

INTRODUCTION

Based on Barna research, here is how Americans envision the "ideal church." It's quite a mixed bag. It varies widely depending on the group you ask. But the overall survey shows these three to be the **biggest concerns: Friendliness; involvement with the disadvantaged; and children's programs.**

But like I said, it depends on the group. For example, if age is the qualifier: Baby Busters are less interested in quality of Sunday school or worship music; while those things are very important to Baby boomers, but unlike the younger group, boomers are less interested in helping the disadvantaged.



If you go by denomination; for Catholics, doctrine is less a concern but length of the service and convenient times are highest priority.

For the Baptists, quality of sermon and church friendliness rank on top.

In his research, Dr. Dwight Smith looks back at his earlier years as a pastor in a very large church. 90% of the effort went into preparing Sunday morning. And success was really defined by: how many showed up and how much was the offering? In short, success was: **more people, more money; more happiness.**

If we're honest, that's how **most western churches** see success. If we have the seats full on Sunday, and the budget is running in the black- we are essentially successful. But is that success?

Is a church successful if it is super friendly? Or if people come from miles around for the children's programs? -Or even if it's belief system is spot on?

Well... being a big church shows something is reaching the people. But I recall a news story a month ago where a very large church in California was in the limelight, because the senior pastor had been using his authority to take advantage of teen girls in the congregation. **-Big doesn't necessarily mean right.**

It is good to be friendly, but it is also a trademark of many dangerous sects to be "friendly" to lure

people in. It is good to have programs that teach children about God; but I know of at least two large churches where the staff lamented the entertainment or "babysitting" rut they had fallen into.

None of these things are the core elements of church success, not by God's standards. **So what is?**

We can start by seeing how **conspicuously absent** these popular elements are from Scripture. We don't read about the great programs they had in the Jerusalem church. We aren't given any hint of how many people attended the church in Corinth. We don't know if the church budget in Thessalonica was in the red or black. We have no idea how good the music was in the Philippian church. And as far as friendliness, when hospitality is mentioned, it isn't as the church protocol, but as a **spiritual gift**.

Care for the disadvantage is a core issue, but check this out:

James 1

27. Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to **keep oneself unspotted from the world.**

Scripture is always careful to **link charity into the name and context of Christ**. If charity ever becomes an end in itself, it is merely **social activism**. Social activism doesn't see beyond this world. Its solutions are temporary, and that's NOT Christ; Christ's business is all about eternity.

If we take a hard look at Scripture, we'll find ourselves agreeing with Dr. Smith. The western church is pretty much about one day a week. And success is; more people, more money; more happiness. But from God's standard, that simply doesn't cut it.

When we look at God's standards, success for a church comes down to **three non-negotiables**. If a collective of believers don't align with these three, it is in fact, not really a church at all. So what are those three qualifiers? Start with this:

1. IT MUST BE A SPIRITUAL BODY

Romans 12

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.

6. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them:

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Romans goes on to list the gifts: **Prophecy**; **exhortation** (*encouragement in the most intense form*); **sharing**; **leadership**; **mercy** (*compassion or pity*)

v7-9

So a healthy church ***isn't a well-oiled institutional machine***. It isn't "big business." It is organic. It is a ***body that runs on the orchestration of spiritual gifts***; like different cells in the human body. There are gifted ones, who can plumb the depths of God's Word and teach it to others. But they aren't so good at other things. So in that body, God puts those gifted with giant hearts- it is their spiritual instinct to tune into the needs of others, there are yet others who have a knack for making new people feel at home.

The ***Christian walk can be hard***, even if you know what's right. So God puts those in the body with big shoulders; they help lift others up when they are down. He blesses others materially, so they can share. And while some are busy researching and teaching and others putting a welcoming arm around new people; there are those who tend to look outside the group to the lost with the compassion of Christ. They take the church outside its walls.

The church is a collection of spiritual gifts all orchestrated by the same spirit for the **same cause**.

1 Cor 12

4. Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit.

5. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord.

6. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all.

7. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all:

And we're given another list of spiritual gifts: **Word of Wisdom** ("logos" of "Sophia") (*That is a reason, motive, computation that is wise*); **Word of Knowledge** ("gnosis"- *the act of knowing that which isn't naturally known*); **Faith** (*extraordinary conviction, assurance, belief, and constancy in such profession.*) **Healing; miraculous power** (*literally "workings of power" that is; to affect miracles*); **discernment** (*judicial estimation; fairness*); **tongues** (*a language especially; one not naturally acquired*); **interpretation of tongues**. V8-10

Here's the thing with churches in our culture; **we hire a minister, or even a few**, to perform the work of all these gifts. And outside of 5 to 10% of the congregation, we sit back, drop a dollar into the plate, and expect one or two people to display all these gifts.

Now, ***it's not an issue of people*** being good or bad; active or lazy. When many don't mobilize in the church family, this is what happens: Some are over extended into areas that are not their gift. So the blessing is diminished for all. Others who never grow in their gifts, bring virtually no blessing at all. –And God's **great promise of success** is never experienced by that church family. The real issue is; **do we want to experience true success?**

Each person in here can and should be alive in Christ, and they should not settle for **anything less than discovering and using their spiritual gifts**. Everyone should strive to be equipped. **The purpose** of the church isn't to be a service to its people; it is to empower its people to be of service; in concert. That is a spiritual body! That is the design! ...that is Godly success!

2. IT MUST BE THE BODY OF CHRIST

Eph 4

15. ... grow up in all things into Him who is the head Christ

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A real church is "the body of Christ." The body does what the head tells it. So that leads us to a logical question when it comes to defining success: ***What did Christ come to do?***

John 6

38. "For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.

39. "This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day.

It is so easy to fall into the trap that we are here to ***do things that we like***; things that inspire us for the moment. When Christ came in a body, He didn't come to do His own thing. And we, as Christ body now, aren't here to do our own thing. We are here to ***do the will of the FATHER***. ***How do we know we're doing the Father's will?***

John 10

10. "The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.

We are on track when ***lives start to change***. It will change lives on this earth, and it will change the course of eternities.

John 3

17. "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

John 9

39. And Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind."

On one hand Christ didn't come to judge, and yet, he did come for judgment; how does that work? Like Christ as a man; we are not here to judge anyone. Our **objective is to open opportunity**. Our goal is to open the door from which God can be seen and heard. It is then up to each individual what they do with that opportunity. Some will walk through to their salvation, others will reject to their own judgment.

Last week, we shared how we experienced God working through the past year. And in every case, the experience involved other people. Each of us; we are walking opportunities for God.

When we open opportunities for people to see Christ, and lives transform as they connect to Him; we have experienced success.

3. IT MUST BE THE BRIDE OF CHRIST

Rev 21

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The church is the bride

Jerusalem equates to God's people. It is to be "adorned" or crowned. What does that mean?

Philippians 4

1. Therefore, my beloved and longed-for brethren, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, beloved.

1 Thess 2

19. For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?

The crown of the church is people. The jewels in the crown are the salvation stories; the disciple stories; the lives that were divinely transformed. If we do not strive to transform lives in Christ; ***the bride has no crown.*** She will be mediocre, unworthy of the wedding.

Our purpose is to prepare for "bridship." Our purpose is to become ***ready.*** –Ready, ***not just as individuals, but as a family.***

Brides do a lot of things to get ready. Some things are pleasant, even joyous. Trying on that beautiful gown is a day to remember for many brides. Some things are hard. How many women nearly kill themselves dieting or exercising so they could get ***into*** that beautiful gown? That's no fun, but for that day; it is worth it!

We need to realize this: We will not only be judged individually, we will be judged collectively as THE CHURCH.

With ***any one*** of us; when we are active in our gifts, the whole body is strengthened. When ***any*** of us are inactive, blowing off the whole idea of spiritual gifts; the whole body suffers. ***The bride suffers.***

Let me close by asking you two questions:

- 1) **Is this church, your church, striving towards real success?**
- 2) **Is *this* "spiritual body more healthy, or less healthy because you are here?**

I would encourage you to let God's Spirit answer that question within you; keeping in mind ***God's*** idea of true success. And then I would like you to ***memorize*** the last six words of this message:

ACT upon what God tells you.

1. Is this church striving towards ***real*** success?
2. Is this church more or less healthy because ***you*** are here?

