

Living a Healthy Life

the value of a health check

John Chapman was a wonderful Australian evangelist who went to be with the Lord in November, 2012. He once commented that Australians are hard to reach with the gospel because life here is so good. So he wrote a few books about the gospel and how Australians can share the gospel. Probably his most well known book is, *Know and Tell the Gospel*.

As “Chappo” got older I remember him painting a picture of his week.

Monday—the G.P.; Tuesday—the chemist; Wednesday—the specialist; Thursday—teeth and feet; Friday—a rest day.

These weren't his exact words—but this was the gist of it.

I had a good friend remind me that I'm getting a little older and I need to get a check-up (**slide 1**). So I went to the doctors and he gave me the once over. I ended up having a bone scan, blood tests, I was podded and poked and asked lots of questions—some of them extremely personal.

I was referred to a skin specialist. I was told I shouldn't eat seafood incrustations because my allergy is becoming worse. I felt a right mess but I was sort of glad I had the health check.

And I guess we all need health checks from time to time. I'm about due for my next overhaul and I seem to be putting it off.

Churches are like people because churches are people.

Churches can live and churches can die.

Churches can laugh and churches can cry.

Churches have personalities and do some things very well and other things not so well.

Churches can get sick and they can be led back to full health.

This morning I'd like ask the question, “what does a healthy church look like”? I'd like us to answer his question into two parts. First, lets look at the word “**church**” and make some comments; then secondly turning to look at a “**healthy church**”.

And so we answer the question, “What does a healthy church look like”?

So we begin by making a few comments about “church”. I'd like to offer a few thoughts on the nature of church, the problem of the church, and the vitality of church.

The nature of church. There are many definitions of church and many thoughts on what a church should be. Some people say church a place of worship, or its like a club where people learn good manners, or its a place for preserving tradition. People come to church full of different expectations.

The word “church” in the New Testament is the word *ἐκκλησία* which refers to the gathering of any people and for us the gathering of God's people. We have a church when God's people come together and worship in the manner he has prescribed. The church's foundation is Christ's work and Christ's work continues the church. The church arises and lives because there is the gospel which is both its source and sustenance.

The risen Lord Jesus is the head of our church and we come together in his name.

The problem of the church. In the movie, “Sister Act” it's the world which rescues the church from irrelevance. Of all people, its a lively and morally loose lounge singer, Deloris Van Cartier who infiltrates and releases the church from bondage. And interestingly the changes come when the music changes (a point worth pondering).

The world is saying to the church “keep up with the times” or you risk irrelevance and death. So please don't preach things we don't want to hear, especially sin, death, hell and judgement. Who wants too hear these things?

We are told that the church needs to rediscover itself. Maybe the church needs to become like a VIEW CLUB for religious people. Run nice events for the community. Nothing wrong with that but if that's all they do—church is like an OXFAM for religious people.

Some churches run coffee shops and deliver meals to needy people—nothing wrong with that but that's all they do—like they're a MEALS ON WHEELS for religious people.

Some churches specialise in counselling and psychological needs. Nothing wrong with that but that's all they do—like they're a SUPPORT GROUP for religious people.

Some churches are very vocal in the public square. They comment on big social issues like marriage and homosexuality. But they're lost sight of the gospel and they FRAGMENT the Christian voice.

While the world wants to recast the Christian church, at the same time many Christians have a growing disinterest in church. It's true that we are not saved by putting our trust in the church, but by putting our trust in the saving work of Jesus. But our union with Christ implies church. Our faith in Christ joins us to the multitudes who also have faith in Christ.

We are irreversibly bound to one another through our union in Christ.

Yet I hear more and more people these days saying they can be a Christian without attending church—that church is all too hard, that it imposes unnecessary and intrusive expectations, that its a place of pain; that really all they want is my money. Increasingly there is a sense that church is a service provider.

There is a consumer-driven mentality because we live in a consumer-driven world. We live in a world full of religious symbols that urge us to spend our way to happiness. Symbols such as Coca-cola, McDonalds and Google remind us of our secular-religious obligations. It is the economy that binds us together in perfect harmony.

The nature of church—the problem of church.

The vitality of church. The third century bishop, Cyprian of Carthage, is reported as saying, “No one can have God for his Father, who hasn't the church for his mother”. These days many would struggle to accept this view and it should not be this way.

More recently, John Stott said, “The church lies at the very center of the eternal purpose of God. It is not a divine afterthought. It is not an accident of history”.

The church should be important to us because of its importance to Christ.

Christ founded the church (Matt 16:18), he purchased it with his blood (Acts 20:28) and he intimately identifies himself with it (Acts 9:4).

The church is the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12, 27; Eph 1:22–23; 4:12; 5:20–30; Col 1:18,24).

The church is the dwelling place of God's Spirit (1 Cor 3:16–17; Eph 2:18,22; 4:4).

It is the chief instrument for glorifying God in the world (Ezek 36:22–38; Eph 3:10).

The church is God's instrument for bringing both the gospel to the nations and a great host of redeemed humanity to himself (Luke 24:46–48; Rev 5:9).

So you see we need to get church right.

The comedian, Lenny Bruce, said, “Every day people are straying away from the church and going back to God”. I wonder if deep down that's your sentiment? You put up with church. Church causes you more pain than happiness. Church is a place of conflict. Church cuts across my Sundays. Church is a financial stress.

This brings us to the marks of a healthy church. **So what does a healthy church look like?**

Three mornings a week I run about a kilometre to help stay fit. The more I do it the easier it becomes. So I press a bit harder; I pace myself a bit quicker because I know that's good for me.

My increased energy running around a soccer field is a good sign of my improving health.

The Bible was written for people like us. It was written to churches struggling with spiritual vitality. The Corinthians had their problems, the Ephesians started strong and faded away, Timothy and Titus needed advice on leading churches that were testing them.

So what does a healthy church look like?

If I were to summarise what a healthy church looks like, I would use the title of one book that came across my desk (**slide 2**), “The Church: The Gospel Made Visible”.

Healthy churches makes the gospel visible because they makes the rule of the Lord Jesus visible. The church is the visible icon of the gospel in this world. We are the tangible expression of the God's grace in this world. In his book, Mark Dever gives a precise definition of a healthy church: *a healthy church is a congregation that increasingly reflects God's character as his character has been revealed in his Word* (**slide 3**).

A healthy church has more than information. It may know that there is only one name under heaven that saved all people, it may know there is only one Lord who rules over all. A healthy church does something with this information. Its a congregation *that increasingly reflects God's character as his character has been revealed in his Word*.

The buildings are important only in so far as they allow us to come together and grow in holiness as we share our faith. Whether we meet under a tree, in a house, a building, a school, a hall or in a traditional stone church—the issue is whether or not we increasingly reflecting God's character which we see in Jesus Christ and is instilled in us by his Spirit.

Christian churches organise themselves so this happens. So what do we need to do to allow this happen? Or put another way, **“What are the marks of a healthy church?”**

If we were talking about good physical health, the conversation would turn to eating a balanced diet, exercising, getting enough sleep, and so on. I need information: what type of food, how much exercise, good sleeping habits. What about that afternoon nap?

What about the church body? We need information to describe a healthy church. This information we call “theology”. And once we have the right theology, then we can exercise this theology the right way. We must put our theology into practice so we reflect the character of God as revealed in his Word.

What are the essential marks of a healthy church? What should happen in church so its people increasingly reflect God's character?

Expositional preaching. Expositional preaching is the kind of preaching that, quite simply, *exposes* God's Word. It's preaching that preaches Jesus as the fulfilment of the whole of Scripture. Jesus was speaking to men on the road to Emmaus and Luke tells us this, “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24.27).

A healthy church wants God's word to be open and accessible. Simon Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6.68). A healthy church wants to hear these words and be led into the text with careful consideration of context and content.

A healthy church wants the implications teased out.

It wants to hear what God is saying through the vehicle of the speaker, whether that be the minister, the small group leader, the Kid's church leader or another member opening up the Scriptures.

Expositional preaching is an essential mark of a healthy church.

Expositional living. A healthy church is a church where members *expose* themselves to life in the Kingdom. It's a church where the fruit of the Spirit matters. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires” Gal 5.22–24).

A healthy church is a praying church. A healthy church longs to know the gospel more deeply. A healthy church is one where gifts are shared for the sake of the body of Christ. It's a church where tongues are controlled for the sake of the body of Christ.

When a church is healthy, its members know and cherish the gospel above everything else. They increasingly want to share it with the world. George W. Truett, a great Christian leader of the past generation, said:

The supreme indictment that you can bring against a church ... is that such a church lacks in passion and compassion for human souls. A church is nothing better than an ethical club if its sympathies for lost souls do not overflow, and if it does not go out to seek to point lost souls to the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Evangelism is not something we mainly do by inviting someone to church. Each of us has tremendous news of salvation in Christ. Each of us has a testimony. A healthy church knows the gospel and a healthy church shares it.

conclusion

Let me encourage you to take a personal health check. What condition is your Christian life in? What's your understanding of the gospel? Are you increasingly reflecting God's character?

I don't ask these questions to pour guilt upon you. I want you to know you can bring your frailties and your struggles and your pain to the God who made you and loves you. God loves his children. He loves you. He knows that living the Christian life is not easy. Jesus says, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never go thirsty” (John 6.35). And, “come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11.28).

We started with John Chapman and I'd like to end with a story from him:

I remember the day that I picked up two hitchhikers. One in the morning and one later in the day. I got into friendly and enjoyable conversation with both and I was able to share the gospel with one. With the other it did not seem appropriate to do so within any of the things we discussed. I was willing to share the gospel with both. I prayed for both men as they got in and during the conversation. With one it seemed the most natural thing to do. With the other, every time I vaguely moved toward saying something Christian the conversation took a different turn.

Can I trust the sovereign God in both situations?

I can, and in both cases I did. Rejoicing that both opportunities had come my way, I committed both situations to God in prayer. I sought to be obedient to God on both occasions and I had treated both men like persons and not like things.

Healthy churches and healthy Christian people know the gospel, grow in the light of the gospel, and share the gospel with this world.