

The Marks of a Healthy Church

Our Epistle lesson sets forth five marks of a healthy church.

Colossians 4:2-18

2 Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.

3 At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison—

4 that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.

5 Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time.

6 Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

7 Tychicus will tell you all about my activities.

He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord.

8 I have sent him to you for this very purpose,

that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts,

9 and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you.

They will tell you of everything that has taken place here.

10 Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him), 11 and Jesus who is called Justus.

These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.

12 Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers,

that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.

13 For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis.

14 Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas.

15 Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.

16 And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.

17 And say to Archippus, “See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord.”

18 I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand.

Remember my chains. Grace be with you.

I. **PURPOSE: A healthy church relentlessly pursues its gospel mission.**

According to Colossians, the chief objective of a healthy church is to proclaim Jesus Christ in all of His fullness so that those who believe in Him might grow to spiritual maturity (see 1:6-7; 1:28; 4:12).

II. **PRAYER: A healthy church persistently prays for its gospel mission (vv. 2-4).**

We advance the gospel mission on our knees and take heed of the apostolic order of speaking to God about others before we speak to others about Christ.

III. **PROCLAMATION: A healthy church wisely and winsomely engages outsiders with the gospel (vv. 5-6).**

Speak to others about Christ, for the gospel makes us a people for others.

IV. **PARTNERSHIPS: A healthy church is committed to becoming a loving fellowship that models the gospel.**

The gospel creates a nurturing community where love rules every relationship. Therefore, a healthy church is committed to loving people well. The Apostle Paul was a great lover of people. Notice just one word that he repeats three times in vv. 7-18: “beloved.”

According to Kent Hughes, this loving fellowship models the gospel in three ways: it enables us to:

- overcome barriers...including ethnic, racial, and economic barriers
- transcend grievances (ex. Onesimus and Mark)
- produce a largeness of heart. Notice Epaphras’ largeness of heart that made him vulnerable to the burdens of others

V. **PATH: A healthy church expects hardship and suffering in fulfilling its gospel mission.**

The gospel mission involved suffering for the Apostle Paul and his apostolic band. Thus, we should willingly count the cost for the gospel’s advance (see 4:3—I am in prison on account of proclaiming the gospel, 4:10—Aristarchus is my fellow prisoner, and 4:18—“remember my chains”)

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it important that the gospel of Jesus Christ fuel and energize the five marks of a healthy church mentioned above?
2. Honestly assess your own life (what you truly value, how you spend your money and time). What would you say are some of the purposes of your life? How do they square with what the Apostle Paul says should be the life purpose of a healthy Christian and a healthy church?
3. The Apostle Paul starts by teaching us how to speak to God about people and then how to speak to people about God. Why do you think he starts with speaking to God first? Why does He command us to continue steadfastly in prayer?
4. How do you tend to view prayer? John Piper claims that prayer often malfunctions because we turn it into a domestic intercom rather than a wartime walkie talkie (see James 4:2). What do you learn about prayer from the Apostle Paul in 4:2-4? How is it instructive for us that the Apostle Paul does not ask for prayer for his release from prison?
5. Witnessing for Christ is an interplay between three things: praying, living, and speaking. In what area do you personally think you need to grow the most? In what area do you think our church needs to grow the most?
6. If God is a God who opens doors for His gospel, why not stop right now and pray that He would do this for your pastor, for a missionary whom you know personally, for your small group, and for yourself?

7. If a healthy church wisely and winsomely engages its not-yet believing friends with the gospel, how can we become more winsome and wise in engaging them in word and deed with the gospel?
8. What attitudes and actions do you think would cause your not-yet-believing friends to ask questions about your faith? Pray and ask the Lord to show you how to live as a more distinctive, contagious Christian who lives in the world but is not of the world.
9. If a healthy church is a loving fellowship that “overcomes barriers, transcends grievances, and produces largeness of heart,” then where do you need to grow the most? Where does our church need to grow?
10. Close by praying for your persecuted brothers and sisters around the world who are enduring the same kind of treatment that the Apostle Paul did. Also, pray for the Lord to grant you courage to face hardship and opposition when it comes your way.

Going Deeper

1. How would you live differently if you expected questions from your not-yet-believing friends about your lifestyle choices and words?
2. What impresses you the most about the prayer of Epaphras in verse 12? His own largeness of heart caused him to take on the burdens of others. Would you pray and ask the Lord to show you whose burden you can help bear today? In light of this wrestling (the literal word is agonizing) in prayer for the church in Colossae, how would you like to grow in your own prayer life?