

September 19, 2010

Psalm 133:1-3 / Ephesians 4:1-16 / Acts 2:36-47
Pursuing and Embracing a Vision of Church Health (#1)

For the last 24+ years I've been preaching exegetical sermons that go through entire books of the Bible, chapter by chapter, and verse by verse, from beginning to end! I Corinthians, I John, Philippians, Acts, Isaiah, Romans, Job and for the last 2 1/2 years now, Luke (with Ephesians in the wings waiting to be tackled next)!

Eight books of the Bible in 24 years! Which at that rate means it will take me another 173 years to preach through the other 58 books of the Bible! In fact, I've preached that way so long I need to confess I feel a bit unsuited for even preaching topical sermons (where you just pick a topic and then go find a text or many different texts to back up what you believe about it).

Why do I tell you all that? Because people have said to me: "*Pastor Jeff, what's your vision for the church?*" And in answer to that question I intend to preach a series of messages (for the next 8-10 weeks) that convey my vision for this church.

It's a vision I want to share because I'm convinced it's Scriptural / was the vision that at least in part fueled the ministry & witness of the early church / was plainly lived out in the first generation of its existence / is the vision which when implemented creates the greatest health in the Body of Christ / and as such, not only offers the most powerful Gospel witness to the on-looking world / but because of its God-centered and balanced approach, does us the most good and brings Him, I believe, the most glory.

So, without any further delay (because we have a lot to cover) let me begin by **FIRST** pointing out "Why it's important to have a vision for the church." And the answer is simple: It's because without a clearly defined vision, any church will eventually lose its way. / We need a vision to keep us on track / guide our decisions / mold the present and future direction of the church / direct our energies and resources as a body / and act as a filter to help us know what we need to embrace or reject / pursue or avoid.

The KJV translated Prov. 29:18 this way: **"Where there is no vision (and it means a divine, prophetic, vision for life) the people perish."** Yet other versions translate the idea of the word "perish" more accurately when they phrase it: "cast of restraint (moral or spiritual restraint)" (NIV) / "run wild" (AV) / or "break loose." "Law and order disappear" says the CEV.

That's what happens when the people of God lose sight of the compelling vision God gives His people in His word -- they "do their own thing," "run wild," or "cast off all moral or spiritual restraint."

And though we see it again and again in church history, the most vivid example of that truth comes to us in Exodus 32, where Moses goes up onto the mountain to receive the 10 commandments (God's prophetic revelation or moral vision for His people).

And because Moses was gone so long, and the people of God had yet to receive the "prophetic vision" God for them, they made a golden calf (the symbol of male sexual virility), sacrificed to it, and then we're told (v. 6): **"They sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry."**

That is, they feasted and partied and got drunk and engaged in all sorts of sexual immorality. They "cast off all moral restraint" and "ran wild."

Why? Because to that point they had not yet received God's compelling vision of love (as it was to be expressed toward Him and other people) to guide their behaviors and help restrain their natural sinful inclinations.

Thus, a more comprehensive paraphrase of Pr. 29:18 would be this: **"When God's people lose sight of the Scriptural vision He has laid out for them in His Word (concerning WHAT He wants done and the WAY He wants it done) they will eventually end up running wild or doing whatever they want (like children left too long without any adult supervision)!"**

And in terms of the church it may not result in such blatant immorality, but it would be safe to say: **"If the church doesn't know where it's headed, and is not determined at all costs to get there, then it will be blown off course by**

the strong currents of cultural change, the distractions of personal adversity, and the mere passing of time, which will combine to carry it aimlessly toward a destination it originally had no intention of visiting."

Or to put it more simply: ***"People who don't know where they're going end up getting lost, because this world is NOT a morally or spiritually neutral environment!"*** The Bible says there are strong forces and spiritual influences and powerful social and philosophical strongholds that pull and tug on us every day! (Eph. 6:1-12 / II Cor. 10:1-6)

So what do we need to keep on track? We need a "vision" compelling enough and grand enough and enthralling enough and all-encompassing enough to call forth our wholehearted commitment to it for our entire lives!

Not a faddish vision that is outrageously popular for a short time and then fades into total obscurity leaving people to come up with a another one and another one and yet another one every few years! / But a vision that will endure, because it's really God's vision for His Church, and thus it is worthy to pass on to the next generation (and the next, and the next)!

A vision that will call forth our wholehearted dedication to it -- because in essence it's the vision God Himself lays out for His Church in His Word, and not mine!

A vision that will not only stretch and grow and mature and compel us to engage in sacrificial service for Christ, but also serve at the very same time to restrain us from venturing into sin or simply "doing as we please."

Which brings us to the **SECOND** thing I need to share. That the Bible's vision, because it's God's vision for His church, can't be derived from any one verse or one passage alone. It must come from the entire sway of the whole revelation of God in Scripture!

That's what I need you to know: The vision I'll be sharing with you comes from looking at all the many things God calls His church to be engaged in, and not just one or two. Because singularly focused visions are stunted. Only by striving to earnestly pursue and implement ALL the things God calls us to do, with equal

zeal and equal fervor can we be the church God has created and called us to be in order to be healthy, and display the glory of His infinite wisdom and Being.

To be biblical a "vision" must be a vision that reflects the whole counsel of God, rather than keying in on one particular part to the exclusion of others. And thus it is, in keeping with Scripture itself, a vision that focuses more on the HEALTH of the church than the GROWTH of the church.

And I need to stress that because the vision of too many churches is simply to get bigger. One Midwest pastor told the Wall Street Journal that his church was the fastest growing church in America, and then added:

"I want the biggest church I can think of." And next to which I scribbled in the comment: "Why? What's the purpose?"

So I want you to know that my vision for the church is not a vision for church growth (which many, I believe, wrongly make their focus), but a vision for church health -- though my contention is that given time a healthy church cannot help but grow!

So, why a vision that focuses on church health instead of church growth? Because when I preached through Isaiah (almost a decade ago!) I was struck by the fact that, ***FOR GOD it was NEVER the SIZE OF HIS VINEYARD that mattered to Him. Rather, the repeated focus was the QUALITY OF THE FRUIT produced in that vineyard, regardless of its size.***

That's what always mattered to God (Is. 5 / 27:3-6). He was more interested in the HEALTH OF THE FRUIT than the SIZE of the vineyard. An emphasis which continues in the New Testament!

In I & II Corinthians / Galatians / Ephesians / both letters to the Thessalonians / both letters to Timothy / both the letters of Peter / Hebrews / Titus / Jude / Revelation, the issue repeatedly addressed and stressed is the health and well-being of all the churches, and not their numerical growth!

In fact, the only book where the "size" is even emphasized is Acts (and once in Romans). Yet even then, it's never in regard to the growth of one particular

church body, but the Church as a whole! It's in reference to people embracing the Gospel in a certain geographical area -- like Samaria, Galatia, Asia Minor / or in Romans, where it's never been preached before.

Yet, despite the fact that church health is the overwhelming Scriptural emphasis, few topics have received more attention in the past generation than "How to Grow Individual Churches Numerically" and usually by transfer growth and not conversion growth.

Studies now show that 85% of all church growth in large churches in America is simply people who are already Christian shifting their allegiance or membership from one church to another. It's already converted people / or people who are already sheep / simply switching the fields in which they graze. Which means most of it is not really church GROWTH at all.

As one friend put it, "It's simply larger churches, with entrepreneurial pastors, and greater resources, sucking the life out of smaller churches in their area, by appealing to consumer preferences like more comfortable seating / a better worship band / an in the building Starbucks franchise / a bigger youth group (and thus more dating options) / state of the art technology / or the #1 element of church growth in America — the size of the parking lot!

Only 15% of American church growth is new sheep being added to the flock of God (as in Romans or the Book of Acts). Which goes a long way to explain why the church in America is actually failing to even keep up with the birth rate!

A trend, which if it continues at the present rate, will, within 25 years, cause the U.S. to post statistics similar to Europe, where only 2.5% of the population attends church on a regular basis.

You see, if there is any mandate laid out in Scripture for the growth of the church, it is through the conversion of non-believers to Christ -- followed by a multitude of other mandates to gather those converts into groups where the primary focus would be creating healthy, godly, balanced individuals and churches who are all striving to grow into the fullness of Christ!

And LISTEN: I'm NOT opposed church growth! If you heard me saying that you heard me wrong! My point was merely that our aim, in order to match with Scripture, should never simply be to be grow! It should be to aim for health which will bring growth as the by-product! And likewise, growth must be defined in terms of winning unbelievers to Christ and not simply getting bigger!

Which brings us to the **THIRD** thing we need to ask: "How does a church become healthy?" And the answer? Through a purposeful effort to establish a comprehensive, all-encompassing and balanced ministry where ALL the divinely mandated aspects of God's will for His Church are pursued and implemented with an equal zeal and equal emphasis and equal importance laid on each one.

As Rick Warren (wisely and correctly, I believe) points out:

“When the Body of Christ becomes unbalanced, disease occurs. Health... can only occur when everything is brought into balance. Healthy, lasting church growth is multi-dimensional. Church health has five facets: The church needs to 1.) Grow warmer through fellowship 2.) Deeper through discipleship 3.) Stronger through worship 4.) Broader through ministry and 5.) Larger through evangelism. These 5 purposes of the church are commanded by Jesus in the Great Commission, explained by Paul in Ephesians 4, described in Jesus’ prayer for the church in John 17, and modeled by the first church in Jerusalem in Acts 2:42-47.

Church growth (he says, and I agree with him 100%) is the natural result of church health. But church health can only occur when our message is biblical and our mission is balanced. Each of the five New Testament purposes of the church must be in equilibrium with the others if church health is to occur.”

He then goes on to make another superb point when he says:

“Because we are imperfect beings, balance in a church does not occur naturally. In fact, we must continually correct imbalance! It is human nature to overemphasize the aspect or purpose of the church we feel the most passionate about (and underemphasize another that we don't). One (church) may be strong in fellowship, but weak in evangelism. Another

may be strong in worship, yet weak in discipleship. Still another may be strong in evangelism, yet weak in ministry. Why is this? It's the natural tendency of leaders to emphasize what they feel strongly about and neglect whatever they feel less passionate about."

To the evangelist, evangelistic ministries are the MOST important ministry in the church. To the missionary, missions is the MOST important. To the person who runs the local soup kitchen, reaching out to the poor and underprivileged is the MOST important.

The same can be said for the preacher, seminary professor, hospital chaplain, music director, counselor, Bible Study teacher, pro-life advocate, and so forth! The reason they do what they do is often because they feel that thing is the most important or most necessary!

Yet the moment that idea takes root in any church imbalance and lack of health has established a foothold. It may be natural for individuals to see the things they're gifted at or interested in as the MOST important, but the moment the church as a whole affirms that personal bias, the people who are not gifted in those areas come to feel that their involvement or gifts are not as necessary or don't even matter.

That's one of the primary issues Paul addresses in I Cor. 12-14. Health in the body can only occur when each part / and the contribution of each part / and each biblically mandated aspect of ministry / is seen as equally important, equally necessary and equally indispensable to the building up of the one body of Christ.

The is NO JUSTIFICATION ANYWHERE IN SCRIPTURE for exalting one form of service, or one aspect of ministry, to the exclusion of another. Individuals and para-church organizations can be singularly focused and highly specialized. But the CHURCH cannot afford to do so without doing irreparable harm to its health!

LISTEN: God did NOT give the CHURCH the option of picking and choosing between the mandates we like and emphasizing them, while ignoring, neglecting or failing to emphasize the ones we're less passionate about!

I don't have the gift of an evangelist, but that does not mean I'm exempt from the need to do it and stress its importance -- and all the other aspects of biblically mandated ministry and service as well!

And although I agree with Warren about the need for balance, and the fact that balance brings health, and health leads to growth, I believe there are not just FIVE, but SEVEN (and possibly eight) divinely mandated aspects of church life, adding Prayer, Foreign Missions, and Social Concern for the Poor to what he's said.

And **LAST**, why don't all churches zealously pursue ALL those facets of church health with equal zeal? Warren says it's because ***"The leaders (tend) to emphasize what they feel strongly about and neglect whatever they feel less passionate about."*** But I believe there's another common reason -- especially in an overly church-ed area like the one we live in.

It's simply this: When an area is saturated with churches, one of the things that naturally occurs is a lack of health! Because that saturation of churches produces competition for members, which leads churches to try to cater to "consumer preferences" or engage in "niche marketing."

It causes each church to believe it must have its own "hobby horse" or "banner" that it can wave to attract potential members to their particular church as opposed to all the others (a mindset I hope you can see by now, is totally contrary to Scripture, and causes a lack of health in churches).

Thus, one church will hold up (I won't mention any names) the banner of being "the soul winning church" / one will be the "experiencing God through music church" / one will be the "Christian School church" / one will be the "social conscience church" / or the "family-oriented church" / or the "seeker friendly mega-church" / or the "support of foreign missions church" / or the "politically conservative, patriotic, flag waving, only republicans should bother coming to our church" church, or its opposite, the politically correct "only democrats welcome here" church. And so forth!

The geographical saturation of churches makes the tendency to be imbalanced almost impossible to avoid! Because after all, if you're competing for members, what flag or banner can one hold high to attract people, when you're seeking to be balanced and healthy and well-rounded — when you pursue ALL the biblically mandated aspects of ministry with equal passion and zeal.

Yet, if we are to image forth a distinctively Christian identity to the on-looking world, we must refuse to jump on one particular hobby horse, to the exclusion of all the others! Because by neglecting any of the seven facets of ministry mandated by God, it not only creates a lack of health in the church, it also warps and twists our own Christian identity!

What's a Christian who worships, but doesn't do evangelism? Or reaches out globally but not locally? Or sees the need to evangelize but not disciple? Or hands out tracts, but refuses to give to the poor? It's a Christian who portrays a warped or inadequate picture of what a Christian is and who God is!!

If we are to be the church as God intended, witnessing forth to the world the uncanny wisdom of our glorious and multi-dimensional God, we MUST stress the equal importance / and passionately pursue all the varied and God-mandated elements of ministry that He has commissioned His church to be involved in!

And that is hard! It's much harder to be balanced than it is to be an extremist! More growth takes place by earnestly seeking to engage in all those things, than by simply focusing on just one to the exclusion of all the rest.

My grandfather (who was just a simple farmer) would continually tell me, when I'd try to haul stuff with the tractor: ***“A chain is only as strong as its weakest link.”*** And what he meant was that it does no good whatsoever to attach a chain of ¾ inch steel links to a tractor with a clothes hanger!

Despite the size of the other links, the “chain” is only as strong as the clothes hanger! And though it seems foolish to even suggest that a person would do that, that's precisely what many churches do in practice when they so focus on evangelism, preaching, or worship, that they totally neglect striving after justice or ministry to the poor and forgotten.

Or just the opposite. They so focus on peace and social justice issues, or outreach to the poor and downtrodden, that they totally neglect the need for prayer, evangelism, discipleship, foreign missions or preaching the Word!

What we often fail to see is that ALL those things are mandated by God, and set forth in Scripture as things He calls us to engage in! Not a list of options from which we get to choose what we like, and ditch the one's we don't -- which only leads to fractured, unhealthy, imbalanced churches and distorts our Christian witness. Or what one man has called, ***“hybrid mutations of what Christians are really supposed to look like.”***

So what's the key to church health? We must seek to strengthen each of the SEVEN LINKS of the chain until they are all equally strong! / PRAYER / WORSHIP / FELLOWSHIP / DISCIPLESHIP and MENTORING programs / our EVANGELISTIC OUTREACH to the lost / OUTREACH OUT TO THE POOR AND THE NEEDY / and FOREIGN MISSIONS.

Those are the SEVEN SCRIPTURALLY MANDATED FACETS OF CHURCH HEALTH, and only when EACH ONE is given EQUAL emphasis, and ALL are integrated into every facet of the life of our church, will each link become strong / church health be the result / and church growth the consequence of that health!