

Characteristics of a Thriving Church

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The past 100 years have not been kind to the Primitive Baptists in regards to total membership and number of churches. Rather than growing, or even holding our own, churches have often declined in number, some even to death, and the average age of those in our congregations has steadily increased leaving few to replace departing saints at the end of their respective lives. Supposedly, in an era in which the population of our country increased by over 300 million, our numbers decreased by half.

This is not exclusively a PB problem. In the largest denomination in North Alabama, the Southern Baptists, nearly 9 out of 10 youths (88%) leave the church as they enter college.¹ While some mega-churches seem to go against this trend, average attendance in the nation's largest denominations is on the decline.² Spirituality in America is greatly shifting for the worse.

I am reminded by the words of a friend who once remarked *"Never show me the statistics!"* Indeed. But, but rather than be the proverbial ostrich with my head firmly placed in the sand, I hope I will heed the words of Haggai the prophet and *"consider my ways."*³

Dying Church

There are many ways to have a dying church. If you want a dying church, these are probably a good idea:

- Hold grudges against others.
- Don't speak at church.
- Don't associate with members away from worship times.
- Don't be welcoming to guests – make them feel like outsiders.
- Hold non-essential customs as gospel truth.
- Consider the Kingdom of God of a low priority.
- Spend bulk of pulpit time warring with other preachers or churches or groups.
- Never, ever invite friends of family to worship.

The good news! Jesus promised to be with us ***always*** - even until the end of the world. He alone has all power in Heaven and in Earth.⁴ God can and will revive us **IF** we are found following the pattern laid down for us in Acts. Our churches can thrive. In fact, over the past decade there have been some movements of God in reviving churches that had once declined to a very small number. In one case, a church which had declined down to one lone member over the past decades was revived and now has a thriving congregation. In a few locations, college aged men have been extremely evangelistic among their peers resulting in new converts to the truth of Grace. *It is so very exciting!*

When such revivals have happened, I made an effort to observe and study the workings of such churches. Why are blessings present in some places but not others? One might say because God is Sovereign. Indeed He is, but the scriptures do not set forth fatalism. In fact, God does indeed reward

1 <http://www.sbcannualmeeting.net/sbc02/newsroom/newspage.asp?ID=261>

2 http://hrr.hartsem.edu/research/fastfacts/fast_facts.html#growlose

3 Haggai 1:7

4 Matthew 28:18-20

those who diligently seek Him⁵. We are beggars at His table, but He will in no wise reward laziness. God's Sovereignty shouldn't be used as an excuse for slackness in a congregation. The following are characteristics I have observed among thriving churches and also on the pages of the books of Acts during a recent, 10 month study on Acts at Flint River Church.

Not what you might think

Among reviving or thriving churches, it wasn't that they had the newest or nicest facility, best location, a young, exciting or articulate pastor, programs, a flashy website, or even the largest congregation (not that all of those were bad). We sometimes place importance on the superficial. Remember, however, that our faith does not stand in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.⁶

A final note

This should not be construed as a "7 Step Program" for a thriving Church. It isn't intended to be such. Rather, these are "personality traits" of church bodies who went against the trend of decline.

Characteristic 1 – A Christ-Centered Church

- This is the single most important trait a church body can possess.
 - We are churches of Christ. Without Christ as our first love, central focus and ultimate motive, we become nothing more than a club or fraternity.
- Our First Love
 - In Revelation chapter 2, Ephesus was a church with many good works. In fact, to the casual onlooker she probably looked like the healthiest of all the seven churches of Asia to which Christ spoke. Yet she had a fatal flaw!
 - The deadly error at Ephesus was that she left her first love. She wasn't motivated by her love for Christ, but apparently had fallen into cruise control, doing what she did because it was what she had always done.
 - Any congregation stands at risk of this – Lord help!
- Christ and Him Crucified
 - Paul said to the Corinthians that he determined not to know anything among them but *"Christ Jesus and Him Crucified."*⁷
 - The foundation of the church at Corinth which Paul laid was Jesus Christ.⁸
- Principle in Action
 - In all of Paul's exhortations in Ephesians 5 and 6, Christ was the central focus.
 - Wives submit...as unto the Lord
 - Husbands love...as Christ also loved
 - Children obey...in the Lord
 - Fathers provoke not...bring up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord
 - Servants be obedient...as unto Christ
 - Masters...knowing your Master is in Heaven

5 Hebrews 11:6

6 1 Corinthians 2:5

7 1 Corinthians 2:2

8 1 Corinthians 3:11

Characteristic 2 – Obsessed with the Gospel!

- The Gospel
 - The Bible definition of the gospel is the story of the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.⁹
 - In short, the gospel is the message of salvation from sin, the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf.
 - Summarized by Jesus' victory cry of "It Is Finished."¹⁰
- Truth Personified
 - Jesus is truth personified, so we should strive to believe things about Him that are accurate and factual.
 - In John 14:6, Jesus said "I am the way, the truth, and the life."
 - What if a wife, when asked what she loves about her husband, could not even accurately describe him? How embarrassing!
 - Speak the language of the Bible.¹¹ This requires study, which can be more than mere devotional reading.
 - Contend for the faith once delivered to the saints.¹²
 - Buy the truth and sell it not.¹³
- Not Ashamed!
 - Paul said he was not ashamed of the gospel, for it is power to believers!¹⁴
 - Compelled to live the gospel, confess the gospel, and share the gospel.
 - This gospel continually saves us who believe it!
- Relevant message
 - Sometimes pragmatism says "we should preach less gospel and more practical instruction."
 - Paul held back nothing profitable in his ministry and declared the full counsel of God.¹⁵
 - We should teach ALL the Bible but the idea that the gospel is not relevant is absurd.
 - The gospel is the single most relevant message ever spoken by the tongues of men.
 - It speaks to our deliverance from the greatest dilemma man has ever known, a condition applying to each of us, death and the judgment of God.
 - While instruction is wonderful, to be converted to the truth of salvation by grace, one must first HEAR the message of salvation by grace.
- Obsessed!
 - Among churches that appear to be thriving, I have noticed a common obsession for talking about Christ's redemptive work. Rather than discussing sports or politics, during breaks or lunch people discussed Christ's finished work.
 - Folks who speak in such a way are usually fervent in attempting to spread this word with those around them!

9 1 Corinthians 15:1-4

10 John 19:30

11 Nehemiah 13:24, speaking half in the language of Ashdod.

12 Jude 1:3

13 Proverbs 23:23

14 Romans 1:16

15 Acts 20:20, 20:27

Characteristic 3 – Fervent and Zealous in Worship

- A Big Subject Indeed
 - Worship is a subject about which the Bible says a lot, both good and bad.
- Study of the word Worship
 - The word worship comes into our KJV Bibles from 17 different words. Interestingly enough, Bible writers used different words to refer to the worship of idols than they did the worship of God.
 - One example, in Acts 17, the word Paul used when he wrote of Pagans who ignorantly worshiped the *Unknown God* is a word meaning *Therapy*. In other words, God has no “therapeutic” value in ignorant worship.
 - Using the various OT and NT words for worship, the following list of definitions helps us understand what it means to worship.
 - To revere (the fear of God)
 - To bow down to (to submit to God)
 - To praise
 - To serve
 - To kiss the hand
 - This word comes from a word describing a dog licking its master's hand and is used some 60 times making it the most commonly used term in the NT.
 - Mth 2:11, the Magi who worshiped Christ.
 - Mth 8:2-3, the leper.
 - Mth 14:32-33, the disciples after the ship was tossed.
- The Father seeketh such...
 - In John 4, Jesus told the Samaritan woman that the Father “seeketh such to worship Him” in spirit and in truth.
 - This is restrictive in a sense as proper worship is defined.
 - In spirit – from the inside. An internal, from the heart worship.
 - In truth – based upon Bible fact and not imagination.
 - Even greater, this is an invitation to us! (The father SEEKETH such.)
- The Church (Assembly) meets to worship
 - Romans 12:1 instructs us to PRESENT our bodies a living sacrifice. This happens in collective worship.
 - Hebrews 13:15 says we offer the sacrifice of praise, the fruit of our lips.
 - We “kiss Christ's hand” by singing from the heart.
 - Eph 5:18-19, we are filled with the Spirit through singing.
 - In Rev 5:9-14, saints worship in Heaven through singing.
- Prayer is an act of worship.
 - A zealous church is a praying church!

Characteristic 4 – A Close Congregation

- The church body is to be the central core group of friends in the life of a church member.
 - In Acts, believers were together and had all things common. Their worship occurred daily.¹⁶
 - Men find a bond of comradery over things such as politics, work, or sports. Why not the

¹⁶ Acts 2:44-46

greatest cause on Earth?

- A special obligation and priority
 - Paul instructed the Galatians to do good to all men, but especially unto to them of the household of faith.¹⁷
- Jesus promised the Church would be a family for the lonely or those alienated for His sake.
 - See Matthew 19:27-30 and Mark 10:28-31
 - This great treasure is not just for affluent or prominent believers but for all in the church body, according to James.¹⁸
 - Sometimes churches make mistakes of putting new members on a pedestal.
- Fellowship of the Early Church
 - For examples of the fellowship found in the first century church, see Acts 2:44-45 and Acts 4:34-37.
 - Take note of the salutations issued by Paul at the end of his epistles. (Romans 16, for example)
- Edifying Itself in Love
 - The Church, according to Paul in Ephesians 4:16, has the responsibility of edifying itself in love. Here are some ways:
 - Support one another – 1 Thes 5:14
 - Exhort one another – Hebrews 3:13, 10:24-25
 - Pray for one another – James 5:16
 - Comfort one another – 2 Corinthians 1:4
 - Rejoice with one another – Romans 12:15
 - Weep with each other – Romans 12:15

Characteristic 5 – A Body of Different Members

- The Church is described as a body of various members with distinct functions.
 - These functions are described as “gifts” being “dealt” to us as the measure of faith at the new birth.
- Christ is the only head of the body.¹⁹
 - Head – Brain – Central Nervous System
 - Thought, control, charge, chief of importance, without which a body cannot live.
- Even in matters of Discipline
 - Disciplinary actions carried out by the church are described as an amputation within the body.
 - “Hand offend...cut it off.” - Matthew 18
 - Error equates to a canker sore. - 2 Timothy 2:17
- A Temple built of lively stones.
 - YOU make up the House of God.^{20,21}
 - See 1 Kings 6:1-23, 7:15-17 and the makeup of the physical temple.
 - We are all distinct components of the House today, the Church.

17 Galatians 6:10

18 James 2:3-4

19 Colossians 1:18

20 1 Peter 2:5

21 1 Timothy 3:15

- Spiritual gifts given at the new birth.
 - God deals unto us what Paul called the “measure of faith.”²²
 - This is a package of spiritual gifts and abilities to be used once uniting with a local church body.
 - There are a great diversity of gifts, each being important though some appear more glorious. See Romans 12:4-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:4

Characteristic 6 – A Loving, Forgiving Congregation

- Because God has unconditionally forgiven us, He is pleased when we show that same grace to each other.²³
 - I have seen a few churches, sadly, who were very harsh with one another.
- Charity
 - 1 Corinthians 13 shares the importance of charity among the believers.
 - *Charity* – the disposition to judge hopefully of the intents and actions of others and to make allowances for their shortcomings.²⁴
 - Without charity, we are vain.
 - Charity causes us to “bear long” with others.
- A forgiving church is walking in the Spirit.
 - Galatians 5 lists STRIFE as a lust of the flesh.
 - Galatians 5 lists PEACE as a fruit of the Spirit.
- Offenses will come according to Jesus in Matthew 18
 - In Mth 18, the context included a debate among the Apostles as to who was the greatest.
 - Since offenses are inevitable, we must trained ourselves to deal with them!
 - Matthew 18 teaches us how to handle serious offenses.
 - The Church is to replace civil court for believers.
 - If an offense isn't worth excluding a brother or sister over, we should let go of our grievances in forgiveness.
 - Issues of rudeness or unchristian attitudes we should just forgive!
 - See Romans 12:9-10 – preferring another above self (you are better than me).
 - Colossians 3:12-14 teaches to forbear one another.
 - The church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for righteous relics. (See Mth 23)

Characteristic 7 – Being Intensely Evangelistic

- I've heard evangelism called the lifeblood of Church.
 - While Christ is the lifeblood, evangelism is the catalyst for church growth.
- Sharing the gospel is what perpetuates the church from generation to generation.
- Evangelism is best described as one beggar telling another beggar where to get a good meal.
- Evangelism is:
 - An act of kindness and generosity.
 - An attempt to glorify God.
- Real evangelism is natural and organic/grassroots.

²² Romans 12:3

²³ Ephesians 4:32

²⁴ Condensed from the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historic Principles, CT Onions

- Not accomplished through programs or gimmicks.
- Is driven by folks who love the message of salvation.
- CHURCH GROWTH should be as much a part of the church culture as singing, preaching, prayer, and the Lord's Supper.
- Purpose
 - To find God's people in a city and convert them to the truth.
 - See Acts 18:9-10 and Paul's experience find God's "many people" in Corinth.
 - See 2 Timothy 1:10, which says the gospel brings life and immortality to light.
- Evangelism is primitive.
 - Attitude – See Acts 26:28-29
 - Action – See Acts 8:4
- Three methods of Evangelism
 - Invitation, a simple "come and see" as found in John 1:43-46.
 - Study of scripture together, as in Acts 8:30. (Understandest what thou readest?)
 - Outright preaching, as in Acts 17:24-31.
- God is intimately involved in Acts of evangelism.
 - Paul said in church growth it was God who gave the increase.²⁵
 - However, without sowing the seed of the gospel, there would be no labor to bless with increase.
- Seek open doors! Begin with those closest to you.
 - Colossians 4:3 – pray for an open door of utterance.
 - Luke 8:39 – Return to thine own house.
 - Acts 10:24 – Cornelius gathered kinsmen and friends
 - Matthew 13 – Church compared with leaven, it spreads outward.
- One doing the work of an evangelist must have a heart of compassion and concern.
 - Matthew 9:36-38 – Jesus was moved with compassion because the multitude was scattered as SHEEP with no shepherd.
 - Notice first, his concern was for sheep, a term used to describe God's children.²⁶
 - These sheep had chief priests, priests, Pharisees, Saducees, and scribes over them yet they had no spiritual shepherding.
 - "There are very few Tiny Tim cases." - Jeff Winfrey
 - Many of the people we preach to will have self-inflicted wounds of sin. We can't act as the Pharisee and condemn them. Rather, call upon them to repent and follow Jesus.
 - *"And such were some of you..."*²⁷
 - We're like recovering patients who help others find healing for their afflictions.

Conclusion

You already knew all of this. Didn't you? It is so obvious one might consider it insulting. Frankly, this isn't a matter of reinventing the wheel, but reclaiming what God has given us. The pursuit of Christ and primitive Christianity, the Christianity of Acts, is the solution to the problems of decline and stagnancy facing believers in our pagan, philosophical America of 2013.

²⁵ 1 Corinthians 3:5-9

²⁶ John 10, Matthew 25:31

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 6:11