

EQUIP South Africa 2012

Session 8

What Makes a Church Great?

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I've been thinking around this thing of success for some time. I do want to know I'm hitting the mark continually. Whatever we consider success in our hearts is what we will pursue and chase after and with leadership we're leading people into those things. Together we can find what God is saying about this. Success is very different from what the world or even the Church says it is.

I heard someone say that success in the Kingdom is a succession of “yesses” to the King. In other words, I believe success is a people obedient to the King where we're not just talking about him but obeying him. For me obedience, saying yes to God regardless of my feelings or how people will respond, has to be one of the most important truths.

This final session is about greatness in the context of the Church. Why is this for everyone? Because the Church is not the pastors, it's all the people. Like it or not, we are the Church. And we need to know what it means to be a Church that is great.

This subject is exhaustive. I don't come as an expert but I am coming here in light of some of the journey we're on. We're going to be asking these questions: What makes a great church? What does it look like? What does the Bible teach?

Measuring success in ministry

In ministry it's difficult to measure success. A few years ago we were leading Coastlands and we had a guy who was a market-place elder. We felt it was time to bring him on full-time. We had faith for him and were trusting God for the finances. I was so excited about it. But when I told him and his wife I didn't get the response I was expecting. They both began to weep. I didn't know if this was out of happiness or sadness, but it turned out it was the latter.

So I asked him why he was crying. He explained that he's a builder by trade and when he arrives at a job site in the morning there's nothing, but at the end of the day he can see something of a wall up. After all that labour he can see something happened and it makes

him feel like he's produced something. But with ministry we can build for weeks and months and we can't see the fruit and often we're just hoping that we hit it right.

That's part of ministry and leadership. But you can't live there all the time and wondering if you're going to hit it one day. God is not gracious if he tells us to constantly be wondering. So we have to ask if there's some measure in Scripture that helps us identify what makes a great church.

In the book of Revelation Jesus commends and addresses issues in churches. So the Bible does provide some measuring tools for our churches.

Every one of us will not be thanked by God for growing our church when we get to heaven. Why? Because you can't grow your church and if you can, it's not His church. God brings the growth.

The obsession with success today says we produce the growth and we're doing it. But when Jesus addresses those seven churches He doesn't mention their size. Why? It's not up to the leader to grow that church. You don't grow your church.

So this isn't about small churches or that sort of thing. This can't be your obsession any more. There are things we do that stops growth but ultimately we can't grow it so don't try and don't make this your obsession. It's so easy to slip into this model of trying to prove your success and making it about how many people show up at your meetings. It's not about people showing up, it's about what you're doing with what you've been given.

The growth is in His hands. I believe in Church growth but let's not sell out but rather advance the Gospel of the Kingdom, for the King.

Looking at Colossians

Colossians 1 (NIV)

1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

2 To God's holy people in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters[a] in Christ:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father.[b]

Thanksgiving and Prayer

3 We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, 4 because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people— 5 the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel 6 that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace. 7 You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, 8 and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.

9 For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, 10 so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, 11 being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, 12 and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. 13 For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Paul thanks God for this church that seems to be a great church. Paul wasn't there and when he heard what was happening he commended them for their love for all the saints, their faith in Christ and their love in the Spirit.

We've got to know that what we're doing is what God has called us to do. There's something about the fruit we see here that's relevant for church growth as this was a church the Bible commends. This may be different to what you're hearing but let's go on this journey together.

Let's make sure that what we're giving our attention to is truly what the Lord is calling us to. There's no question you're going to heaven, because you know Jesus and that's it. But can you imagine getting there one day and hearing that everything you gave your life to was insignificant. Let's go back to the Word and see what the churches were commended for and embrace those things.

1. This was a church that was bearing fruit

There seemed to be some fruitfulness here. Paul commends them for their faith in Jesus.

We have emphasised Jesus as He is important, but what's happening at your church? Would Jesus commend our churches because our priority is our faith in Him? I'm not just referring to saving faith but the life we live, which is about Jesus, the central theme and focus.

It's amazing how many people have faith in the Church and their leaders and this is all important, but it's not where your faith should lie. How many people even have faith in faith? But we have to work hard in pointing people to Jesus as their faith then won't rest in man but in the One who does not disappoint and whose Kingdom will not end.

1 Thessalonians 1:3 says this:

We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

You can see in Colossians 1: 5 (above) and in this verse that their hope was in Jesus, not in Paul. How many of you want your church to end when you go? The only one who will stay when you go is Jesus. The most consistent person who is unchanging and is always there is Jesus. So we better make sure our faith is always in Jesus.

This nation is full of Christians who hate the Church because they put their faith in the Church or a pastor. If we don't stop that we will keep perpetuating the problem. We must point people to Jesus.

Our facilities and ministries do not make a great church. But if Jesus is the central theme and focus – not just for the leaders but for all – then that's what makes a great church. We have a priority to point people to Jesus not sometimes but all the time. We are going to begin to end if we stop pointing people to Jesus.

2. Passion

It's good that we are passionate about doing things together but Paul commends these people for their love of the saints. That's a sign of a church that's great. We don't just love the world but we love the people in our church – we celebrate the saints in our church; we get along.

If you love the work but you don't like the people you're called to do the work with, your team will be dysfunctional. We must have a passion for the saints. Not that we love the Church more than Jesus but we have to love the Church. Our focus on the world cannot

be stopped but how do we win the world if we don't love each other? By our love for one another the world will know we are His disciples.

I've met too many people that hate the Church and yet say they're all about the Kingdom. We can't forget the Church. The Church is the agency in which this Kingdom comes. So we better love the Church. I even know people who like to travel because they don't like being in their local churches. There's a problem.

I've been challenged that Jesus is building His Church. Would Jesus send people to people who don't love people? It doesn't matter how good our programmes are we have to value the individual; not just the sinner but the saint too.

The Bible is full of these truths of the "one anothers". That's church. So look at the love in your church.

3. Hope for the future

In verse 5 in Colossians 1 (above) Paul talks of hope for the future. We are a people who believe in a promise of the future. As we listen to the people we're leading we need to ask if there's something of a dreaming of a future together.

Don't underestimate the power of hope. We need to trust and believe for an incredible future. I'm nervous when the visionaries are happy. There are greater things we're trusting God for. There are greater things yet to be done. We need to be walking in absolute conviction that our greater days are ahead, even though we've had great days in the past.

Do you believe this? That's a sign of a great church. There's no future in history. You can never underestimate the power of what's to come. We have new people coming into our churches that are happy about our history but want to know about our future.

4. God's grace and perspective

In verse 6 in Colossians 1 (above) Paul talks about understanding God's grace. I love the emphasis that comes through. Whenever we understand Jesus we understand grace.

I'm concerned about the misunderstanding of grace. Paul was able to commend this church for their understanding of grace. The best way to understand grace is to live in grace. Many of those who are great grace preachers seem to extend the least grace to others in situations. Their understanding is brilliant but they don't know how to live in it.

When you're living in grace you can extend grace. It's such a touchy subject when it shouldn't be – it's liberating, if we just preach it like Jesus preached it.

Grace saves us. I believe in justification, that God looks at us just as if we never sinned. I also believe that grace sanctifies us – Jesus speaks of grace being a process and we all know we're not like Jesus now.

If you only preach sanctification you kill people. If you only preach justification you liberate them to do whatever they want. We need grace to ring out from our churches and cities and we need to walk in grace to reach the world.

If you want to be commended for being a healthy church, get to a true understanding of grace. But not where you just preach it but where you can live it. When you look at your local church you should see people who are liberated.

We need to have an understanding from Scripture and not just a good book. It's great that we have access to a lot of information these days and can tap into teachers across the world, but it's dangerous as we know nothing about them. We just know their message. We also need to know the context of their ministry as some of them are ministering in a legalistic context.

5. Servant leaders – a pattern

Colossians 1: 7 (above) talks about servant leaders. There's a pattern we can see in this. Great leaders make for a great church.

God planned that in His Church leaders should lead God's people. He has put people in place and entrusted them. There is something of leadership and great leaders that help churches to be great. Not dictators but people who have understood that these are God's people. We don't whip or coerce the people. We lead them into an inheritance not by what we preach but by how we live. Paul commended Epaphras as he was a good leader and lived what he taught.

I still believe elders are chosen and called by God. So we better hear God before we release elders as they have been given the highest human governing authority in the local church.

I believe elders are not just great shepherds, as important as that is. First they have a responsibility to guard the Gospel of the kingdom before they take care of the sheep. They

must please God first before the people. I've seen many churches in a mess because pastors are pleasing the people. Our message cannot be changed to suit the crowd. We can't water down this message – we pastors are going to stand before God and give an account to Him for our people. We're not giving an account to our people for God.

Don't look at how many people you have in your church but look at how well your people are. This is what we are going to stand for – this is what it means to be a great church in God's eyes.

Ezekiel 34 is a job description for leaders. We have to talk about the sheep and love them because that's the responsibility of a great leader. Some say they're in ministry but don't love people. Go find another Kingdom. This is about people loving people.

Visionary elders – you don't have a team if you're the guy who is going to do it all. We have different roles and I understand that, but we cannot have the visionary being the hit man. You have a team around you to help you sort out the problems. Most of them can probably handle it better. Does that mean you avoid conflict? No, it just means you're not the guy who's always shooting people and getting shot at.

We're all leading the mission together. We have a team around us who are leading with us, not watching us lead. I don't want karaoke elders who sing my song! I want them to sing their song and I want to see it fit in with the song we all sing. That's what makes a healthy church.

Leadership isn't about keeping people happy but keeping them moving. Which pretty much makes them unhappy. Leadership isn't to get something out of people but rather to invest in people. Delegate the work to the right people so they can do a better job.

Leadership is also not about what we're against but rather what we're for. It isn't to model perfection but rather to admit mistakes and shortcomings. Let's be real. People can't see you as the guru who's perfect, that's not a healthy church.

Leadership isn't to tear people down but build them up. It isn't to wish for more time but rather to use our time wisely. It isn't to be envious but rather to be a student of what God is doing somewhere else. Leadership isn't to restrain people but rather to work with them to figure out what God has called them to.

6. Plurality

We work as team. We must have team. It's God's plan. He doesn't want you on your own, he wants you to build team.

I've had the privilege of inheriting team and starting team. And there are some challenges we face with team. It's important that those on your team don't just have the calling and character but also that there is chemistry when they come on to your team.

The thing is, can you work together? There are issues when we can't work together. Chemistry is an important thing in building teams. You need to love the people you do the work with. You don't want to arm-wrestle, you don't want yes or no men, you want people who are on board that are willing to carry it rather than fight on the road. We're spending our lives dealing with issues in eldership teams because the chemistry is not there.

Don't use the pulpit to address and attack your team. I've been under some of that leadership and it destroyed me. You keep wondering if he's talking to you or not. Liberate them. Let there be no suspicion.

There's strength in team. We have a glorious future together. Set your team free and watch how God sends you guys to do amazing things together.

Also, we need communication. This is the most destroying thing as a team grows. When you don't communicate people get hurt, offended, left out and so on. We often think something and then hold people accountable for what we thought. But we have to say it! You can't over-communicate as we go forward in our inheritance.

We need teams liberated so we can see great churches. And we need creativity on our teams.

Also, we need cheerers not complainers. Not cheer-leaders but people who are on board.

Teams that worship together stay together. We're building for long-term. When the eldership is healthy the church is healthy. You've got to make time for worship if you're serious about being a great church. Get away together and have fun and not talk church and issues. You'll fix those issues by honouring God.

7. Prayer

If you don't believe in prayer you've lost an understanding of eternity. Prayer is not a duty, it's a necessity. A church that prays is powerful and prayer in a church is a sign of a great

church even in the New Covenant.

Make your prayer meetings a priority. It's important for a church to flourish. We were told prayer doesn't work in America. That's why the nation's struggling and the Church is powerless. Get together and pray – it works.

8. Producing transformational disciples

That's what this church in Colossians was known for – a people who had changed. I believe that Paul understood something of the return of Christ that got people to live as transformed disciples. We've made this doctrine of the return of Christ mystical and weird but Paul used it in every chapter in 1 Thessalonians to transform those leaders and followers to understand who they were and live with eternity in their hearts.

I want the evidence of salvation in people's lives. It's not salvation when people put their hands up but nothing changes.

In chapter 2 of 1 Thessalonians, Paul uses the return of Christ as the motivation for evangelism. Evangelism doesn't just require an understanding of the value of people but an understanding that Jesus is coming back. And so we better tell people about Jesus.

Paul then used this doctrine for Christian growth in Chapter 3, to comfort people who are struggling. Churches would be more comforted if they understood the return of Christ and the fact that he's coming back soon.

Then Paul uses the return of Christ to help mature people to live a blameless life.

9. Presence of God

This guarantees success. Not when it's just talked about but when it's demonstrated. God's heart for our churches is that we walk in this and this is evidence that God is with us. Remember when Moses said to God that His presence must go with them? His presence distinguishes us from others.

What's a key and measure of a great church? The presence of God; the anointing. Acts 10:38 says this:

“...how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil,

because God was with him.”

Jesus went about doing good and so forth because God was with him. That's what God wants from the church you're leading – He wants people to know He is with you. He wants to be there. This is a season of demonstrating in our local churches that Jesus is alive and well.

10. Pioneering

This gospel is producing fruit wherever it goes. It's so easy to settle in things when it's going well. I can't go back to the church I'm leading after this week and get back to the rhythm I had before I came here. Friends, it's time to take new territory. God's done things in us and gripped our hearts. It's a fruitful season. Pioneering is a sign of a healthy church.

Prominence and significance

There is no insignificant church in God's eyes. Pastors you need to hear that. You are as significant in God's eyes if you have three as those with three thousand. And you've just got to settle that.

There's a big difference between prominence and significance. In God's eyes, size does not matter, it's where you are and what you're doing and if God's called you there you're as significant as anyone else.

All growth is seasonal. We're trusting for growth at every level but when you can't see it, don't close down, don't question what you're doing. God's in what you're doing and you're significant in His eyes.

Big is not better; healthy is better and stronger is better. The city you're in is significant. I commend you for where you're at because God put you there. You are significant in the eyes of the Lord and that should matter most. Who cares what others think? God put you there and in eternity you're going to matter. Let the pressure come off you and be free to be who God called you to be. And in God's eyes you're magnificent and He put you there and you're a gift to that city and your church will flourish.

It's a flourishing season. Stay the course, don't try the tricks, stay true to the call. God is watching over His church and His word and He loves the Church and this city and this nation and the regions. That's why we're here.

It's go-time

Measure your success and church according to Scripture. We need more churches to be planted. This is a season of taking ground and territories. Some of you who have planted need to hear God saying it's time to plant again. It's time to let people go in your church – send them, commission them, celebrate them. It's church planting season. Don't go out with all the books but go out with the Bible and go after those things the Scriptures say is success.

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