

## MARKS OF A HEALTHY CHURCH

*Kenneth O. Gangel*

A STRIKING STATEMENT FROM ISAIAH leaps off the page of the annual report of a small evangelical denomination: “See, I am doing a new thing!” (Isa. 43:19, NIV). The 459 pages that follow describe how God is dealing with that fellowship of churches to craft a vision for the future. Many of their goals of recent years have been achieved; some have been set aside; others revised for new challenges in the future.

One of those new challenges calls the members to prayer, evangelism, church planting, and “discipling world Christians who view the mission of the church through Christ’s eyes and hearts.” The report rejoices, “What an opportunity God is giving His church.”

In the report denominational leaders then introduce readers to the concept of “healthy Great Commission churches,” which are defined as “communities of Christ-centered people characterized by five balanced passions: winning the lost, building the believer, equipping the worker, multiplying the leader, and sending the called ones.” Who could reject those concerns? However, the statement soon erodes into statistical ashes. Suddenly “healthy churches” seem to be measured not by the five passions, but by where they stand numerically, a picture that comes across with stark reality.

Thinking Christian leaders must accept the challenge to focus on healthy churches while recognizing that church size is never a guarantee of spiritual quality. Churches must face the future with total dependence on the sovereignty of God and the power of His Word, while being careful to avoid marrying the spirit of this age and becoming a widow in the next. If the key word is *health*, what are the marks of a healthy church?

This article suggests that healthy churches are measured in

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spiritual terms, follow biblical patterns of ministry, are based on theological foundations, focus on a ministry model, and adopt scriptural models of leadership.

#### HEALTHY CHURCHES ARE MEASURED IN SPIRITUAL RATHER THAN NUMERICAL TERMS

True, the five passions noted earlier go beyond head-counting. But what best measures a church's spiritual health? Churches must be careful they do not get trapped into thinking they are healthy simply because they are growing numerically. Church leaders must not turn their backs on smaller or plateaued churches. Believers in some small churches may exhibit more spiritual maturity than believers in some large churches. In their book *No Little Places*, Klassen and Koessler emphasize that God judges ministry by quality, not size.

Today the term *church growth* is used almost exclusively to mean numerical growth. If the numbers go up, the church is growing. If the numbers stay the same, the church is experiencing a "plateau," a buzz word for stagnation. If the numbers are going down, the church must be unhealthy and in a state of decline.

Such thinking is over-simplistic. Numerical growth can take place for wrong reasons. For example, during Jesus' ministry, much of the crowd that followed him was more interested in his miracles than in his message (John 6:26). All of us have seen churches that are getting larger for the wrong reasons. Are such churches really growing?<sup>1</sup>

Several biblical texts affirm that leaders ought not count numbers. Of course no one wants a gravel-road church in an interstate world, but at no point do the Scriptures give any warrant for measuring health on the basis of size alone. The early chapters of Acts record that some large numbers of people came to Christ. Then Luke never again mentioned the size of any congregation Paul visited on his three missionary journeys, nor does anyone have any idea of the size of any congregation to which the New Testament letters were written.

Immediately after Luke wrote that three thousand people were added to the church on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41), he stated the formula for healthy churches both then and now. "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe, and many wonders and signs were tak-

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<sup>1</sup> Ron Klassen and John Koessler, *No Little Places* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 24 (italics theirs).

ing place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:42–47).

These believers gave themselves to Bible study, prayer, fellowship, praise, and worship. Without special programs, catchy slogans, and new paradigms, many were being saved every day. The behavior of the Christians attracted the attention of the unsaved.

For many Christians worship is a lost art. In the lives of some believers it may never have been cultivated at all. Part of the problem is that many think of worship as an *act*, failing to realize that *attitude* is far more important because without it the act is meaningless. Furthermore for too many people worship requires a place, a building or room to which they go to “pay their respects” to God. As I wrote elsewhere, “Worship as service describes people allowing God to work through them in order to create a spiritual community. Worship as service involves the understanding and application of spiritual gifts and their role in the body of Christ (Rom. 12:6–8). The unity, diversity, and mutuality of the church abound when worshipers serve and servants worship.”<sup>2</sup>

Healthy churches emphasize the sovereignty of God, who calls His people to worship. Genuine worship begins with an awareness of God’s presence and power. Healthy churches practice balanced worship with music that focuses attention on the triune Godhead and with preaching that rivets minds and hearts to His Word.

Healthy churches do not confine worship to a single compartment of the Christian experience. Worship involves total commitment to God in every aspect of daily life.

Central to healthy congregational life is the biblical mandate of mutual ministry (Rom. 12:5) and the willing and joyous participation of believers ministering to each other (1 Pet. 2:4–9).

In coming to know Jesus Christ, believers became part of the body of Christ, the church. Under the priesthood of Jesus the church itself is a priesthood. In 1 Peter, the author refers to Exodus 19 where Moses was about to go up the mountain to receive God’s law. God said to Is-

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth O. Gangel, “Reexamining Biblical Worship,” in *Vital Ministry Issues*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1994), 171.

rael, “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19:5–6). The whole nation of Israel, not just the tribe of Levi, was to be God’s priesthood. God’s plan was that His people would represent Him to the world. They would be the channel of His revelation and His salvation purposes. This was God’s commission to Israel. Although Israel often was unfaithful and the commission was only partially fulfilled, God’s purpose was clear.<sup>3</sup>

Church health does not begin with evangelism or missions—though both must follow. *Biblical church health begins with a Christ-centered, Bible-centered congregation determined to be in their personal, family, and corporate life precisely what God wants of them, and it makes no difference whether their number is fifteen, fifteen hundred, or fifteen thousand.*

#### HEALTHY CHURCHES FOLLOW BIBLICAL RATHER THAN CULTURAL PATTERNS OF MINISTRY

Though the gospel has always been transcultural, believers have frequently been tempted to adapt so dramatically to their own cultural surroundings that Christianity loses its distinctiveness. This often arises from sincere motives, a desire to contextualize the gospel or to be “relevant to the times.” Commonly seen in the Renaissance and again in the Enlightenment, such behavior marks much of evangelicalism today. Churches seem hooked on futurism, movements, fads, and slogans.

The sometimes shaky theology of the church-growth movement has drawn many by its pragmatic outcome-centered approach—if it works, it must be right. MacArthur warns, “The contemporary church’s abandonment of *sola Scriptura* as the regulative principle has opened the church to some of the grossest imaginable abuses—including honky-tonk church services, the carnival sideshow atmosphere, and wrestling exhibitions. Even the broadest, most liberal application of the regulative principle should have a corrective effect on such abuses.”<sup>4</sup>

Rather than programs and paradigms, first-century believers were marked by unity and generosity. “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was

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<sup>3</sup> Howard A. Snyder, *Liberating the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983), 170–71.

<sup>4</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., “How Shall We Then Worship?” in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, ed. David Wells (Chicago: Moody, 1996), 181.

his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need" (Acts 4:32–35, NIV).

No wonder the world was interested! The believers spoke the Word of God boldly and proclaimed the name of Jesus and His resurrection—wherever they went. And their message carried meaning because people knew what kind of relationships they maintained when they were together. "The Epistles command believers to unite together on the basis of their new family relationship in Christ. Over and over come the instructions: suffer together (1 Cor. 12:26), rejoice together (Rom. 12:15), carry each other's burdens (Gal. 6:2), restore each other (Gal. 6:1), pray for each other (Rom. 15:30), encourage each other (Rom. 1:12), forgive each other (Eph. 4:32), confess to each other (Jas. 5:16), be truthful with each other (Eph. 4:25), spur each other to good deeds (Heb. 10:24), and give to each other (Phil. 4:14–15)."<sup>5</sup>

Hayes emphasizes the commonality of believers in the local church.

One of the compelling concepts of the church is the doctrine of the communion of the saints. The Apostles' Creed included this designation as a platform of belief. Earlier we looked at Christian fellowship in light of the marks of a true church. The reality of a common bond in Christ between Christians regardless of race, gender, or class should be an obvious mark of the church. But the *koinwnia*, unique to the essence of the body of Christ, is more than a binding element. It carries with it responsibility and accountability. The fellowship of the saints should corporately display our unity in Christ and our accountability both to the Word and to other believers. "For none of us lives to himself alone," wrote Paul, "and none of us dies to himself alone" (Rom. 14:7).<sup>6</sup>

Church services, then, center on believers, and evangelism takes place as believers make contact with unbelievers outside the church. Thus MacArthur doubts the biblical justification of the so-called "seeker-service" philosophy. "There is simply no warrant in Scripture for adapting weekly church services to the preferences of

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<sup>5</sup> Raymond C. Ortlund, "Priorities for the Local Church," in *Vital Ministry Issues*, 91.

<sup>6</sup> Ed Hayes, *The Church*, Swindoll Leadership Library (Nashville: Word, 1999), 124.

unbelievers. Indeed, the practice seems to be contrary to the spirit of everything Scripture says about the assembly of believers. When the church comes together on the Lord's Day, that is no time to entertain the lost, amuse the brethren, or otherwise cater to the 'felt needs' of those in attendance. This is when we should bow before our God as a congregation and honor Him with our worship."<sup>7</sup>

In the biblical pattern, building up believers precedes winning the lost or any other valued passion. *Believers must first develop a spirit of unity, mutuality, and generosity.* What could be less effective in fulfilling the Great Commission than inviting unsaved people into a congregation that is marked by complaining, bitterness, criticism, and hypocrisy?

#### HEALTHY CHURCHES ARE BASED ON THEOLOGICAL RATHER THAN SOCIOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Many Christian leaders have taken their cues from sociological pragmatism (as suggested earlier), ignoring the true dynamic of biblical theology, and even failing to evaluate cultural and sociological insights by the measure of Scripture. Guinness picks up this precise point in his critique of the church-growth movement. "On the one hand, its theological understanding is often superficial, with almost no element of biblical criticism. As a well-known proponent states, 'I don't deal with theology, I'm simply a methodologist'—as if his theology were thereby guaranteed to remain critical and his methodology neutral. But in fact, theology is rarely more than marginal in the church growth movement and discussion of the traditional marks of the church is virtually nonexistent. Instead, methodology, or technique, is at the center and in control. The result is a methodology only occasionally in search of a theology."<sup>8</sup>

Most New Testament students agree that Ephesians identifies biblical goals for the church and describes how they can be achieved. In that letter Paul did not deal with error or heresy but sought to expand the spiritual horizons of believers. Where in Ephesians did Paul discuss programs and statistics? Where in that letter did he talk about growth or plateauing? What about buildings and fund drives—both allegedly marks of a "healthy church" in recent decades?

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<sup>7</sup> MacArthur, "How Shall We Then Worship?" 185.

<sup>8</sup> Os Guinness, "Sounding Out the Idols of Church Growth," in *No God but God*, ed. Os Guinness and John Seel (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 155.

Of course the apostle discussed none of these subjects. Instead he described humble people making spiritual progress with God and each other. He offered a formula that could change a church of any size from spiritual sickness to health in a matter of weeks, telling them to live the Christian life “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:2–6).

Some may respond, “That kind of ideal may have marked the churches of the New Testament. But after two thousand years of spiritual warfare, the enemies of the soul seem more darkly arrayed against the people of God.” It may seem so, but modern secularism affords neither a lesser nor greater threat to biblical truth than Roman paganism; in fact the similarities are striking.

As to spiritual warfare, church leaders must pay attention again to what the Bible says lest another trendy religious offshoot direct attention away from the centrality of God’s truth. Armstrong asks a haunting question: “Where are we warranted to deal with Satan’s kingdom in the same manner that our Lord dealt with the direct frontal assault upon His person and His message seen in the Gospels?”<sup>9</sup> Armstrong answers his own question: “The biblical way of dealing with the devil in this age is more simply stated: We are to ‘put on the full armor of God’ (Eph. 6:11). We do not do this in our own strength but ‘in the Lord.’ The very picture here is that we go to battle against an opponent who is outside us. As Jesus said, ‘The gates of hell shall not prevail.’ Gates signify a defensive posture. The church is on the march by the Word and prayer as it fights against the Evil One. We fight him by ‘standing firm.’ We do this with the truth.”<sup>10</sup>

I intend no general criticism of all interest in or forms of church growth. After all, two such books have strengthened my own ministry: *Body Life*, by Ray Stedman (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1995), and *Sharpening the Focus of the Church*, by Gene Getz (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1984). When church-growth books build on biblical theology, they serve well. But when they abandon that foundation, they fail miserably. Schwarz discusses eight qualities

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<sup>9</sup> John H. Armstrong, “How Shall We Wage Our Warfare?” in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, 236.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

of a healthy growing church: empowering leadership, gift-oriented ministry, passionate spirituality, functional structures, inspiring worship services, holistic small groups, need-oriented evangelism, and loving relationships.<sup>11</sup>

To these eight essential factors Getz and Wall offer an additional four: biblical preaching and teaching, visionary and spiritual leaders, unity, and stewardship.<sup>12</sup> Getz and Wall discuss measuring church growth, assimilating newcomers, encouraging member participation, and numerous other technique issues. But they emphasize the uniqueness of each congregation in its efforts to become all that God wants it to be. “Therefore the principles one draws from this study can never take the place of humbly seeking the Lord’s face and responding obediently with courageous faith to His leading for *one’s own* church. Wise pastors avoid comparing their churches with other churches, and they avoid mimicking other churches. Aware of the biblical qualities of a healthy church, wise pastors lead their people in the way they believe the Chief Shepherd is leading them and their flocks.”<sup>13</sup>

The central question of any ministry asks, *Why has God raised up this work in this place at this time and what does He want to do for and through us?*

#### HEALTHY CHURCHES FOCUS ON A MINISTRY MODEL RATHER THAN A MARKETING MODEL

In *U.S. News & World Report* John Lelo tells of a 1983 publication entitled *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, which became an intercultural text on many campuses. It won the Nobel Prize in 1992 as a nonfiction work. More recently, research by anthropologist David Stowell discovered that huge portions of the book were apparently untrue. In an amazing backlash, university professors have defended the book and its author and have attacked the research that establishes the book’s falseness.

Stowell approaches the subject from a liberal prospect and gives Menchú the benefit of the doubt at all points. Yet, as he put it, “When I began to talk about my findings, some of my colleagues

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<sup>11</sup> Gene Getz and Joe Wall, *Effective Church Growth Strategies*, Swindoll Leadership Library (Nashville: Word, 2000), 96–107.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 107–10.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 118 (italics theirs).

regarded them as sacrilegious.”<sup>14</sup> In other words in the modern professoriate, liberation theology represents the center of reality and no one dare defrock a political icon who has attacked the cultures of oppression. Truth is of no concern because lies in defense of the established position are acceptable. Defenders of Menchú argue that her writing is not mendacity, but merely general narrative. Here is Lelo’s response: “Why is it not mendacity? Because our campus culture puts more emphasis on voice, narrative, and story than it does on truth. A growing number of professors accept the post-modern notion that there is no such thing as truth, only rhetoric. The result is the blurring of distinctions between history and literature, fact and fiction, honesty and dishonesty. One outraged professor wrote in an Internet message that ‘The Menchú controversy, like the Clinton controversy, reveals the depth of academic disregard for truth in the post-modern era.’”<sup>15</sup>

This is a dramatic illustration of a cultural epistemology driven by the marketing model. One of the perils of prosperity is the constant and tenacious emphasis on selling one’s ideas in any way and with any possible means. Yet evangelicals and their institutions must provide an oasis in the barren desert of such lifeless thinking. They must test everything they say and write by the standard of God’s absolute truth. As Kaiser once wrote, “Evangelicals affirm that the Bible is God’s Word and therefore completely true and trustworthy. It is the authority by which evangelicals form their thinking about what is true about God and the world and by which they guide their lives and practices.”<sup>16</sup>

Healthy churches reject the marketing mentality in their quest for effectiveness. They emphasize functioning in God’s grace and power at a level of excellence in accord with the resources He has provided. However, in today’s culture people who claim to hold and live by absolute truth place themselves directly in the path of scorn and vilification. A culture driven by infatuation with economy will hardly respect excellence in ministry.

A healthy church maintains a biblical model of spiritual effectiveness in achieving its mission rather than a model of worldly success as measured by peers outside the evangelical camp. Evangelicals have been called by God as a *protest* movement in the

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<sup>14</sup> David Stowell, quoted in John Lelo, “Nobel Prize for Fiction?” *U.S. News & World Report*, January 25, 1999, 17.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Walter C. Kaiser Jr., “What’s So Important about Inerrancy?” *Evangelical Beacon*, October 1, 1990, 6.

world—not a group of negative whiners and victims, but a group of struggling servants with high commitment to the Lord. “Our job is to grow into an awareness of our unity and life in Christ, and to show this force to a world that desperately needs to know something about the One who is both the Savior and our Lord.”<sup>17</sup>

#### HEALTHY CHURCHES ADOPT SCRIPTURAL RATHER THAN SECULAR MODELS OF LEADERSHIP

The deficiency among contemporary Christians in grasping a clear, distinctive New Testament model of servant leadership seems widespread and glaring. How did the picture become so distorted? Too many pastors, presidents, and principals have bought into an autocratic model of leadership that is old covenant in theology, political in style, and outdated even in current secular literature. The fact that it sometimes works cannot overcome the reality of its incontrovertible opposition to the New Testament. More people are hurt in churches by oppressive leadership styles than by inadequate salaries and ramshackle buildings.

The melody of shared leadership rings through almost all contemporary secular literature on leadership. “The traditional standards of leadership that may have been acceptable in the past will not lead to success in the future. The leader of the community of the future will face much greater challenges in retaining members. The leader’s success in adapting to the new world of the community of choice will be a huge factor in determining the community’s success and long-term prosperity.”<sup>18</sup>

Leaders in healthy churches recognize that no amount of technique and strategy, no spit and polish of the marketing model can propel their congregations through the marshes of moral miasma in which their spiritual boats ride. Paul, Peter, James, and John all concluded their lives and ministries by warning about the deterioration of society. Western culture has spawned permissive parenting, theologically shallow churches, and moral standards determined by polls and profits. Spiritual maturity on the part of many church leaders and many more congregants cannot be assumed.

In the legitimate quest to link *health* with quality rather than

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<sup>17</sup> Darrell Bock, Alister McGrath, Richard Mouw, and Mark Noll, “Scandal? A Forum on the Evangelical Mind,” *Christianity Today*, August 14, 1995, 75.

<sup>18</sup> Marshall Goldsmith, “Global Communications and Communities of Choice,” in *The Community of the Future*, ed. Frances Hesselbein et al. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 114.

quantity, church leaders pay no less attention to the essentials of ministry function, including mission statements, vision-casting, goal achievement, strategic planning, and empowerment of others. But they measure themselves by a different standard.

Sometimes achievement can be quantifiable, such as the number of visits a pastor might make in a given month, or expanding the day-care center to five days instead of two. Often, however, we look for life change as an evaluation of achieved ministry goals. A pastor whose congregation seems self-centered and preoccupied with its own programs and buildings may see a long-term goal achieved when those same people learn how to function as an interdependent congregation that shows concern for people. A mission field director who leads people highly skilled in their specialties but ineffective as a ministry team might praise God for helping them develop unity and a genuinely cooperative spirit that produces team results.<sup>19</sup>

Current thinking says that health in a church does not occur without contemporary and cutting-edge approaches to ministry. However, churches will never become spiritually healthy merely by means of paradigms or programs. The biblical commitments of each congregant, each leader, and each denominational official must first target God's priorities and then allow Him to produce in those churches what He wants—*from the inside out*.

Far from detracting from the fulfilling of the Great Commission, this approach, because it is so obviously biblical, enhances the believers' mission to know Jesus Christ, exalt Him, and lead others to Christ and build them up in the faith. God wants to accomplish these goals through His church by His power. Churches need to be sure that the methods, movements, and manipulations of modern cultural Christianity do not get in the way.

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<sup>19</sup> Kenn Gangel, *Coaching Ministry Teams*, Swindoll Leadership Library (Nashville: Word, 2000), 74.