

Seven Characteristics of Effective, Biblical Churches

By Bob Young

I have spent over forty years studying churches. I have worked in urban churches and rural churches, big churches and little churches. My family and I have lived and ministered in the northern sections of the U.S., and also in the Midwest and South. We have lived in big cities and small towns. We have worked in the U.S. mission field, and also in the Bible Belt where the church is relatively strong. We have worked in churches with elders and without elders. I have visited or preached in approximately 10% of the churches of Christ across the nation. I have consulted with dozens of church leadership teams.

Through the years, I have noted that churches that are growing and prospering share certain characteristics. I have titled this article “characteristics of effective, biblical churches.” The focus is not exclusively on church growth. Some effective, biblical churches do not grow significantly in number. Most effective, biblical churches will experience growth—numerical, organic, spiritual, and practical. An unhealthy focus on growth may, however, actually hinder the development of a healthy church which works effectively in its context with the gifts God provides. The characteristics identified here may not be the only ones that such churches have in common, but these are especially significant in my observation.

1. MISSION. The church must have a focused sense of the mission of the church and of the individual members, informed by God's purposes.

Growth is much easier when the church knows its mission. This is not to say that growth is impossible when the mission is blurry (note that some churches grow by swelling, often as a result of where they are on the demographic “cutting edge” of growing metropolitan areas), but the church is best served when its God-given mission is kept in view. This mission from God influences how the church understands its work in the context of the local congregation, in the lives of individual Christians, in its community, and in the world (cf. Ephesians). A church must be responsive to God if God is to give the increase (1 Cor. 3:8).

2. LEADERSHIP. Healthy, effective churches have strong leaders who share a commitment to leadership development and training. This kind of leadership provides enabling and empowering structures and activities that encourage and enhance the ministry of the entire body of Christ.

The church of the New Testament is built on a base of leadership which equips the entire church for ministry within and without the body (Eph. 2, 4). Leadership is foundational in the effective church. The church does not rise above its leaders. Effective, biblical leaders are not threatened by others who have leadership qualities, but in fact seek to develop additional leaders. Healthy leaders are not threatened by ministers or highly-spiritual members. Biblical leaders are examples, mentors, and shepherds. Effective leadership provides a framework for the functioning of every member of the body of Christ. Effective leaders help get the work done, even in the menial tasks, but their view is more expansive than the immediate tasks. These leaders are focused on helping every member, and even those outside the body of Christ, reach heaven. For this, they will give account.

3. MINISTRY. Effective churches encourage individual ministry enabled by a gift-oriented empowering and participative approach that encourages ministry according to one's spiritual and natural gifts.

The effective, biblical church is committed to service. The churches I am describing have an overwhelming majority of the members involved in acts of ministry and service. Members see things to do and do them, naturally, without pressure or manipulation, without programs, and without permission. Such churches usually appear to be “bee-hives” of activity. Members are free to serve in whatever areas they identify, and the entire church has a continuously “full plates” of things that need to be done. The leadership model does not stifle such actions through centralization or control, but rather liberates the membership to do what their hands find to do. These churches honor individual abilities and spiritual gifts and empower the members for service according to these talents. This attitude combines the members into a body that is fully participating in this world.

4. FELLOWSHIP. Effective churches have healthy small groups that provide relationships, community, and support for an integrated, holistic spiritual life in the context of today's world.

I would like to call this something besides fellowship, but fellowship is the word that the churches I work with understand best. I would prefer community, but that word is not as popular. Several aspects of the above sentence are especially important. First, the use of the term “small groups” does not necessarily imply a formal “small groups program.” Some churches have zone programs, fellowship groups, or informal fellowship opportunities. Many churches use Bible classes as effective fellowship opportunities. What is important is that the church should encourage multiple relationships within the body of Christ. (One study indicated that church members who actively participate in seven church groupings are very unlikely to become unfaithful.) The churches I am describing provide a variety of relational contexts and opportunities in which a holistic, spiritual life may be developed. Such groups honor and emphasize the nature of the shared faith, define and support individual faith, and provide a context for continuous integration of faithful individuals into the faith community.

5. WORSHIP. Effective, biblical churches have meaningful, celebrative, and inspirational worship that centers on God and develops community.

I am aware that not all worship assemblies are created equal. I also know that what appeals to one person in worship may not be the favorite of another. Nonetheless, churches that are effective and biblical share a worship experience that develops an atmosphere of expectancy and anticipation in worship, a sense that God is present as worshipers look upward and seek divine connections and reconnections, with the result that the worshiping community develops sensitivity and awareness of God, one another, and the world around it.

6. SPIRITUALITY. The church must have a commitment to fervent spiritual life, evidenced by spiritual nurturing which encouraging progress and maturity on the spiritual journey.

Here I am using a relatively recent word (at least in the experiences of most churches of Christ) to describe an old, old reality. I grew up in an effective church (not a perfect church). As a teen, I recognized spiritual maturity (and sometimes, spiritual immaturity!). The effective church provides a context in which individuals continue their spiritual journeys, without undue

expectations and pressures, but with encouragement and support. The churches I am describing are characterized by fervent prayers, tears of repentance, compassionate hearts, caring relationships, and profound biblical understandings that avoid superficial and quick answers.

7. OUTREACH. The effective church cannot omit reaching out, focusing on meeting the needs of those around it. Such churches are characterized as others-focused and spiritually-based, able to connect with others, share the good news, and bring people to Jesus.

Many contemporary churches have given up on evangelism, or have decided that evangelism occurs naturally so that no special effort is required. The effective churches I have observed through the years have some kind of organized, purposeful, intentional effort to reach out and touch those around it. Further, this effort is “church-wide”. That does not mean that every member is directly, actively involved, but it means that the members are supportive of the effort and focus and assist by identifying needs, opportunities, and individuals. The effective church touches the world of needs and the needs of the world, focusing on others, seeking spiritual values, ready to meet global needs, whether physical or spiritual, but never forgetting that the greatest need of the world is eternal.

May God bless you as you seek to help the local church where you work develop these attitudes and characteristics.