

## **Pastor, You and Your Church Can Get Healthy Again**

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Pastors and churches often need renewal. And God can give it. Not that it's easy. But a new era of refreshment can be surprisingly near. This workshop will chart a course into biblical renewal for pastors and churches who are tired of where they are and what they are.

What is a healthy church? There is more than one good way to answer that question. We think, of course, of the Nine Marks of a Healthy Church, which are helping so many churches today. But an internet search would give us many insights into defining a healthy church. The one thing we all want to do is hold ourselves responsible not to define church health in terms of our own personally desirable criteria. We don't *grow* by reinforcing what we already understand. The Christian race is not running laps; it's cross-country, discovering new terrain all the way. The Bible calls us to "be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2). How can we be renewed, if we aren't open to what's new? We get more healthy by stretching ourselves in new directions, according to Scripture.

One significant reason we and our churches drift into unhealth is that we neglect or under-emphasize or even turn away from aspects of Christ himself that we find confusing or threatening. That's the main thing I want to say today. We get healthy again when we stop miniaturizing Christ and rediscover his actual grandeur and we allow him, in our churches, to be all that in fact he is. That's our problem in the South, I believe. I live in a part of the country that still doesn't mind God-talk, even Jesus-talk. But what Jesus are we talking about? A bobble-head mascot Jesus Junior? Or the multi-faceted, industrial-strength Jesus of the Bible? This past Sunday at Immanuel we sang, "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation," with the line, "*He* is your health and salvation." And if that is so, and it is, then there is no mechanical or technical or managerial secret to church health. We and our churches have to deal with Christ himself, the Almighty, the King of creation.

The overall goal of gospel ministry is, as Paul states it, "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). What church, of any denomination, has attained that? What church, when you look at it closely, makes you think, "Whoa. I see in that church nothing less than the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ"? The grandeur of Paul's language, his largeness of vision, his majestic categories of thought sweep us up from all small and petty and merely denominational and currently popular categories of consideration. His vision for every church whispers to us all that there is more to Christ than we have yet apprehended. Admitting it humbles us. It lifts our standards from mere "success" to a glory from above that will compel the attention of our bored and exhausted world. And where are the churches that blow us away for their grandeur and beauty and stature?

I believe that health for us pastors and our churches awaits us in those very regions of Christ – if I may put it that way – that we have not deeply visited but which right now lie open to us all, by his grace, according to Scripture. In other words, unhealthy pastors and churches stay unhealthy because they keep going back over truths and insights and understandings about Christ that they’ve already established. But there is more to him. And we need more of him. And we don’t flourish in health and strength by limiting ourselves to the familiar Christ we already understand. We grow and thrive by daring to press into more of the Christ that we don’t yet understand. Which requires honesty and openness. I think of the Bible as something like the medicine cabinet in your bathroom at home. Open the mirror and there are shelves with various remedies for various ailments – Tums for our stomachs, Unisom for sleep, aspirin for headaches, etc. The passages of the Bible are like that. Every passage is a prescription from the Divine Physician for some human sickness and suffering. But when you have a headache, just devouring more and more Tums won’t get you healthy and might injure your health. Health is taking in all that Christ is for all that we need.

So here is my approach today to our question about pastoral and church health. In Colossians 2:5 Paul explains why he rejoices over that church: “For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ” (Colossians 2:5). What a fascinating thing to say about a church. It shows us what kind of church made an apostle rejoice. What kind of church made an apostle, who couldn’t be there to hold their hands – what helped him not to worry about them but rejoice over them? What kind of church made the apostle Paul cheerfully confident? A church that was marked by two glorious powers, which in combination might seem to oppose each other but which in reality complement each other: good order, and firmness of faith. Let’s think about those two glories – good order, firmness of faith – which, when combined, are just one indicator of church health.

Good order is all about organization, alignment, definitions, standards, procedures, clarity – as opposed to scatteredness and confusion. Firmness of faith, on the other hand, is all about conviction, intensity, energy, enthusiasm, expectancy – as opposed to lethargy and indecision. Both powers, when they aren’t competing but combining, evidence church health. Let’s think further about what each one means.

The word translated “good order” is τάξις, meaning “order, arrangement, position.” It was used in secular Greek to describe the organization of a society. It was used of an army marching forward rank upon rank, as opposed to a mob straggling along in chaos. We get our modern word “tactics” from this Greek word. So “good order” is a church that defines terms, makes distinctions, keeps things in line, cares about standards and planning and org charts and the flow of information. Good order is a church embracing mutual submission, so that the body moves forward together, informed, united. Healthy churches don’t do sloppy.

The word translated “firmness” is στερέωμα, meaning “solidity, strength, steadfastness, vigor.” It was used in the Septuagint of the force or strength of an army on

the field of battle. Our modern word “steroids” is traceable back to this Greek root. So we can say that “firmness of faith” is faith-on-steroids, faith of a very decided character, faith energized by strong convictions, it is a decisive and gently demanding faith. Brian Edwards, in his book on revival, describes the churches God has used for revival this way: “They knew what they wanted, and were determined to get it.” *That* is firmness of faith. Healthy churches don’t do wishy-washy.

When Paul saw that good order and that firmness of faith in the Colossian church, it drew from him joyous admiration. But in our own natural bent, each of us can be predisposed in favor of *either* good order *or* firmness of faith. Each of us can be biased one way or the other. Some of us naturally geek out on procedures and policies and minute definitions. Others of us naturally exude warmth and enthusiasm and passionate restlessness. Indeed, whole denominations can stand out one way or the other. Some churches are clearly ordered, and other churches are obviously energetic. But in ourselves, we and our churches tend to veer off into an unhealthy one-sidedness. Some churches are held back by their over-written and tedious structures, and other churches stumble over themselves because of their undiscerning enthusiasm. But the kind of church that made an apostle happy did not allow itself a one-sided either/or but held together God’s wise both/and – both good order and firmness of faith with equal emphasis and obviousness simultaneously. Only a healthy church reaches that surprising fullness and grandeur.

The Christian faith is marked throughout by dichotomies – not contradictions but opposites and differences and paradoxes and incongruities that set Christianity apart as more complex than a manmade religion. For example, both truth and experience, both mercy and judgment, both divine sovereignty and human responsibility, both law and grace, both gospel preaching and social justice, both justification and sanctification, both rest and exertion, both restrained self-awareness and boisterous joy, both earth and heaven, both the physical and the spiritual, and so forth. Real Christianity is bigger and fuller than every one of us and all of us put together. We are simplistic and small, which is where unhealth creeps in. When lose our robust health whenever we turn God’s both/and into our own either/or. But we can fail to see it, because our preferred part of God’s fullness *is* right. Emphasizing gospel preaching, for example, *is* right. But without the complementary glory of social justice, we can feel more complete and more healthy than we really are. A half-right church can be oblivious to the fact that it is also half-wrong, because it really is right insofar as it is right. But an incomplete, one-sided right is not our standard of health. Our standard is “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” Which means all of us are partly wrong in the very areas where we are partly right, and we are partly unhealthy in the very areas where we are partly healthy. So I am making the case that the completeness – not the collision but the completeness – of both good order and firmness of faith in Colossians 2:5 is just one example of the comprehensive biblical fullness that marks healthy pastors and churches. But if we turn God’s multi-course feast, which he wants us to devour fully, into our self-invented menu of mutually exclusive options to choose from, we distort the *whole* of our Christianity, including the parts that we get right. And how can that smallness of vision nurture healthy churches? To quote Don Carson,

Damn all false antitheses to hell, for they generate false gods, they perpetuate idols, they twist and distort our souls, they launch the church into violent pendulum swings, whose oscillations succeed only in dividing brothers and sisters in Christ.

And, I would add, they succeed in perpetuating and even reinforcing ill-health in our churches. So the remedy for our lack of vigor is not to dig ever deeper into just the one side, our side, of the two-sided glories of Christ. In other words, our ill-health is not remedied by more intense efforts in the direction we're already going but by a more radical reappraisal of the real weaknesses in the strengths we emphasize and the real strengths in the weaknesses we under-emphasize.

In his prophetic book *The Church Before The Watching World*, Francis Schaeffer charted for us our only path forward. If we can ever become healthy enough to display the glories of our real Christ, here is what we must embrace. This is a lengthy quote from Schaeffer. His particular concern is the both/and of the love of God *with* the holiness of God, but his line of reasoning applies widely:

One cannot explain the explosive power of the early church apart from the fact that they practiced two things simultaneously: the orthodoxy of doctrine and orthodoxy of community in the midst of the visible church, a community which the world could see. By the grace of God, therefore, the church must be known simultaneously for its purity of doctrine and the reality of its community. Our churches have so often been only preaching points with very little emphasis on community. But the exhibition of the love of God in practice is beautiful and must be there. . . .

The heart of these principles is to show forth the love of God and the holiness of God simultaneously. If we show either of these without the other, we exhibit not the character but a caricature of God for the world to see. If we stress the love of God without the holiness of God, it turns out only to be compromise. But if we stress the holiness of God without the love of God, we practice something that is hard and lacks beauty. And it is important to show forth beauty before a lost world and a lost generation. All too often young people have not been wrong in saying that the church is ugly. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are called upon to show a watching world and to our own young people that the church is something beautiful.

Several years ago I wrestled with the question of what was wrong with much of the church that stood for purity. I came to the conclusion that in the flesh we can stress purity without love or we can stress the love of God without purity, but that in the flesh we cannot stress both simultaneously. In order to exhibit both simultaneously, we must look moment-by-moment to the work of Christ, to the work of the Holy Spirit. Spirituality begins to have real meaning in our moment-

by-moment lives as we begin to exhibit simultaneously the holiness of God and the love of God.

If Schaeffer is right, and he is, then we pastors and our churches cannot get healthy again by tweaking this or that aspect of the ministry. We get healthy again by opening up to *all* that Christ is, and especially those aspects of the biblical vision that have always struck us as perplexing and unhelpful. So let's get ourselves off our starvation diet of some facets of the glory of Christ. Let's ask ourselves if, when we accepted Christ, we accepted *all* of Christ. Let's give ourselves fresh permission to go where we never would have gone, if we ourselves had designed the Christian faith. Think of how Paul describes our Lord in chapter 1 of this letter:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. Colossians 1:15-20

What is lacking in *that* Christ? What is superfluous in *that* Christ? What is optional in *that* Christ? If *that* Christ cannot make us healthy, what can? And would we even *want* any other health? And since the fullness envisioned here in Colossians 1:15-20 is who he is and always will be, our part is not to imagine the better Christ we wish we had and then make up for the deficiencies of the Christ we do have but to stretch our faith out to the full extent of the actual grandeur of our Christ. And that is how we and our churches can get healthy again. It is not a matter of our cleverness and packaging and branding. It's not even a matter of strategic planning, though that has its place. Getting healthy again is a matter of our humility. It's a matter of us finally letting our Christ be as big and complex and multifaceted as he really is, without our diminishing him by chopping him up into parts and then choosing which parts we will emphasize and which we will downplay or even ignore. So the first step toward renewed vigor and health and vitality for every one of us and our churches is to ask this question: *What is there about Christ we are oblivious to, or maybe avoiding, under-emphasizing or refusing, or maybe even denying?* Whatever the answer to that question might be for us and our churches, that is where and why we are languishing and exhausted and fearful and unmotivated. And the remedy is not to sharpen yet further our clarity about what we now know of Christ but humbly to go find out the very points where we have never made much of him and discover more of his glory, without leaving behind the glories he has already revealed to us.

In the Revelation of John the Bible describes our Lord as both a Lion and a Lamb. Jonathan Edwards, in his wonderful sermon, "The Excellency of Jesus Christ," proposes this thesis from that part of the Revelation: "There is an admirable conjunction of diverse excellencies in Jesus Christ." In other words, his diverse excellencies are what we most

admire about him. We don't find his diverse excellencies problematic. We admire him all the more because he is *not* simplistic and one-dimensional and predictable and containable. We *rejoice* that he is not like us but full of diverse glories. We don't edit him down or explain him away but we play him up by letting him be himself to us. Doing so might put us at odds with some in our denominations, but doing so might also become the edge of revival pressing into our denominations.

Therefore, health-conducive pastoral ministry gets us asking this question: What parts of the both/ands of the gospel are we clear about? What is there in the glory of Christ that we see with some clarity? And what is there in the glory of Christ that we might be blind to or under-emphasizing or even afraid of? Keep the former, and embrace the latter.

I propose four steps as follow-through:

1. For your own soul's sake, read *The Whole Christ* by Sinclair Ferguson. It was the most life-giving book I read in 2016, when it was published. He tells the story of the Marrow Controversy in eighteenth-century Scotland and how it helps us understand and embrace and experience the free offer of God's grace in the gospel. Christ, received for all that he is as a whole, as a totality, cannot fail. There is nothing about him we need to worry about or brace ourselves against or filter out. The grace of the whole Christ is both gracious and morally uplifting. In fact, the more gracious we know and feel him to be, the more uplifting he also proves to be. So our health lies not in compromising between his grace and his law and meeting in the middle with grace that has a little law in it and law that has a little grace in it; our health lies in receiving his grace as the total grace of the whole Christ that makes sinners into saints. Thomas Chalmers, in "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection," famously and wisely said:

The freer the Gospel, the more sanctifying is the Gospel; and the more it is received as a doctrine of grace, the more will it be felt as a doctrine according to godliness. This is one of the secrets of the Christian life . . . . Retain a single shred or fragment of legality with the Gospel, and we raise a topic of distrust between man and God. We take away from the power of the Gospel to melt and to conciliate. For this purpose, the freer it is, the better it is. That very peculiarity which so many dread as the germ of antinomianism is, in fact, the germ of a new spirit and a new inclination against antinomianism. Along with the *light* of a free Gospel does there enter the *love* of the Gospel, which, in proportion as we impair the freeness, we are sure to chase away. And never does the sinner find within himself so mighty a moral transformation as when under the belief that he is saved by grace, he feels constrained thereby to offer his heart a devoted thing, and to deny ungodliness.

I also recommend *True Spirituality* by Francis Schaeffer, with the profound insights he gained from his spiritual crisis in 1951. The ugly sickness he saw in his denomination nearly drove him from Christ. But then, in his anguish, he began to see something new. He began to see the real-time relevance the finished work of Christ on the cross for his

ongoing, present needs – the finality and sufficiency of Christ not just for a new convert but as an endless resource for the broken Christian moment-by-moment – Schaeffer’s discovery of a glory in Christ he had never seen before broke upon him with life-giving power. It might help you, as it has helped me.

2. In your public ministry, preach through whole books of the Bible, especially the books you’ve never dared to preach from. Give yourself permission, deep within, to lead your church on an adventure that no denominational headquarters can package for you but that your Lord above can lead you into very fruitfully. Doing so takes courage, but the Lord will be with you. And as you preach through Joshua or Malachi or 2 Thessalonians, let each passage along the way speak with its own full force. Yes, of course, put every passage into the larger context of the biblical gospel. But don’t mute the voice of *that* passage. Each passage is there to let more light from the glory of Christ into the darkness of our world and the semi-darkness of our churches. Don’t turn every passage into a sermon on substitution and imputation and justification by faith alone. Unleash the Bible, passage by passage, and your people will start coming to church every Sunday with eager anticipation. You all will start wondering, “Wow, what’s coming next?” And that itself is a sign of growing health.

3. As you lead your church forward, never stop affirming your church. Don’t treat the past as failure. They will perceive that as you invalidating them. Remember that you are their friend, not their critic. You are their fellow-pilgrim, not their savior. Validate their past attainments that you didn’t contribute to. Where the Lord has led them thus far is all of grace, all miraculous in nature, and wonderfully glorious. Remember that in Acts chapter 2 the Holy Spirit fell upon Peter and the early church with breath-taking power and blessing. But it wasn’t until Acts chapter 10 that Peter began to see the multi-ethnic implications of the gospel. God blessed and used a Jewish renewal movement, that we now call the early church, even when they were still oblivious to gospel insights we now take for granted. And so it is with every church. And as you and your church journey forward, guided by whole books of the Bible, all of you can celebrate the new themes you are discovering together, wonderful new insights marked by such grandeur – that of Christ himself – that those new discoveries become part of your church’s story and heritage, making your church stronger and more convincing for the future. Present new insights not as *competing* truths or even as *corrective* truths but as *enhancing* truths, not as a new direction but as a next step, enriching still further what the Lord has already given your church. Acts 10 didn’t invalidate Acts 2; it built upon Acts 2. It also helps to quote the historic creeds and confessions and authors that define your church’s heritage. But be careful not to replace one false dichotomy with a new, opposite false dichotomy. Pendulum swings do not build health. And if your church’s past has been imperfect, your church’s future will also be imperfect, even after you’ve given them your best. Your privilege now is to help them grow *more* toward the display of Christ.

4. Spread a sense of cheerful adventure by showing your people that *you* are growing. One of the great Bible teachers of my dad’s generation, Wilbur Smith, was famous for saying, whenever he preached, “And here is something I discovered in this

passage during my preparation this week that I'd never seen before." I never heard Wilbur Smith preach without his saying that along the way, and it drew us all *in*. No one gets healthy by recycling the unbalanced diet that got them unhealthy in the first place. But the gentle enthusiasm of expectancy will appeal to people whose hearts are open, as your heart is the most open. Sadly, the newness in Christ that you and others will relish might upset a few people. But you will win over more people by setting a wise *pace* of discovery. My dad used to say about church leaders, "One step ahead, you're a leader. Two steps ahead, you're a visionary. Three steps ahead, you're a martyr!" So yes, set a trajectory of adventure. And yes, be sure to satisfy that expectation. But also, set a pace anyone can follow. The Bible says of our Lord, "He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young" (Isaiah 40:11). If young moms can follow you cheerfully, you're setting the right pace.