

Church Wellness

[compiled and edited from various sources and posted by Bob Young]

In psychiatry, researchers study not just the manifestations and causes of mental dysfunction or illness, but also 'wellness,' that which helps the patient become 'more well.' In education and business, for students and for companies respectively, increasingly the emphasis is to explore and develop strengths rather than focusing on weaknesses. In analyzing developing countries, debt relief agencies now include positive attributes in assessments, rather than just focusing on or measuring the bad ones as in previous models.

These shifts do not suggest that one should ignore glaring weaknesses and problems inherent in whatever system you are working with. They do suggest that the focus should not be exclusively on 'what is wrong?' They suggest a healthy, useful place exists for asking 'what is right?' Using another medical example, doctors know that referring a patient to a pathologist does not in and of itself lead to good health.

I believe we have made a parallel mistake in our assessments of churches. We are at times pathological. We look at current forms and factors in the church, we look at the history of the church, all with an eye to identifying the 'ill health,' the deformations, and the negatives. Then we construct an ideal for the church in reaction to the 'sickness' diagnosis. Church effectiveness is defined by what we are not—the church is mostly about 'not being.' We measure who we are by what we do not do, and by what we are not. Is it any wonder that we have so little understanding of what church 'wellness' looks like?

The situation in Europe, where the church has ceased to have a meaningful impact (in some areas only 1-2% of the population is connected to a local church community), is revealing. This focus on what is wrong seems only to exacerbate the problem. We are not far behind in the U.S. A negative focus gives us more and more reasons (excuses) to avoid the notion of being the people of God in any missional sense. Our pessimism about church seems almost insurmountable, our confidence shattered almost beyond restoration.

How do we avoid the slide into a pathological approach while attending to the very real problems of church? How do we speak prophetically, idealistically and passionately to the need for church reformation, at the same time being practical and pragmatic, without losing our confidence and the necessary focus on action? How do we find the best of the church throughout history, to take us forward into the future, without a blind naive sentimentalism which lives in the past? How do we avoid fostering a negative cynicism that invalidates everything that has gone before us? How do we navigate these dilemmas and arrive at a positive and enabling vision of church that leads us to 'wellness?'

I believe it is time to direct our reflections and actions toward cultivating the characteristics of wellness, just as doctors help us learn about the habits that maintain well bodies physically. It is time to value and affirm what God through his Spirit is doing with the church in our times. It is time to ask what God is doing in our world outside the existing church structures. It is time for the church to ask what relationship it has or should develop with the world around it. It is time for those who have inherited church, and for all in existing churches, to seeking renewal that speaks honestly and candidly in meaningful words and connections to the cultural changes around us while maintaining deep and meaningful connection with God through Christ and His Word.

May our focus change so that we are not about what is wrong, but rather about the challenge of the world in which we find ourselves. Let us recover a confidence in the gospel

and scripture, align ourselves with the work of the Holy Spirit, and participate in forming communities that are living faithfully as disciples of Jesus.