heavens, to a certain degree. But, as you know, it was terribly flawed. As a result, it provided a warped perspective of the earth’s role in the universe. It undermined scientific progress and it eventually began to collapse under the weight of its own false premises.

Then Copernicus came along and he rocked everyone’s world. He said, you have got it all wrong, the sun is the center of the solar system. And that brought everything else into proper alignment. Folks, in the church we live in a solar system that has fixed laws every bit as fixed as that of our solar system, and it revolves around Jesus Christ. But sadly, many churches have their calculations all wrong. They think that the entire universe revolves around something else and they make tragic decisions based on this flawed premise.

Now what are the implications of a church centered on Christ? There is, first of all, a burning devotion to Christ. You see, love for Christ defines what it means to be a Christian. Listen to Paul in 1 Corinthians 16:22, “If anyone does not love the Lord, he is to be damned.” Do you know what Paul was saying? Loving Christ is what it means to be a Christian. If you do not love Christ then you have no hope of eternity. But sadly, even Christians can stray from their first love. You remember of course, in Revelation 2:1-7, the Ephesian church in the time of the Apostle John is said to have left, with all of its orthodoxy, with all of its correct teaching, to have left its first love, that is, its love for Jesus Christ. Where there is a healthy church there is a burning devotion to Christ.

Secondly, there is constant reference to the Lord Jesus Christ. If all you ever hear in a church is talk, generic talk, about God, it is a problem. Because God made Christ the mediator. The Christian life is characterized as being a disciple, a learner, a student of Jesus Christ. The church is Christ’s church. I became a Christian when I was 17 and I went off to a Christian college. But the more I grew and the more I read and the more I studied, the more something just did not seem right. It just did not seem like I was in the middle of a New Testament type church.

I remember, one night, one of those nights I was working at the Mackey mortuary, there were no visitations that night, which was a dream for a seminary student because that meant I had all evening to myself. And I sat down and I read the book of Ephesians and I read it with one objective, one simple thing I wanted to see, and that was, what was the difference? What made the difference between a New Testament church and what I was experiencing? And you know what? It became clear to me before I got to the end of the second chapter.

The early church, the New Testament church, a healthy church, is obsessed with Jesus Christ. This is the test, not only of the health of a church, but it is a test of each of our own spiritual health as well. Are you obsessed with Jesus Christ? Are you centered on Christ?

Thirdly, if we are centered on Christ, it will produce a deeper concern for what pleases Christ than pleasing men. Galatians 1:10, Paul says, “For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, then I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.” When you really are centered on Christ you care more about what honors Him, more about what would please Him, than you care about pleasing people. That does not mean you are ungracious, you do not have to be ungracious in that, it just means pleasing Him matters more and you can see that in the life of a church.

Let’s move on quickly. Number four, a church that is healthy is gripped by the gospel. You know, it is really impossible to know where to start to show you how this preoccupied the apostles and the churches that they founded and wrote. This was a theme to which Paul the apostle constantly returned. Two of his epistles have the gospel as their primary theme, both Romans and Galatians. Romans, to present the truth of the gospel and the implications of the gospel, and Galatians to defend the gospel. Both of those letters were written to Christian people, to churches. And you see right away as you read how he wanted the gospel that captivated his own soul to captivate them as well, to grip them.

You see it in Romans 1 where he writes in verse 16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel,” the gospel that should bring shame to me because I am serving and following a condemned criminal who was executed in the most shameful way possible, brings me no shame at all, “for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it,” that is, in the gospel, “the righteousness from God is revealed,” and it is a righteousness that comes by way of faith, it is faith from beginning to end is what that next expression says, “from faith to faith,” from beginning to end, it is all about faith, there is no work in it, “as it is written, ‘THE ONE WHO IS RIGHTEOUS BY FAITH SHALL LIVE.’” Paul was gripped by the gospel.

He goes on in Romans 3 to explain it, to lay it out in all of its glory. I love Romans 3:21. He says, “But now apart from the Law *the* righteousness of God has been manifested, the one that was witnessed by the Law and the Prophets,” this is not a new gospel, he says, for “even *the* righteousness of God,” which comes, “through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.” Verse 24, “being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.” You see it in Galatians 1, we looked at that passage last week, where he defends the glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ against perversion.

In Philippians 3:1, he says something very interesting. He introduces this passage on justification. You remember now, we studied it many months ago. And he says in verse 1, “To write the same things *again* is no trouble to me.” Paul is referring back to what he had taught the Philippians about justification, over and over again when he was with them. And now in this

brief letter he says, I am going to tell you again and it does not bother me to do it, because this was the heart of the apostle. He goes on through that third chapter to present the truth of justification by faith alone which is, of course, the gospel. And in fact, the gospel was the essence of Paul's ministry.

You want to see what Paul's ministry was all about? Look at 2 Corinthians 5. He says in verse 18,

Now all *these* things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, [*and here it is,*] namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word, [*or the message,*] of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were begging through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. [*And here it is; here is the gospel in a nutshell.*] God made Christ who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

The wonderful glory of justification, of imputation, God credits our sin, the believing sinner's sin to Christ on the cross so that He dies in our place, and God credits Jesus' perfect life of righteousness to us and treats us as Christ deserves to be treated. Paul was gripped by the gospel and a true healthy church is as well.

What are the implications? We have just gone through our study on salvation so I am not going to spend much time here, but I just want to comment on it. Where there is a church gripped by the gospel, the gospel is clearly and biblically defined. It is not fuzzy around the edges. They understand man's fallenness and his depravity, his total inability. They understand the need for God's intervention, for His grace, for regeneration, for absolute change. They understand that God, by His sovereign grace, gives repentance and faith to a sinner who is dead; He brings him to life and through that process justifies him. The gospel is clearly and biblically defined as by grace alone, by faith alone, and in Christ alone. Secondly, the people are actively evangelistic. A church that is gripped by the gospel, a healthy church, will be evangelistic.

Hastening on to number five. A healthy church will be directed toward holiness. In 1 Corinthians 3, we looked at several weeks ago, the church is called "the temple of God," "the Spirit of God dwells in you," that is plural, it is talking about the church now, not our individual bodies, "the temple of God is holy and that is what you are." Listen, the essence of the assembly is to be holy; it is to be a dwelling for God. And so a healthy church is passionate about holiness, personal holiness.

Ephesians 2:21, "In Christ the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord." The church is really growing, if it is healthy, it is growing in holiness. You

see the same thing in Ephesians 5, that reference of Christ and His work in giving Himself for the church,

that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, in order that He may present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.

That is what Christ is doing and a church that reflects the purposes of Christ, that is healthy, reflects this same passion for holiness. You see it again in Revelation 19:8.

Now, what are the implications of a church that is really concerned about holiness? You can recognize it because you will see, first of all, that they require a profession of faith for membership. You say, what does that have to do with holiness in the church? It begins, the church begins with a desire to protect the holiness of the church by not knowingly letting tares into the congregation. They try to preserve the holiness of the church on the front end.

Mark Dever, in his excellent resource *Nine Marks of the Church*, on his website as well if you are interested, Pastor of the Capitol Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., he writes this, “Churches should be careful to allow only genuine believers into the covenant of church membership. Why? Because of who the church is. By definition the church is the gathered people of God. Those who are not a part of that people are welcome as visitors, but membership in a local church only belongs rightly to those who already belong to God by faith in His Son, Jesus Christ. Unregenerate members do not share the same spiritual DNA as Christians. Infusing the church with their blood will lead to complication, infection, and potential fatality.”

That is exactly right. A church that is concerned about holiness begins on the front end. They also will insist on the reality in their membership of a changed life, a changed life. “If any man is in Christ he is,” what? “A new creation.” That does not mean we are perfect, none of us are. It does not mean we do not sin, we all do. It does not mean we do not even sometimes sin egregiously and terribly. But what it does mean is if you look at the pattern of life over a number of years of a true Christian you will see a decreasing pattern of sin and an increasing pattern of holiness.

The church that is directed toward holiness also faithfully practices church discipline. We looked at that last week together. Not only for the restoration of that member, but another purpose of church discipline is to purify and cleanse the body, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5.

Number six. Two more, briefly. A healthy church is filled with true, genuine love. This is throughout the New Testament. You remember, Christ on the night before His crucifixion said to His disciples in John 13, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another,” not new in the sense that it had never been told before, but new in a special way to them, He says, “even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are

My disciples, if you have love for one another.” Jesus gives us a definition for a healthy church, where there is love.

First Corinthians 16:14, “Let all that you do,” Paul says to this troubled Corinthian church that was not very healthy, here is the remedy, 1 Corinthians 13, love, pursue love. And then he ends in chapter 16 verse 14, “Let all that you do be done in love.” Colossians 3:14, “Beyond all these,” other commands I have given you, “*put on* love, which is the perfect bond of unity.” First Thessalonians 3:12-13, he says, I want “the Lord to cause you to increase and abound in love for one another.” First Thessalonians 4, “Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for *anyone* to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another,” and I want you “to excel still more.” Second Thessalonians 1:3, he says, we are very much thankful for you. Why? Because “the love of each one of you toward one another grows *ever* greater.”

Paul is helping us identify a healthy church. It is a church that is filled and permeated with love. First Timothy 1:5, “the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” First Peter 1:22, “Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart.” This is a healthy church, a church that is filled with love.

So how do you recognize it? What are the implications of a church that is filled with love? Well, there are so many and I am just going to give you two brief ones. First of all, do the members enjoy one another in fellowship? You know one good way to see this? Watch what happens after a service. Does everybody head for the doors and the cars or is there a desire to be with one another, to enjoy one another, to fellowship? You know, I have to tell you, that has been one of the greatest joys of my heart over the last several years, is to watch that grow in our church. The members enjoy one another in fellowship.

Secondly, the members serve one another in practical ways. And of course, John makes that clear in 1 John 3. He says we know we are Christians if we love the brethren. And he says if we really love the brethren then we “love not with word or with tongue only, but in deed and in truth.” Take a look and see how the membership really serve one another. Privately, behind the scenes, is there a genuine concern for each other?

Finally, a healthy church, and this seems strange to say but I think it is very much defensible from Scripture, a healthy church is a church that is immersed in the church. That is, they understand the priority of the church. The first message in this series was on the priority of the church. And if you were not here I encourage you to listen to it. But essentially I made this point, the church should be important to us because it matters to God. And the reason the church matters is because of the example of the New Testament believers, and we looked at many different passages under each of these, I am just going to give you the outline, because of the example of New Testament believers, because of the teaching and pattern of the apostles,

because of the commands of the New Testament to be engaged in the life of the church, the priority of Christ.

Christ after all is the one who said this is what I am going to be about, building My church. And if it is that important to God, and if it was that important to the apostles, and if it was that important to the New Testament church, if the church mattered that much, then it matters to a healthy church. That does not mean they lose sight of Christ, or the gospel, or the Word, or any of these other things, or each other. But it matters that they care about the church.

Now, where there is a healthy concern for the church, in a healthy church, it will have these implications. First of all, they understand that their lives should be focused on the church. The individual members grasp that they ought to be using their gifts and serving other believers through the context of a local church. It is not all about the organizations down the street. Those are good, some of them are good and helpful and so forth, but Christ only promised to build one organism, one organization, one institution, one assembly, and it is the church.

Number two, where this is embraced they embrace a biblical philosophy of ministry in the church. What is a biblical philosophy of ministry? Well, we will look at it in a little more detail in coming weeks, but in Ephesians 4 Christ lays out a philosophy. Christ's plan for His church, for any church, has four simple parts. Christ appoints the leaders of the church, Ephesians 4:11, the leaders equip the members of the church, 4:12, and the leaders do that by the Word of God and by prayer. Then the members accomplish the service of the church, the second half of verse 12, and the final part of the plan is the outcome produces the growth of the church, the end of verse 12, "the building up of the body of Christ." That is the plan. That is a biblical philosophy of ministry. And a church that understands that, and is working on that, is a healthy church. There is also biblically qualified leadership. There are male elders who meet the biblical qualifications for leadership in Titus 1 and 1 Timothy 3. And finally, they practice the ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Table, in a biblical manner.

So, how did our church do? Take a look again, a truly healthy church is a church founded on Scripture, captivated by God's transcendence, centered on Christ, gripped by the gospel, directed toward holiness, filled with love, and immersed in the life of the church. As I look at that list, and I search my own heart and the heartbeat of our church, overall I am encouraged. But I think there are some areas that we as a church need to work on. I think we are founded on Scripture, we are all about that, and that is a strength of our church. I think we are captivated as a whole by God's transcendence, and that is good and right, and as it should be. I think we can work more as a church on being centered on Christ.

You know Seth and I were talking just a few weeks ago, there are a lot of great praise songs that are very generic about God and God as Creator. Now, that is a wonderful thing and we ought to sing those; a lot of the psalms focus on that reality. But we ought to also be singing a lot of songs that focus on Christ and on the gospel. We ought to be looking for Him in the Scripture as

well. We as a church need to be, in a greater way I think, gripped by the gospel. And practically that means I would like to see us grow in our evangelistic outreach. I would like to see every one of us passionate about seeing people come to faith in Jesus Christ, friends and family and neighbors, and actively pursuing that.

I think as a whole we are directed toward holiness. I think we could do better at being filled with love. This is a loving church, I have enjoyed that from the beginning, but I think we need “to excel still more.” There are some people who come at times and get the impression that that is not true because we are so busy loving each other that sometimes we really do not reach out the way we should. And I think we are learning what it means to be poured into the life of the church.

Let me ask you a question, how did you do? What about your own heart, your own life? Are you founded on Scripture? Are you captivated by God and His greatness and His majesty? Are you centered on Christ? Are you gripped by the gospel? Are you living your life directed toward holiness? Are you filled with love for God and others? And are you immersed in the life of the church? May God give us the grace to pursue these things, to be a healthy church. Let’s pray together.

Father, we do pray that You would give us a renewed energy and resolve and passion, as a church and as individuals, to pursue these things. Lord may these things define who we are. Not for our sake, not for our glory, or any individual’s glory, or for our elders, or for our teachers, or for any individual member, but Father, for Your glory, because Your glory is what should be put on display in the church. Father, give us the strength and the capacity and the commitment and the resolve, and the wisdom to know how to pursue these things privately and individually, and corporately. We ask in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, amen.