

Church: Reading the “Error Codes”

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In Kansas in the early 1960s, a teenager could begin driving at age 14. I could drive by myself if I was going to school, to church, or on a farm errand. Cars were less sophisticated than they are today. When I started driving, you learned to diagnose problems by the way the car acted or sounded – the engine ran rough, lack of acceleration, fuel mixture too rich or too lean, unusual noises.

Sixty years later, our cars have a “check engine” light to indicate there is a problem. Problems are diagnosed by connecting the car to a small device that can identify error codes and point to problems. What if churches had a “check engine” light and could diagnose problems easily?

In fact, there are some quick “error code” indicators to help churches do God’s work smoothly. Problems can be identified so that appropriate adjustments can be made. Here is a checklist of possible “error codes.”

Lack of focus on Christ. Col. 1:27 – “Christ in you, Christ among you.” Christ must be the head, the center, the purpose of the church as the body of Christ. Is Christ the focus? Is there a clear and conscious awareness of the presence of Christ? Do people leave worship talking about the majesty and splendor of Christ? Do people leave Bible class rejoicing in Christ? Is allegiance and loyalty first to Christ? The church as the body of Christ must draw its strength and guidance from the head. No other purpose or concern can replace the centrality of Christ. Some churches keep going and never recognize that Jesus is missing.

Lack of prayer. Prayer is the oxygen of the soul. One author compared God’s Word to the fuel and prayer to the oxygen required for combustion. God works within his people to accomplish more than we think or imagine, making it possible for his glory to dwell in the church, when the church prayerfully seeks his will.

Lack of focus on evangelism. I remember a classmate from high school. He had a beautiful car. He spent hours washing and waxing it. That car was a sight to see! But – he spent an equal or greater amount of time repairing it. It did not run very well.

How many contemporary churches are like that? Everything looks good, even excellent, on the outside. But the church is not doing what God designed the church to do. God’s purpose for the church as the body of Christ is to bring all things together under the Lordship of Jesus, to save people and bless people extraordinarily. Many of the activities of churches today are distractions. The church is mis-defined and misunderstood. Multiple ministries exist that make the members feel good. These ministries give the church a greater shine, but the church is not doing what God put it on earth to do.

Without Christ at the center, God’s plan for fulfilling his eternal mission to bring all people together in Christ, the church is like racing engine not connected to the transmission. Too many churches are going nowhere because they are not connected to God’s purpose and power.

The goal is to share Jesus. Sharing the Good News will empower the global mission – global and local. How does the church help members contact their oikos (a Bible word that refers to one’s household, family, neighbors, and friends)? What efforts will help members reach those in their circle of influence through spiritually focused, bridge-building activities and caring? What is the church doing locally and internationally that is bringing multitudes of people to Jesus?

Inactive parts. What happens when parts of the church do not work? I remember the car of a friend in college. It ran well. It got her where she needed to go. But some things did not work – the speedometer, the gas gauge, the heater!

I am reminded of churches that gain members but fail to make disciples of Jesus. Discipleship is essential in the active church. Are new converts cared for and trained by those who discipled them? Is there follow-up and an equipping system designed for spiritual growth? Are there abandoned new believers in the church, left to grow independently?

Worship fails to stimulate connection with God. Worship should enable a vertical God-connection. I remember a college student who visited worship at the invitation of her friend, one of our members. After worship, I greeted the visitor and asked her reaction to our worship. She replied, “I was kind of hoping that God would be here!”

In the typical worship assembly with singing, prayers, announcements, sermon, communion talk, Lord’s Supper – a good question to ask is whether people are being helped toward a stronger, more lasting connection with God through Christ.

Lack of deep fellowship. Fellowship is God’s plan for establishing horizontal connections and community life within the believing community. Is the church spiritually relational, practicing the “one another” passages? Or is it mostly a gathering for fun and happy relationships? In biblical community, the church experiences deep fellowship that is not limited to the core group but extends to the entire membership.

Lack of follow up, lack of continuity, lack of accountability. Are church members accountable to each other as parts of one body, or are there a lot of independent, Lone Ranger Christians? In the human body, all members have different functions but are interdependently connected. Interdependence is the result of connections, contact, continuous follow up, and holding one another accountable.

Primary warning system malfunction. A primary part of God’s plan for the church includes alert leadership that provides effective training, mentoring, and supervision. The task of the leader is to help the church remain spiritually healthy and effective in its work and responsibilities. Leaders know how to read the “error codes.” God’s leaders tune in when Christ is not the focus, when prayer is weak, when sharing Jesus becomes secondary, when members are uninvolved, when worshipers fail to see the greatness of God, when some members are excluded from community life. God’s leaders are the first line of defense for follow up, continuing, and accountability. The Bible calls it shepherding!

The healthy, active, effective church moves forward smoothly to fulfill God’s purpose, resulting in the multiplication of believers and churches, both locally and globally. When the “check engine” light comes on, someone must read the “error codes” and help make necessary adjustments so that the church can do God’s will.