

## **GOD'S PLANS FOR A HEALTHY CHURCH**

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I'm not in a series right now so I can speak on anything I want. I thought I'd speak on the Church. I direct your attention to Romans 12:3-8, a theme that I call "God's Plan for a Healthy Church." I'm not suggesting that Romans 12:3-8 has everything that God has in mind for building a healthy church. That would take more time than we have time to develop and more scripture than we're going to read. But certainly in the passage I'm going to read are found three principles that are absolutely essential for a healthy body. You can use other principles but if you don't have these you won't have a healthy church.

"For by the grace given to me I say to everyone of you do not think of yourself more highly than you ought but rather think of yourself with sober judgment in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. Just as each of us has one body with many members and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts according to the grace given us. If the person's gift is prophesying let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve. If it is teaching, let him teach. If it is encouraging, let him encourage. If it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously. If it is leadership, let him govern diligently. If it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully."

As far as I'm concerned the word "church" is one of the most beautiful words in the English language. When I think of the word "church" I immediately have a kind of warm, fuzzy feeling. I love the church. All my life has been associated with the church of Jesus Christ. Yet I realize not everyone of you has that same feeling for the church. Maybe for some when the word "church" is enunciated you think of a building or you think of a denomination or you may even think of some hurtful experience that you've had at one time or another in your life. But I think of the church as people who really love God and really love one another.

I see that happening all the time in the church. I'm not at all suggesting that our church is perfect. I know that mistakes are made, that there are errors and omissions. I really believe that when they're made they're never from wrong motivation. But I believe that as a body of Christ we are really trying to be a church of the Lord.

The actual meaning of the word "church" in the Greek New Testament is a combination of two Greek words "out of" and "to call." So it is literally "the called out ones." The church is called out of the world. God has touched our shoulders and said, "You." There's not a single one of us that God really didn't want. There's not a one of us that he said to the angels, "I'm kind of 50-50 on this person. Think I ought to give them an invitation?" I'm not arguing the merits or demerits of Calvinism or Armenianism. I kind of have the view that God chose me and I elected to choose God's call. So however that fits together.

But we are chosen of God, called out of the world to serve Christ. I like to be chosen. I like to be a called out one. I like to be chosen. We're chosen by God and then we're called. Not only to him but to one another. I think one of the perils of the contemporary church, the southern California church, if you will, is the peril that we may somehow think that salvation is only an individual matter. Only between us and God. We fail to realize that the stress of scripture includes a view of salvation which is both personal and corporate. That is we're called of God

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but we're also called to one another. Because God is at work building a community in the world. Through that community of family and church God is wanting his glory to shine out to others.

In fact Jesus began his call to persons by not ever calling one person alone. Notice when he started calling people he didn't just single out one person first. I think that one person thereafter would have had an insufferable ego. But it was on the first day some brothers he called to follow him. Then later when he called, for example, Matthew the tax collector, Matthew couldn't say to the Lord, "I sure want to follow you. I think you're the greatest but I don't like those guys that you've got with you. They've hassled me at my tax collector's booth. What I'm going to do is follow you but I'm going to stay home and watch you on TV."

No. You have to get involved in the live church. The living church where people are different from you, compliment you, contradict you, encourage you and sometimes drive you crazy. But that's the church, the community that God is building. And God's calling us out of isolation to one another.

There's a tremendous difference between an audience and a church. Right now you're really an audience. You're listening to me. But the real guts of this church is not necessarily what happens on Sunday morning but we're the church 144 hours a week. All during this week this body, this church has been functioning. We've got to have a view of the church that has far greater depth and dimension to it than just coming and parking in a pew for an hour once a week. That's great to do that but that's not being *in* the church.

There's a real difference between an audience and a church. An audience gathers for an event, to watch a star or a group of stars. But I'm not a star. You're not gathered to watch me play, hopefully. My role as I understand it from the Bible is more in athletic term, I'm the coach of the team, along with the other coaches. You're the stars and it's you that's doing the action and we're supposed to stay on the sidelines as the pastoral staff and cheer you on. An audience gathers together and pays its money and feels that therefore it has paid its money it has the right to cheer or boo because it's not responsible for the action.

But the church is like a family. It is not something we go *to* but something we are *in*. We tell the children, We're going to where the church meets. We try to deliberately avoid the phrase, we're going to church, because the building isn't the church. We're simply going to where the church meets. We are the church.

John Wesley once wrote an inquirer who was asking about salvation. He said, "Sir, you wish to serve God and go to heaven? Remember you cannot serve him alone. You must therefore find companions or make them. The Bible knows nothing of a solitary religion."

Unfortunately others feel more like the poet who said, "To dwell above with saints we love, oh, that will be glory. But to live below with saints we know, well that's another story."

In our verses today Paul represents Wesley's understanding that the Bible knows nothing of a solitary religion. And Paul outlines for us three vital principles of a healthy church.

First is that each of us have an appreciation of our own worth in the body of Christ.

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He puts it first of all negatively. That we are not to be high minded or think more of ourselves or think of ourselves more highly than we ought but to think with sober judgment.

I think there are probably three positions. The middle position is to think with sober judgment. One extreme is to be high minded and the other extreme is to be low minded. We need to stay away from the extremes. First the extreme of high-mindedness and an exaggerated sense of self worth.

The critical self question that we not ask how can I shine. But how can I serve. Exaggerated sense of self worth is looking for a place to shine. Sober judgment is looking for a place to serve. The church is always in danger of people like Diotrephes in 3 John 9. Where it is said of him, "Diotrephes who likes to put himself first." When you get a person who's high minded, real damage is done in the body of Christ. And there cannot be a healthy church.

Neither can there be a healthy church if people have an under estimated sense of self worth. Such a person might often be negative in the sense that they do not feel themselves up to an opportunity and therefore see it as an obstacle.

Jesus tells the story about the three divisions of talents, five talents, two talents and one talent. I think he probably gave more one talent deposits to people than he gave two talent and five talent deposits. I look at the body of Christ and I see most of us are operating on one talent. There's not too many five talent. Not too many two talent people.

But the great danger is to look at our one talent and say, God, when he was dealing things out didn't give me much. So we don't do anything with it because we think it's not much and we get defensive. We say let somebody else do that. There are other people in the church that are more qualified. In a larger church like this we always face the danger that there are persons who say, I'm not needed. If you say that, that's not true. And secondly, that's non biblical. It's contrary to the scripture to say you're not needed. Of course you're needed. We're all needed to make the body of Christ complete and make operational all the ministries that the Lord has designed for this church.

Paul tells us not to be high minded nor low minded. But to be sober minded. Have a realistic estimate of my value and worth to the body of Christ. He tells us that we will do this in accordance not only with the grace that is given to each of us, that special giftedness that God gives us. But we're to also do it according to the measure of faith that has been given to us.

So if we're going to have an individual contribution to the body we want to look for two things. We want to look for what God has graced us with as a gift. Or a contribution to offer. And secondly, we want to look at what our measure of faith is.

I preached my first sermon when I was 10. I come from a small church background where before the Sunday night service you had the youth meeting. And the young people included everybody from age 8 to 35. And all 12 of us would show up. And every once in a while it was somebody's turn to preach the sermon to the group. One day it fell my turn. Ten years of age. I never looked once at the audience. I read it at about 150 miles an hour and thought I must have been up there at least an hour's time but only about 3 or 5 minutes had elapsed by the time I sat down. I didn't have much faith.

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But I took what little was there. People ask if I ever get nervous. Of course I get nervous. First of all it's an awesome responsibility. Secondly by nature I'm more of a retiring shy kind of a person. I have to force myself to get out of that shyness. But the faith develops over the course of time and that's the way it is with everything.

You'll never exercise a ministry or make a contribution unless you develop that faith that is there. I decided that our contribution to the body of Christ really springs out of two things. Sometimes it springs out of an inner impulsion. An inner sense of "This gives me great satisfaction. I feel called. I feel equipped. I feel natural in doing this. I feel the Lord would have me to do that." That's a wonderful way to minister when you really feel like God has laid it on you and given you the grace to do it.

But the second way we also get called to ministry is we find ourselves where there is a need and we're simply there and we need to do it. And we need to develop faith for that as well.

When I began pastoring certainly an area that I needed to have faith for was I had never been in the presence of death and I had never performed a memorial service, funeral service. It was an awesome thing for me to consider that. I never called on a person in the hospital that was dying. I had no faith for that and I didn't feel I had any grace for that. I was just hoping I could pastor the church long enough before there was any serious illness in the church or death. The first two years we didn't. But then one day the phone rang and one of our members was on the line saying, "My brother who has not served the Lord all his life, been a mean, cussed person whose language is totally vile. He's now dying. He's smoked himself into emphysema. I'd really like for you to call on him and see if you could lead him to the Lord before he dies." I thought, "Lord, can't somebody else go? I know I'm the pastor but I'm not up to this. I don't know what to do. I've never been around a dying person. What am I going to say. I'm scared to death."

But I was asked to go. I'm the pastor of the church. Aren't pastors supposed to show up in their dark blue suit and make it official. I've got to go and so I went. I saw a little man whose flesh had been eaten away. He was down to skin and bones. He was on a breathing machine. He could hardly gasp out his words. I could hardly understand him. But when I told him who I was and I'd come to talk to him about the Lord all he started to do was to cry. He cried endlessly. There were no vile words. There were no swear words. Instead it was, "I'm an awful sinner. I need God."

I read him scripture. I led him in a prayer. He gave his heart to the Lord. I walked away saying, but I have no faith for that. I was just asked to do it and I had to do it. But God saved him.

About two days later the phone rang again, his sister was on the line saying he'd passed away, could you have his funeral? I'd never had a funeral. I wanted to say no. But again, the need was there.

The body of Christ is that way. Sometimes we think, if I'm going to minister in the body of Christ I need a voice from heaven, goose-bumps on my flesh, I need the organist playing softly and the angels are speaking saying, Go do this. We look for all those wonderful self affirming great feelings. If we got that we know we've been called by God. But a great many times God doesn't work that way at all. He puts something in our path. We say we can't do that.

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We we're talking in staff this week and in board meeting about our bulletin last week. We had four inserts in the bulletin last week. I don't know if any of you noticed. We were saying there are so many needs. We had our agent from State Farm that writes our church insurance with us talking to us about liability and stuff. He made a statement that really intrigued me. He said, "We insure lots of churches. We insure bigger churches but based on our meetings with all our underwriters and the like there is no more active church in ministry and outreach to its community than Newport Mesa Christian center that we have found in Southern California. We use this church as a model for insurance agents and underwriters for how a church ought to function."

That coming from an outsider I really appreciated it. We are trying through the various ministries of the church to make a dent for God in this world to bless one another and bless this world and reach out. It takes all of us doing that. It takes all of us. That's why we're always asking for help. We're putting a need in your path and saying consider this. Have faith for this.

We need to offer the talent we have. God has not called us to be critics. He's called us to work for him. The fact is you have something to offer the body of Christ, the church. That's yourself. That's what you have to offer. Do you have sober judgment. The sober judgment that says God has given me something to contribute to this body. That's the first thing in the healthy church. My next two points won't take as long.

The second is utilization of our uniqueness. Not only an awareness of our worth to God and to the body but also we're unique. Paul says it very well in verse 4 and we all know that it's true "These members do not all have the same function." No, we're not all like one another. In fact, Paul goes on to say that although we form one body we all belong to one another and he lists for us seven different gifts which strengthen the body – prophecy, service, teaching, encouraging, contributing, leadership (which is administration), and mercy. Of course there are many more that could be added to this list but this list of seven is representative. These are the kind of things that glue and cement the body of Christ to one another in relationships and health.

All of us will find ourselves filling in a different role. One of my favorite scriptures is Acts 5, Peter going along and people are not only getting healed in ordinary ways like hands being laid upon them and anointing with oil and stuff. But there's so much faith when Peter is around that they're laying people in his shadow. And they're being healed by laying in his shadow. I wonder how John and the other apostles felt. They don't have a shadow ministry. I just wonder if they said sometimes, "We're being left out by God. Peter's now got the shadow ministry and if we're to keep our place of exaltation in the body of Christ we've got to have a shadow ministry like Peter. So let's break off what we're doing and go into our prayer closet and fast and pray until we get the shadow ministry."

You could say that's stupid but no it's not. Look at the ministry in recent years in charismatic circles on people being slain in the spirit or falling under the power. There was some people who had that as a genuine gift. But other people come along and they didn't have that ministry. They got into the pushing ministry. They couldn't be content to pray for people standing up; knock them down.

It's because we don't appreciate our uniqueness. Let God be God and do what he wants. Acts 12 Dorcas was a person who made garments. I wonder if there was anybody in the early church who said, "Dorcas you need to be sewing less and praying more." I wonder if that happened.

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We do wrong to people if we try to make Marthas out of Marys. And Marys out of Marthas. It's that difference which when it's all added up makes the unity so special.

Which brings us to the last point, the third mark of a healthy church is a strong bond of unity. We take that individual sense of worth that God has given us and that individual uniqueness and bring it all together. And we're bonded to one another in a body called the church. We're not met to be theater seat participants and just come and see a show and leave. We're meant to be connected all during the week. The most important ministry that occurs in this church doesn't occur when we all meet together. I'm not un-valuing the ministry that's occurring now but I'm just saying the vital ministry where our needs are touched are often on the one to one basis. There's a strong bond of unity that must be there.

There's a great difference between unity and union. Right now we have union in the sense that we're all together in one place at one time. But that doesn't mean we have unity. Just because you get people together doesn't mean you've got unity. The Lord wants unity in the body and how does a body get unity? By taking direction from its head. The body, the members, the parts must be responsive to the head. Who is the head of the body, the Christian body? Obviously the Lord. What's the Lord want to do? Very simple. He wants to exalt the name of the Father. He wants to make disciples. He wants to save the lost and he wants to serve human need. As I look at the gospels that's really the main things Jesus really wants to do. Everything can be lumped in one of those four things. That's what the church is for. We're to be making disciples through teaching and fellowship. We're to be reaching out in evangelism. We're to be serving human need. We become united as we cooperate with the direction of the head.

That belongingness in the body is essential. It's not an elective. I can't say I've not decided whether I'm really going to be committed to the church. If you're a Christian the very nature of that means you're going to be committed. Not just to the church as a theoretical concept but the church as a local concrete expression of Christ himself. The parts of the body are meant to serve each other and thereby in serving each other their own needs are met. A body is not made by artificial connection. That's not how you make a body. You make a body by duplicating the original cell. And the original cell in the body of Christ is Jesus. We're duplicating his personality in its diverseness and yet unity in all of us. Christ in you.

Any of you who've worked in construction know it takes so much longer to build than it does to wreck. You can wreck in a minute. It takes time to build. I want you to join me even as you've already done but even with more intensity to be part of the Oedipus complex, the building of the body of Christ.

God does have a plan for a healthy church. Except your worth in the body. Except your uniqueness. And therefore your unique tasks on the body. And accept and be a part of the unity in the body itself.

Father, we come to you today and we pray specifically for your church, this church which you have called to be a light in this community and a witness for you. We realize, Lord, that there are many ways in which we fall short. The ground in our boasting is not in our effort or anything that pertains to our life and ministry as a church. Our ground of boasting is in you. Our faith is in you. It is you who are the perfect one. We will simply want to offer ourselves anew to you. This is your church, Lord. No one owns the church. You have title to it. We as a body together want to express your mind and your heart and your will for this

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world. Help us, Lord, if we've been sitting on the sidelines watching the action to get into the playing field, into the arena and to become participants in the body. Help us, Lord, not to undervalue our gift to the body not to presume that we have nothing to offer because others may be more talented. Help us to discover and be confident in that uniqueness which is ours. Help us to develop something far deeper than the surface relationship of elected and elective relationships. Help us Lord to discover that deeper commitment which survives differences and discord to find that there is a greater bond of unity that is over all. The unity in you. Teach us, Lord, how to love. That we indeed may be that example which you look for: "By this shall all men know you're my disciples if you love one another." We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.