

## **Diagnosis and the Modern Church**

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### **The Importance of Diagnosis**

Last year, as a result of nasty fall, my daughter found it very painful to bend her arm. The physician who examined her probed and studied the elbow area before finally ordering x-rays. Based on his findings, he concluded that there was no fracture of any bones, and that she just needed to be careful for awhile until the sprain healed. After a week the pain lingered on. A second doctor, after studying the case for a few minutes, began to probe Sarah's wrist where he quickly discovered a previously unknown sore spot. He had, quite literally, put his finger on the real source of her problem. The painful elbow was a symptom. A fractured growth plate in the wrist was the cause. Six weeks in a cast corrected the problem and prevented the serious difficulties which could have otherwise arisen.

This incident illustrates a very important principle: a proper prescription can be offered only after a proper diagnosis has been made. This is no less true in the world of Christian living, than in the world of medicine. Misdiagnosis in either realms can be deadly.

Problematic symptoms must be recognized and carefully analyzed. But it is never enough simply to eradicate the symptoms; their causes must be identified and addressed. Jesus lays the foundation for this principle in His warning against false prophets: "You will know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:16). Their fruits are symptomatic of their true nature. Bad fruit indicates a bad tree. Good fruit indicates a good tree (Luke 6:43-45). A bad tree is not made good simply by picking off its bad fruit.

Both the physician and the pastor are involved in the work of diagnosis and prescription. In recognition of this the Puritan designation of the pastor as a "physician of the soul" is very appropriate. Just as any self-respecting physician will labor to become increasingly skilled in the practice of medicine in order to promote physical health so too the serious pastor must be diligent in the ministry of the Word in order to promote spiritual health (2 Tim. 2:15).

On the contemporary church scene perhaps there is no greater need than proper diagnosis of some troubling symptoms. Evangelicalism is becoming increasingly enigmatic. The more evangelical churches multiply and grow, the more seemingly irrelevant they become to modern men and women. All of our efforts, programs and strategies are failing to stem the tide of immorality and religious indifference in our nation. Why is this?

Before offering suggestions in response to this important question, we must first consider two specific symptoms which indicate that the modern evangelical church may indeed have serious problems.

### **The Symptom of Meaningless Membership**

One obvious indicator is the lack of commitment by the majority of our church members. William Pinson, Jr., Executive Director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, calls this symptom "church membership without meaning."

Earlier this century Elton Trueblood observed, "The chief reason why the church as we now know it is not more effective than it is, is the fact that membership has become almost meaningless." He went on to conclude, "Membership is now largely paper membership." The situation has not improved as the twentieth century draws to a close. A significant number of those who are counted as church members never attend a worship service, never participate in their church's life, and make no contribution to its ministry. Such membership is meaningless.

Various solutions have been prescribed in response to this situation. The most prevalent are those which propose simply ignoring the problem in hopes that it really is not all that significant. "It's just a little chest pain--probably nothing to be worried about." A whole new, unbiblical theological category has been constructed to justify this type of attitude. I am referring to the "Carnal Christian" theory as it has been popularized in booklets and tracts. This theory teaches that some Christians simply are not "spiritual" and therefore cannot be expected to do "spiritual" things like attend church, pray, give, fellowship with believers, or grow in grace. Sure, they may miss out on a few rewards in heaven, but "at least they are saved!"

This theory soothes the conscience of a church and its leaders by viewing its "paper members" as on the road to heaven. They should, no doubt, be

encouraged to become "spiritual," but even if they never do (the reasoning goes) at least their destiny is secured.

This prescription of doing nothing in response to inactive members fails miserably for the simple reason that it has completely misdiagnosed the problem. Widespread lack of commitment among church members is symptomatic of an inadequate doctrine of salvation in the church. Specific questions need to be asked and answered--questions which are so basic that they are often overlooked and taken for granted: What does it mean to be a believer (i.e. how does he act, respond; what are his spiritual tastes, appetites, etc.) and how does one become one? What is the content of the faith that saves, and how is it expressed?

If these questions are taken to the Scriptures and the full impact of the answer is allowed to inform one's doctrine of salvation, a new assessment of completely inactive church members will necessarily emerge. It becomes impossible to deny the strong probability that many of those who are mere paper members have never been truly converted. Such a conclusion calls for a reevaluation of the evangelistic strategies which initially placed such people on the rolls. A biblical renovation of evangelism--both in its content and methodology--will be in order.

Ernest Reisinger's article, "Lordship and the Nature of Saving Faith," sets forth a biblical foundation for doing just that. Together with Tom Nettles' article on the value of catechisms, it provides a challenge to rethink the whole issue of how evangelism and discipleship are carried out in a church. If the malady is ever to be effectively addressed, its root cause must be uncovered. The first step in curing the disease of widespread inactivity among church members is to return to more biblical patterns of evangelism and discipleship.

### **The Symptom of Weak Worship**

Another symptom of ecclesiastical illness is weak worship. This area of church life has been receiving an increasing amount of attention from leaders within and without the SBC in recent years. The last decade has witnessed the publication of numerous articles and books on the subject. "Ritualistic," "uninviting," "dull," "monotonous," and "uninspiring" are among the terms which have been used to describe the worship services in many typical evangelical churches.

Often such services seem to be ill planned and thoughtlessly entered into. The focus is not on God (as worship in the Bible clearly always is) but on man. The Word of God is too often neglected and worshippers are too often more concerned with what they stand to get out of the service than with what they should put into it. For many church members, worship has become optional and attendance is based on convenience.

Many prescriptions are being suggested in response to the symptom of weak worship. The Southern Baptist Convention has launched a complete worship enrichment and attendance emphasis entitled "Let's All Go to Church." Among other things this emphasis is designed to help churches focus on the importance of worship while trying to implement change in corporate worship services.

Some of the proposals to enhance worship which are being made today border on the ludicrous. One conference suggested that worship would be improved by replacing white lights with flesh tone bulbs in the auditorium. Other suggestions include: starting a musical ensemble, adding an orchestra, purchasing an electronic keyboard, using visual aids, and removing the pulpit. Nothing is inherently wrong with these ideas. The problem is that they collectively miss the point. Worship is not mere mechanics. It is an encounter. When believers consciously come into the felt presence of God--no matter what color the lights--they will worship.

Church growth specialists talk of making worship "seeker friendly," that is, inviting and non-threatening for unbelievers. If all that is meant by this designation is that we should do our best to befriend unbelievers and make it convenient for them to attend our services (i.e. by providing clear directions, keeping the church property neat and the facilities clean, etc.), then no one should protest. However, the specific proposals which many church growth experts are making clearly demonstrate that this is far from all that they have in mind.

Rather, the philosophy which underlies this new effort to develop "seeker friendly worship" is simply this: find out what unconverted people like and give it to them in your worship services. If they like "Top 40" music, give it to them. If their preference is "Country and Western," change your music style to that. Further, since we are well entrenched in the television age, make sure that the service is fast-pasted with lots of variety. Inevitably this philosophy drives worship toward an entertainment event. The congregation

becomes an audience. The worship leaders become actors on a stage, and the service becomes a performance.

In this scenario, the cure is more deadly than the disease. Once again, the problem is misdiagnosis. Weak worship is a symptom of an inadequate theology. Specifically, it betrays a deficient view of God, and a misunderstanding of the essence and basis of worship itself.

Isaiah's worship was far from boring or ineffective. When he recognized that he was in the presence of the thrice-holy God, he could not help but worship. He humbled himself, confessed his sin, received forgiveness and volunteered for service (Isa. 6)

Paul demonstrates the foundation of effective worship in Eph. 1:3-14. What is it that causes him to erupt in adoration and praise to God? Even a cursory reading of those verses reveals the answer. The foundation of genuine worship is the awareness and consideration of God's character and works. God is to be "blessed" because he is the "God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with all spiritual blessings" (v.3)

Three times in these verses Paul expresses praise in connection with God's glory (vv. 6, 12, 14). In each instance he is contemplating one aspect of our Trinitarian salvation. God the Father elects us... "to the praise of his glorious grace." God the Son redeems us... "that we should be to the praise of his glory." God the Spirit seals us... "to the praise of his glory."

What do these verses suggest? Precisely this: Our worship will be enhanced as we contemplate and grow in our ability to comprehend the majesty of our triune God in his person and works. If, in the words of J.B. Phillips, "your God is too small," your worship will inevitably be deficient. In too many churches today the "god" who is being preached is so human-like that he is not worthy of worship (Ps. 50:21).

Mechanics, forms, and styles have their place, but the substance of worship must be centered on God--the biblical God. David Dockery's article on worship establishes this point with biblical clarity and pastoral sensitivity.

### **Diagnosis and Prescription**

So, why is the evangelical church making so little impact on men and women in our society? Not enough programs? Not modern enough? Poor

marketing? No. The problem is more basic than any of these. At many crucial points we have lost our spiritual and doctrinal moorings. We have tried to replace genuine spiritual power with man-made schemes.

In one sense what we need is beyond our grasp. We need a fresh visitation of the Spirit's power on our worship and witness. This is beyond our reach, but not beyond our prayers.

In another sense what we need is within our reach. In the closing hours of the twentieth century, the evangelical church in America is in desperate need of a biblical and theological reformation. We need to return to basic principles. Historic principles. Principles which served the Southern Baptist Convention well in its formative years. We need a reformation in both our faith and practice.

The sons of Issachar are described as men who "had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do" (1 Chron. 12:32). They had an effective prescription because they made an accurate diagnosis of the days in which they lived. May God raise up more sons of Issachar who, properly understanding the symptoms which become apparent, will be skilled in prescribing biblical remedies as our churches face the twenty-first century.

*"The church of Christ is a common hospital, wherein all are in some measure sick of some spiritual disease or other; that we should all have ground of exercising mutually the spirit of wisdom and meekness."*

Richard Sibbes