



Foundations of a Healthy Church

What is a Healthy Church?

What is a Church?

- **Question:** How would you define “church”?
- **Key Term:** ἐκκλησία (ekklēsia), means “assembly”.
 - **Old Testament** – In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint, the word appears 65 times. Most of the time, it refers to the gathering of the people of Israel before God.¹
 - **Deuteronomy 9:10** ¹⁰*And the LORD gave me the two tablets of stone written with the finger of God, and on them were all the words that the LORD had spoken with you on the mountain out of the midst of the fire on the day of the **assembly**.*
 - **Joshua 8:35** ³⁵*There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the **assembly** of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them.*
 - **New Testament** – In the New Testament, ekklēsia also means “assembly.”
 - Appears regularly in the New Testament, even to describe secular assemblies (Acts 19:32, 39, 41).²
 - **Acts 19:32** ³²*Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the **assembly** was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together.*
 - **Acts 19:39** ³⁹*But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular **assembly**.*
 - Appears twice in the Gospels, both in reference to an entity that, when assembled, carries the authority and purpose of Jesus.

¹ Chris Hutchison, “What Is a Church?,” 9Marks, accessed September 1, 2023, <https://www.9marks.org/article/what-is-a-church/>.

² Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1988), 458.

- **Matthew 16:18** ¹⁸*And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*
- **Matthew 18:17** ¹⁷*If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*
- Elsewhere the word refers to the gathering of believers in Christ Jesus, assembling for the purpose of worship and mission.
 - **Acts 11:26** ²⁶*and when he [Barnabas] had found him [Saul], he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.*
 - **1 Corinthians 4:17** ¹⁷*That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church.*
- Sometimes the word is used to refer to all the redeemed in Christ, called the “eschatological church”.
 - **Colossians 1:18** ¹⁸*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.*
 - **Ephesians 1:22** ²²*And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church...*
- Frequently, it’s used to refer to local expressions of that future reality, namely assemblies worshipping God in particular places at particular times.
 - **1 Corinthians 16:19** ¹⁹*The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord.*
 - **Philippians 4:15** ¹⁵*And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only.*
- **Key Themes:**
 - **An Assembly that’s Called.** Importantly, the assembling of God’s people is always done in response to his creative work. Individuals are called *into* the assembly through the proclamation of the gospel.
 - **An Assembly that’s Gathered.** Each time the word is used, it refers to a people that’s gathered together as local expressions of an eschatological reality.

- **An Assembly that's Purposeful.** It's not merely a gathering – it's the assembling of people together for a purpose. In the case of the church, it's an assembly for the purpose of worship and carrying out the mission of God.
- **An Assembly that's Committed.** The people of God are marked by a common commitment to each other, obvious even to outsiders (see Acts 2:42-47; Acts 5:12-13).³
- **An Assembly that Communicates.** When the people of God gather for his worship and mission, the assembly becomes a beacon to the world of what it means to walk in fellowship with God.
- **Definition of a Church:**
 - A "church" is often defined in view of two dimensions: its nature and its purpose.
 - A Church's Nature: What the church *is*.
 - "A church is a local expression of the universal body of Christ."⁴
 - "The church is primarily a body of people who profess and give evidence that they have been saved by God's grace alone, for his glory alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone."⁵
 - A Church's Purpose: What the church *does*.
 - "A local church is a group of Christians who regularly gather in Christ's name to officially affirm and oversee one another's membership in Jesus Christ and his kingdom through gospel preaching and gospel ordinances."⁶
 - Both definitional aspects are important to consider when defining the church.
 - **Definition:** A church is a body of believers in Jesus Christ called by God through the gospel that, by the ministry of the Spirit, gathers for worship, practices the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper, watches over one another in fellowship, and fulfills the great commission.
- **Some Analogies**
 - The church as a family.
 - The church as an embassy.⁷
 - The church as lighthouse.
 - The church as a barracks.

³ Chris Hutchison, "What Is a Church?"

⁴ Jervis David Payne, *Apostolic Church Planting: Birthing New Churches from New Believers* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 22.

⁵ Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, Fourth edition., 9Marks (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2021), 123.

⁶ "What Is a Local Church?," 9Marks, accessed September 1, 2023, <https://www.9marks.org/article/what-is-a-local-church/>.

⁷ "What Is a Local Church?"

Characteristics of a Healthy Church

- **Question:** If you were asked for a list of Biblical characteristics of a healthy church, what would you include?
- **Mistakes in Assessing Church Health**
 - **Confusing maturity for health.** We must be careful not to equate the lack of maturity in a particular area with unhealth.⁸
 - *Example:* A one-year-old child cannot speak English, but that doesn't mean he/she isn't healthy. The goal is to see such development, but he/she isn't there yet.
 - **Equating a particular strength with health.** Churches of all developmental stages can identify ways that they hope to grow and be strengthened. We must avoid the tendency toward complacency, content with health in a few areas at the expense of others.
 - **Mistaking certain cultural expressions as health.** There are some aspects of church life that flow from culture that we may be inclined to label as healthier as compared to others.
 - *Example:* Churches elsewhere in the world meet for much longer periods on Sunday, including sharing multiple meals and enjoying fellowship late into the evening. Would it be fair for them to consider our more scheduled worship gatherings "less healthy?"
 - **Others?**
- **Evaluating Church Health:** The characteristics of a healthy church should be evaluated along two dimensions:
 - **Presence** – Is a given characteristic present in the church?
 - **Progress** – Is there effort being made toward maturation in that characteristic?
 - **Example:** If a church only has one pastor/elder, is it automatically unhealthy?
 - Imagine a new church with the aspiration of having a plurality of elders, but presently only contains one qualified man according to Scripture. Efforts are being made toward discipling a few men who, God willing, will be ready within the coming year.
 - **Example:** If a church has struggled with evangelism, is it unhealthy?
 - Imagine an established church that teaches good doctrine, but needs to grow in evangelism. They're prayerfully asking the Lord for an outpouring of His Spirit, and they're making efforts to train members to engage the community.

⁸ Payne, *Apostolic Church Planting*, 26.

- **Twelve Characteristics of a Healthy Church⁹**

Twelve Biblical characteristics of a healthy church.

- **Biblical Preaching and Teaching.**

Such teaching is central to the weekly gatherings of the church and consists of the exposition and application of Scripture. The church regards the Bible as the supreme, controlling authority over all it believes and does, and faithful Bible teaching saturates the life of a healthy church. A healthy church holds to the inspiration, inerrancy, authority, sufficiency, and clarity of Scripture, and interprets each text of the Bible responsibly in context, according to the norms of grammatical/ historical interpretation.

Nehemiah 8:8; Acts 2:14-40; Luke 24:27; 2 Tim. 3:16, 4:1-5; Hebrews 3:7-4:13

- **Biblical Evangelism.**

People come into the church because they have heard the full biblical message of the gospel and have responded in repentance and faith. They then continue to share the gospel with the lost in a lifestyle of evangelism.

Acts 8:4; Matthew 28:18-20; Romans 10:12-15

- **Biblical Discipleship.**

Members of the church intentionally invest in one another's lives to grow to maturity in Jesus Christ. This discipleship is characterized by transformed hearts, minds, affections, wills, relationships, and purpose—all in keeping with the Word of God.

Titus 2:1-8; Titus 2:15; 2 Timothy 3:16; 1 Timothy 4:12

- **Biblical Prayer.**

Members of the church pray both privately and corporately. In their prayers, they worship God, confess their sins, thank God for His blessings, intercede for others, and ask God to meet their own needs. A healthy church prays fervently and frequently.

Acts 2:42; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18; Ephesians 6:17-18; James 5:16

- **Biblical Giving.** Members of the church give freely of their resources for the support of those who teach the Word, the expenses of the church, the relief of the poor, and the advance of the gospel around the world. Healthy churches are financially self-sustaining or moving toward being financially self-sustaining.

2 Corinthians 9:7; Acts 4:36-37; 1 Timothy 5:17, 6:17-19; Romans 12:13

- **Biblical Membership.**

The members consist only of people who give credible evidence of repentance from sin and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and who have been baptized as believers. Biblical church members are committed to one another, to assemble faithfully together with one another, and to be the body of Christ to one another.

1 Cor. 5:13; Acts 20:28; Heb. 13:17, 1 Tim. 5:17

⁹Borrowed from IMB, "Foundations" (International Mission Board, n.d.), 80–81.

- **Biblical Ordinances (Baptism and the Lord's Supper).**

Baptism is immersion in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and it is only administered to those who give credible evidence that they are born-again believers in Jesus Christ. All believers are expected to be baptized. A healthy church regularly celebrates the Lord's Supper in remembrance of the death of Jesus, as a visible sermon of the gospel, and in anticipation of His return.

Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 2:38-41; Romans 6:1-4; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-29

- **Biblical Fellowship.**

Members of the church love each other, encourage one another, and build each other up. They care for one another, serve one another, and bear each other's burdens. They are kind to one another and forgive each other. They teach, admonish, and exhort one another with the Word of God. They stir one another up to love and good works. They are involved in one another's lives and know each other well enough to be fruitfully involved in one another's discipleship.

Acts 2:42-47; Galatians 6:2; Hebrews 3:12, 10:25; Romans 12:10; 1 Thess 5:11

- **Biblical Accountability and Discipline.**

Members of the church hold one another accountable for their obedience to the Word of God, and leaders of the church watch over the flock that has been entrusted to them. When necessary, the church exercises church discipline according to Scriptural instructions, always praying and laboring for restoration of the erring brother or sister.

Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; Hebrews 3:12-19

- **Biblical Leadership.**

The Bible recognizes two types of leaders in the church: pastors/elders/overseers and deacons. In the New Testament, the words pastor, elder, and overseer are used interchangeably and refer to the same office (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5-7; 1 Peter 5:1-4; note that pastor = shepherd). The qualifications for these leaders are given in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. They must be examples of faithful discipleship, and they must hold firmly to sound doctrine. They must be gifted by God to teach. According to Scripture, pastors/elders/overseers must be men. Scripture is clear that not everyone is gifted and called to teach and lead in the church, but all gifts are equally honorable and necessary to the church. The consistent pattern in the New Testament is for churches to have a plurality of pastors/elders/overseers. Deacons are servants of the church whose qualifications are listed in 1 Timothy 3:8-13. They are chosen as needed to perform tasks, which free the pastors/elders/overseers to devote themselves to the ministry of the Word and prayer.

Acts 2:17; 1 Peter 5:1-4; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Timothy 3:8-13

- **Biblical Worship.**
A healthy church offers to God worship that is acceptable to Him according to His Word with reverence, awe, and joy. It sings psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs whose content is saturated with biblical truth. Its worship includes the public reading of Scripture, the testimonies of God's people, and prayer. As appropriate, it may also include corporate fasting. All of its worship aims to glorify God and edify His people.
Colossians 3:15-16; Acts 13:2-3; Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 14:26-40
- **Biblical Mission.** Not only is the church organized to share the gospel and make disciples locally, but it is also organized and actively involved in taking the gospel to the nations. Members of a healthy church demonstrate the goodness of God in their works of mercy while declaring the gospel of Christ to the lost. Every follower of Christ, including cross-cultural workers, needs the teaching, worship, fellowship, and accountability of a local church.
Matthew 28:18-20; Matthew 24:14; Acts 11:19-21; Acts 2:47
- **A Thirteenth Characteristic?**
 - **Biblical Multiplication.** Churches that are obedient in evangelism and the great commission will seek to make disciples and establish churches in areas where a healthy church does not yet exist and/or where there is insufficient gospel witness proportionate to the population. The spread of the church is God's plan for kingdom advancement because the church is the only God-established structure in which disciples of Jesus can faithfully obey the great commandments and the great commission.
Romans 15:20-21; 1 Cor. 12; Ephesians 4:11-16; Acts 11:19-26; Acts 13:1-3

Lesson Summary

- The church is comprised of the redeemed in Christ who have been called by God for His glory for worship and mission.
- A local church is an embassy of the kingdom of God, an expression of the universal church.
- After being birthed, a local church begins a journey of growth in all the characteristics of health. The hope of every church should be ongoing maturation in obedience to Christ, the head of the church.
- The final mark of a healthy church is that it multiplies as disciples are made in obedience to the great commission.

"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

Matthew 16:18