



The Measure of a Church

By

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Do America's churches measure up to God's Standards? Is He pleased with our efforts? Are we accomplishing His Goals? What does God say to America's churches?

This Bible study was first presented more than 20 years ago and is reproduced here in its original form.

I became a member of the Body of Christ almost 50 years ago, so that's given me a lot of time to see how the American church functions. I was also a professional journalist for 40 years, so I had many opportunities to see churches in the news. How do Christians and their leaders measure their success as members of Christ's Church?

Following certain doctrinal beliefs has always been an important measure in every church. People who believed or acted differently on points of doctrine were usually not allowed to participate in anything meaningful in worship or leadership. Conformity has often been an important part of church life. I've talked to many Christians who were frozen out or forced out of churches because of unimportant differences. Some of it came down to petty jealousy and envy on the part of a few powerful church members.

Many Christians measure their churches by the amount of money they spend on missions. Others count the number of people saved and baptized each week. Many hold up numerical membership growth as a very important measurement tool. Some churches struggle to reach their first 100 members. Others are trying to surpass 10,000 members. No matter the number, increasing membership is often a primary measuring goal.

I've seen churches set huge goals for attendance and membership. I saw pastors ride donkeys into church and take pies in their face to "get people in the tent," as they would say from the pulpit. Tens of thousands of church leaders attended "church growth" seminars that taught how to use marketing and promotional techniques to bring people in the doors of the church and keep them in through a variety of "programs."

They met with pastors of America's largest churches to hear their secrets of building large, powerful churches that could impact entire cities and regions for Christ. They participated in city-wide evangelistic and revival campaigns that brought hundreds or thousands of people to the altar to receive Christ, confess their sins, get right with their family or neighbors or announce their call to the ministry. They heard Christians talk about how "successful" their program had been because of the large number of people who responded to it.

Unfortunately, I've seen and covered many "growing" churches fall into public disgrace because of fights, feuds and scandals. I've seen churches and pastors split because of tiny issues. I've seen them spread all kinds of vicious rumors about other believers throughout their community. I've seen Christians rejoice at the failure of people with whom they once worshipped and labored.

I've seen young Christians leave churches in disgust, never again to darken the doors of a local assembly. I've seen churches lose hundreds of members in a matter of weeks because leaders overspent church funds on marketing techniques and programs or outright embezzlement. I've seen church after church pushed to the door of bankruptcy. I've watched as pastors by the hundreds left their ministries each year because of battles with their congregation or denomination.

I met pastors years ago who talked about their churches and their calling as if they were building a personal kingdom. They talked about people in their churches as if they were their objects or projects. They called on their people to give sacrificially for the purchase of church buildings, equipment, and television programs, even to the point of placing families in danger of financial ruin. They spoke harshly about how Christians weren't selling all they had to give to the growth of the church. I heard pastors say the measurement of the Church God wants is always "results."

What I've seen and experienced for almost five decades led me to ask some tough questions about how we should measure a church. I am not discounting the importance of winning people to Christ, supporting missions and working to bring new people into the church. Not at all. What I have asked myself is what can Christians and their leaders do to please God. What does He want? That seems to be the most important thing in God's Word.

God wants love in His Church, the Body of Christ. He wants Christians to be kind to one another. He wants believers to forgive each other. God wants us to rejoice with each other. He wants us to be patient with one another. God wants us to be faithful to Him and other Christians. He wants church leaders to be an example of Love and Grace for all believers. God wants us to be unified in things that matter to Him.

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.” 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

The Christian Church would marvel at someone who could speak in the languages of all people on earth and the angels in heaven. They would be stunned at someone who understood all mysteries and possessed all knowledge. They would be amazed by someone who had faith that could move mountains. They would be humbled by someone who gave everything they had to the poor and who surrendered their body to the flames. Pastors all across the land would get in line to have that person speak at their church. They would promote that person’s attendance in every media available.

Paul said something even more stunning than the abilities of this special someone. Paul said if that person could do all these things but didn’t have love, he or she would be only a “resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.” Paul said they would be “nothing” and “gain nothing.” That is strong language, but God is serious about this. His emphasis is Love. No church program is worth anything without it. No multi-media campaign to bring the multitudes in the doors of a church is worth anything without love. So, how can we measure whether our church is a “loving” church? Paul gives us that measurement in the same context. Look at the next verses.

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.” 1 Corinthians 13:1:4-8

That’s a tough measuring stick! Are our people patient and kind? Do they envy or boast? Are they proud? Rude? Self-seeking? Easily-angered? Do Christians keep a record of other believers’ wrongs? Do they delight in evil or rejoice in truth? Do believers protect each other, trust each other, hope for each other, persevere for each other? How about church leaders? How do they “measure up” to God’s Standards?

God has given us a High Standard, but it’s not too high. It’s a wonderful Standard we can reach with the help of the Holy Spirit. He is the One Who can help us become all God wants us to be. Paul taught the Church that “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. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.” (Galatians 5:22-26) Allowing the Holy Spirit to be God in our hearts and minds will lead us toward the true measurement God has for His Church, the Body of Christ.

Paul told the Ephesian Christians to “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” Unity is one of God’s measurements for His Church. The Church has fallen short in that one. How many denominations do we number as part of the Body of Christ today? How many splinter associations do we have within those denominations? That’s such a shame because Christians have so many reasons to be unified.

“There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”
Ephesians 4:3-6

Where does “Body Unity” begin? It starts at the beginning – “As a prisoner for the Lord, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.” (Ephesians 4:1-2)

Before Paul told the Christians in Ephesus to make every effort to keep the Unity of the Spirit, he told them to “live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” He told them to be “completely humble and gentle.” He told them to “be patient, bearing with one another in love.” Unity is not something we can get or hold on to easily. Paul said we need to “make every effort” to keep the Unity of the Spirit.

What is Unity? The Greek word is *henoteta*. It means “unanimity, agreement.” We do not have unanimity or agreement in the Body of Christ today and won’t have it until we are “completely humble and gentle.” Unity won’t happen until we are “patient, bearing with one another in love.”

How do we get Unity within the Body of Christ? Where does it start? It starts with me. It starts with you. We can be in agreement about what God says He wants us to do. We can have unanimity about what God says are the “important” things. If two people can agree, maybe four people can agree. If four people can agree, maybe eight people can agree. If eight people can agree, maybe sixteen people can agree, etc. Unity can happen, if we all want what God wants.

Does unity come easily? Does it come without sacrifice? Is it easy to keep? No! Paul makes it clear we must “make every effort” to keep Unity through the bond of peace. The Greek word is *spoudazontes*. It means “to make haste, be eager, be diligent, do one’s best.” Unity is worth so much to God. He wants us to be eager and diligent and make every effort to “keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

Notice that the “unity” God wants us to work so hard to keep is not our idea of unity. No. It’s the unity of God’s Spirit he wants us to be eager to keep. I’ve watched Christians treat their local church as if “they” owned it. I’ve seen Christians fight about minuscule, unimportant issues in churches because they thought they were protecting “their” church. Hey! It’s not your church. It’s not their church. It’s not my church. It’s God’s Church! Christ died for the Church. He bought it with the Supreme Price of His Blood! He

owns it! He is the Lord of all. Jesus is the Head of His Body and what He wants is for Christians to make every effort to keep the unity of His Spirit through the bond of peace.

Unity is agreement – agreement with God and His Word. It's also agreement with God's people of the Word – other believers. That agreement comes through the bond of peace. Peace is the binding factor in Unity. It's not a peace that comes from blind obedience or a lack of knowledge. It's a peace that comes from hearts woven together by an understanding of who we were "in" Christ. It's a peace that comes from grasping the cost to God of our salvation. It's a peace that comes from knowing the challenge that faces each of us as members of the Body of Christ.

God measures each church by His revealed Word. God told Christians to "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice." He told Christians to "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." God told Christians to imitate Him "as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." God reminded all Christians that they were once "darkness, but now you are light in the Lord." God told Christians to "live as children of light." God told Christians that the "fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth." God told Christians to "find out what pleases the Lord." (Ephesians 5:1-10) That's our goal as members of the Body of Christ: to find out what pleases the Lord and then do it.

It's interesting to read Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus to see what he told them about God's measurement of a church. What we find is spiritual leadership that is "above reproach." We see leaders who "must be" temperate, self-controlled, respectable, one who loves what is good, upright, holy, disciplined, having a good reputation with outsiders, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not over-bearing, not quick-tempered, not a lover of money, not a recent convert, blameless, not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient, able to manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. A church leader "must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it." That's a tall order, but it's what God wants in His Church. God measures churches by the leadership.

God also measures churches by the people who serve it. Paul told Timothy and Titus that deacons should be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, not pursuing dishonest gain, keeping hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience, managing his children and household well, tested first, then if there is nothing against them, they can serve as deacons. "In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything." God wants Christians to serve His Church lovingly and properly.

God measures churches by the people in it. Churches are made up of individual people who God loves with all His Heart. How does God measure individual Christians? Paul told Titus to remind believers “to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men.” He told Titus to “teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and endurance.” Paul told Titus to “teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good.” That is important because older women in a church can “train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God.” Paul told Titus to “encourage the young men to be self-controlled. In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.” Paul told Titus to teach slaves “to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive.” Paul told Titus to “stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone.”

How do our churches measure up in God's eyes? What kind of "growth" is God looking for in His churches? Does God want "numbers?" There's no question that God is adding people to His Church every day. God's Word teaches that He loves the lost and makes His appeal to them through Christians who share the Gospel of His Grace. But is that how we measure ourselves and our churches: by numerical growth alone?

Look at how Paul, the Apostle of God's Love and Grace, prayed for members of Christ's Body:

"I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." Ephesians 3:16-19

That's how God measures His Children of Grace. He wants us to be strong through His Spirit in our inner being. He wants Christ to be able to settle down and make a home (*katoikesai*) in our hearts through faith. God wants His children to be rooted and established in love and have the power, together with all Christians, to grasp the immensity of the Love of Christ. He wants us to know Christ's unique love completely by experiencing it continually (*gnonai*). God wants Christians to be filled with all His fullness. It's mysterious, it's amazing and it's wonderful! Most importantly, it's what God wants.

Christ “in” you will measure you. Christ “in” you will teach you how to measure others. He will show you His Way.

“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.” Colossians 3:12-15

May the peace of Christ rule in all our hearts today. Remember – we have been called to peace.

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