

What Makes a Good Church?

What do you think about the church? How do you view the church? What makes for a good church? What words would you use to describe a great church?

Some define a good church by its size. A big church has a lot more to offer—more people, more groups, more money, more ministry opportunities, bigger events, greater impact. On the other hand some would say a church is better small where they experience deeper fellowship, more intimacy, where they feel needed and wanted.

Some define a good church by what it accomplishes--how many people are won to Christ and baptized, how much it gives to missions, what its impact is on the community, how many books the pastor has published, what does the children's ministry do, or the youth ministry.

Some might look at the church's reputation with others—how the community views the church, is it having a positive influence?

Some will focus on the worship service—how the pastor preaches, what kind of music is there, how long it runs.

Some even focus on the building—the size or design of the worship center, the facilities for the kids or for recreation.

But, as I think about it, maybe we are not even asking the right question. Rather than asking “what is a good church or a great church?” maybe a better question might be, “what is a healthy church?”

Today, as we come to Romans 12:3-5, I want us to see three essential qualities of a healthy church. While these three aren't the only ones we might think of, they are vitally important because Paul focuses on three qualities that involve the way we look at ourselves, the way we look at each other, and the way we look at our own personal involvement in the church.

Now someone may point out that in Romans 12 Paul does not even use the word “church.” In fact Paul does not use the word “church” in the book of Romans until his personal greetings to the church in chapter 16. How do we know that is what he is talking about? In the Bible the most common picture of the church is the body of Christ.

(Ephesians 1:22-23) **22 And He put all [things] under His feet, and gave Him [to be] head over all [things] to the church, 23 which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.**

(Colossians 1:18) **18 And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.**

The church is the body of Christ. Now keeping that in mind, let us read our text for today. Romans 12:3-5:

3 For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith.

4 For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function,

5 so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.

This is a picture of life in the body of Christ, the church. The church is a body. It is made up of all believers who share the life of Jesus Christ. It is a living organism in the world today.

The first essential quality of a health church is:

1. Humble Self-Estimation.

Paul began chapter 12 by urging us to present our bodies as living sacrifices to God. This offering of ourselves is based on God's mercy shown to us in Christ and results in a life of service worship. This offering of ourselves to God as an act of worship works itself out in our lives as we stop being conformed to this world, this present evil age, but rather we are transformed, being made into the image of Christ, by the renewing of our minds. God transforms us from the inside out by changing the way we think.

So in verse 3, the first aspect of a renewed mind is how we think about ourselves.

In verse 3 Paul uses one particular Greek word (and its compounds) four different times. It's the word that is translated "think." A literal translation of verse 3 might read something like this: *"Do not super-think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but rather think of yourself with sober thinking."* The idea is that Christians ought to have a realistic appreciation of themselves—not puffed up with conceit and not dragging themselves down into the mud.

Although again, Paul does not use the word in this verse, I think the key idea here is humility. *Humility is knowing who you are in God.* Pride comes from "super-thinking" about yourself, blowing your own horn too often, bragging about your accomplishments one too many times, dwelling on your own supposed greatness. Humility is a quality that is greatly prized by God.

Humble is how Jesus described Himself:

(Matthew 11:29) 29 **"Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."**

Paul insists on it later in Romans 12:

(Romans 12:16) 16 **Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion.**

Peter writes:

(1 Peter 5:5) ... **Yes, all of [you] be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for "God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble."** (Also James 4:6)

In the next few verses Paul is going to teach on spiritual gifts. Let me illustrate what thinking too highly of ourselves is like in the matter of spiritual gifts. ***First, we may think too highly of ourselves because of the gifts God has given to us.*** Spiritual gifts are gifts of grace. Paul himself is example one in this. He writes in verse 3, ***For I say, through the grace given to me. "Grace" is the root (CHARIS) on which the term "spiritual gifts" (CHARISMATA) is built. "Spiritual gifts are sovereignly given as gifts of grace.*** Spiritual gifts are unmerited and not an evidence of our spirituality. Neither are

they a barometer of our worth. Yet when given one of the more visible, more prominent and prized gifts, we may be tempted to take credit for that which **God** has given us and which **He** is accomplishing through us.

Because of our natural self-love, we will always think too highly of ourselves. Grace should lead to humility. Everything we are and everything we have is a gift of God. We did not deserve it or earn it. And so the foundation for true humility is always to keep God's grace in view. Keep coming back to the cross. Jesus didn't die for you because you were worthy and He knew that He was getting a real prize. John Newton put it rightly, "*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.*"

Second, our response to being given a less prominent gift may reveal an inflated estimation of ourself. Consider these words of Paul recorded in 1 Corinthians:

(1 Corinthians 12:14-16) **14 For in fact the body is not one member but many. 15 If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? 16 And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body?**

You might think that the "**foot**" and the "**ear**" did not regard themselves highly enough, but this is not what Paul is saying. The "**foot**" does not say, "Because I am a foot, I am not a part of the body." He says, "Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body." The "**foot**" does not think too little of himself; he thinks too much of himself. He (wrongly) thinks that being a "**hand**" is more important (more prestigious?) than being a "**foot**." If he can't be a "**hand**," the "**foot**" refuses to function as a part of the body at all. The "**foot**" thinks he is better than the gift he has been given. He thinks too highly of himself. There is no sacrificial service of worship here but only self-seeking ambition. The "**foot**" does not need more self-esteem but more humility and gratitude. The "**foot**" needs to "die" to himself and to fleshly desires and ambitions.

Paul is urging us to think soberly, with sound judgment about ourselves. That means to think biblically about ourselves. Instead of measuring ourselves by the opinions of others, or by the ways of this world, we measure ourselves by what the truth is in God's word.

This will be the work of a lifetime, to truly know your strengths and weaknesses, to understand your temptations, to look at yourself with sober judgment, and to find a way to use what God has given you without falling into the twin traps of vanity and false humility. When God's people take Romans 12:3 to heart, we'll see a change in the attitudes of people around us. *Pride builds walls. Humility builds bridges.*

We are to think with reasonable, sound judgment "**as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith.**" Literally it is, "As God has measured out to each one a measure of faith." Where does the faith come from? Not from us. From God. He has measured out to each one a measure of faith.

What does this mean? God has given each of us enough faith through His grace in Christ that we can serve in the body of Christ. In verse 6 Paul gives an example concerning the gift of prophecy: "**if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith.**" The Lord does not expect more of you than He puts in you. But He does not expect you to bury your "talent" like the unprofitable servant did, and fail to invest yourself in God's kingdom. This means that for everything He gives us to do, the Lord has given enough faith to carry it out. We do not need someone else's faith for our responsibilities before God. We might say, "Oh, if I just had the faith of Billy Graham,

then I could accomplish so much more.” If God had desired you to accomplish what Billy Graham accomplished, He would have given you the same “measure of faith”.

The Lord has given you enough faith to do His will. So what are you doing with the faith He has measured out to you? Are you serving in some ways that stretch you so that you must depend on the Lord? Are you seeking to build relationships with others that are trying and difficult, so that you might serve them in the name of Jesus? Faith is reliance on the Lord. If we never venture beyond our own strength then we know little of the exercise of faith.

2. Unity in Diversity.

The church is like a body. It has many parts with many functions yet they all serve a larger purpose. If you want to know what the church is like, stand in front of a mirror and look at your own body. You will discover three truths about your body and about God’s church:

1. Your body has many parts—visible and invisible.
2. Every part is important.
3. Every part depends on every other part.

If you doubt that last fact, think about the last time you had a toothache. Probably you never stop to think about your teeth until they start hurting. But when your teeth hurt, you can’t think about anything else. It’s the same with every part of your body. You don’t think about it until it hurts.

The principle involved is unity amidst diversity. *We’re not all alike in the body of Christ.* We have different functions, different gifts, different backgrounds, and different preferences, different measures of faith. God doesn’t make cookie cutter Christians. That truth would have been especially important in Rome where Jews and Gentiles struggled to find a common ground inside the church. Two thousand years later the struggle continues as black and whites, Asians and Hispanics, rich and poor, haves and have-nots, blue collar workers and white collar workers, men and women, young and old, the contemporary crowd and the traditional crowd all struggle to find a way to work together in God’s church.

A healthy church is one made up of all kinds of people from many different backgrounds who join together based on a common faith in Jesus Christ. We don’t have to share the same politics or like the same music or eat the same food or drive the same cars. That’s not what it’s all about. What we do share, however, is a deep-seated love for Jesus Christ. That ought to be enough to hold us together in the hard times. Healthy churches are filled with people who work together in spite of their differences.

That leads directly to the third mark of a healthy church.

3. Interdependence

Not independence, but interdependence. As you know, we Americans tend to be individualistic. We admire the strong, independent guy who can make it on his own. To depend on others for help is a sign of weakness. But as Christians, we must not conform to this thinking of the world. The principle of the body means that we need each

other to grow and stand strong against the enemy. But to admit that and practice it requires humility.

Just as a body is not a loose confederation of separate parts all doing their own thing, so the body of Christ, the church, is not a bunch of loosely connected, independent people all doing God's work. The church is one where we are **"individually members of one another."**

In other words, the church is not just a place where you come, as you would to a theater, to watch a show and then leave without much if any interaction with other attenders. Or, a church is not like a college classroom, where you may know a few of the students, but you only come to hear the lecture, chat with a couple of friends in the hallway after class, and then go your own ways. The church is a body, which implies a deeper level of contact and interaction than the theater or classroom comparisons provide.

Did you know that you belong to the person sitting next to you? We're on the same team with each of us playing different roles. Don't get puffed up by your own importance and don't take yourself out of the game by thinking you don't matter. We need each other because we belong to each other.

I read a touching story that illustrates this truth. During Vacation Bible School, a woman teaching a primary class was interrupted about an hour before dismissal when a new boy was brought in. He only had one arm and the teacher did not know any details about why he was missing his arm or how he may have adjusted to this handicap. She was nervous and afraid that one of the other kids would comment on it and embarrass him. But she had no opportunity to coach them on how to respond.

As the class came to a close without incident, she began to relax. She asked the class to join her in their usual closing ceremony. "Let's make our churches," she said. "Here's the church and here's the steeple, open the doors and see all the" Then the awful truth of her own actions hit her. The very thing she had feared the children would do, she had done.

But as she paused, speechless, the little girl sitting next to the new boy reached over with her left hand and placed it up to his right hand and said, "Davey, let's make the church together."

So are you doing your part in the body? Are you encouraging and building up the other members by your faith?

Let me put the question another way: Suppose that everyone in the church contributed to the body like you do, what kind of church would we have? Would we be able to teach the Bible to children and youth and adults? Would we still support missionaries around the world? Would we still reach people for Jesus Christ? Let these questions sink into your soul. If it feels uncomfortable, perhaps the Holy Spirit wants you to do something about it.

Maybe you have been attending here for some time and today the Holy Spirit is urging you to become a member of this church. Maybe you are a member and today the Holy Spirit is urging you to begin serving in ministry in the church.

Listen to the Holy Spirit of God as He speaks to you during our invitation time.

