



Looking Inwards (15 mins)

Caring For Each Other

*Reflecting on your life at the moment, is there anything you would like to share with other members of your home group which you feel is appropriate (this is an **opportunity to share**, not something you have to do, however, 'it's the sharing that enables the caring!') for:*

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?



Looking Outwards (15 mins)

Concern For Others

*Is there anything concerning someone in your: family; circle of friends; neighbours; or church, which you would like to share (please be careful not to pass on anything that is **confidential** or which you think the person/people concerned would not wish to be shared) for:*

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?



HG29: Annual General Meeting

How Do We Become A Healthy Church?

1 Corinthians 12

Home Group Study Notes

25th April 2010 - Revd Paul A. Carr

Introduction: Some of you may suggest that we are, already, a healthy church and have no need to worry; and some of you may admit, as Brian did a couple of weeks ago, and as painful as that was, that we are a church that is dying. I'm sure we all have our thoughts as to where we might be and why that might be. There's no doubt that a healthy church is the key to church growth. All living things grow if they're healthy. As parents we don't have to force our children to grow. They grow naturally. As long as we remove the hindrances, such as poor nutrition, their growth is usually automatic. If our children do not grow, something is wrong and each of us would do whatever it takes to discover the reason and put it right. The same principle is true for the church.

The Importance of Balance: What then is the secret of church health? It's *balance!* God is a God of balance. He created our world to be perfectly balanced. It's at just the right angle in its axis to support life. It rotates at a speed that minimizes vibration. If earth were just a little closer to the sun, we'd burn up and, if it were just a few miles further away from the sun, we'd freeze to death. God created human beings to be perfectly balanced. Our body has nine different systems (circulatory, respiratory, digestive, skeletal, etc.). When these systems are all in balance, it produces health. It's God's desire that His church should also be perfectly balanced too – that's what the passage from 1 Corinthians 12 teaches, doesn't it? When the Body of Jesus (the church) becomes unbalanced, things start to go wrong and, it seems to me, that effective growth only occurs when everything is brought into balance and, because we are imperfect, it *does not* happen naturally: it's something we must continually strive to correct.

We are not a business, though we have a responsibility to be good stewards of all that God has given us. We are not an organisation, though it is true that we want to be able to manage, effectively, our church structures. Our reading from 1 Corinthians 12 reminds us that we are a living organism because we serve a living Saviour. It's natural for an organism to grow. If a church is not growing, just as in nature, it's dying. There's no middle ground. I want to suggest five areas of church life which are worth considering if we are going to become the healthy, well balanced, church that we desire to be, intertwined with some Biblical principles of what, I believe, church membership entails. The bookmark I've given you outlines 10 spiritual principles - though I won't be highlighting everyone of these, we looked at some of these on Commitment Sunday - of what the Bible teaches about church membership.

1) Healthy Church Grows Warmer through Fellowship: We've had some great times together in the past twelve months, haven't we? Times when the Lord has been present with us in wonderful and powerful ways. There's no doubt that the atmosphere, in church in recent times, has been quite dynamic and we seem to be engaging more passionately and enthusiastically as we sing God's praises - perhaps 'the joy of the Lord, is becoming our strength'.



How I wish, along with many of you, that we could worship as we did on Easter Sunday, and with Teen Challenge, every week. Just imagine how exciting and encouraging and uplifting that would be to us and any visitors who worship with us? However, we should never allow ourselves to become complacent because, as we readily admitted at the ministry Action Group on Monday, there are times when it hasn't been so good. The not-so-good times have so much to do with our relationship with God as much as the style of music and sense of occasion. I remember a cartoon I saw many years ago which simply said: "*Feeling away from God lately? Guess who moved?*"

But it's not only about Sundays. A healthy church grows warmer through fellowship when Christians meet together during the week. I'd want to suggest that if you are not doing so then you are actually stunting your growth as a Christian. And so, just as those first disciples: *Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another ...* Hebrews 10:25.

Home groups provide a great opportunity for church members to grow in their faith and to share fellowship with other Christians. I believe successful house groups are an essential part of: building a Christian community; establishing meaningful relationships; and provide the freedom and safety to encourage and develop individual gifting; and are an effective platform for evangelism and pastoral care. The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Thessalonian church, wrote: *May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other, and for everyone else ...* 1 Thessalonians 3:12 (Read also 1 John 3:11-24 & 1 John 4:7-21). Loving each other is a gospel imperative. *Jesus said: a new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.* John 13:34-35 (Romans 14:19; Ephesians 4:29).

Is that true of us here at Emmanuel? Does the community of Billericay know we are Christians by our love? How are we known? What is our reputation? As I suggested to the couples at our marriage preparation evenings; Love is not an emotion, it is an act of will. Love is a verb; it is a doing word. Love is intentional. Sometimes it seems to me as though our faith is *functional* rather than *generous*. We seem to struggle so much in our relationships with each other and this effects our welcome to the stranger and the bruised reeds in our community.

2) A Healthy Church Grows Deeper through Discipleship: I think most of you are aware of how highly I place preaching/teaching as the foundation for our faith and that it shapes our Christian discipleship. It's encouraging to know that many of you are benefiting from **all** the preaching that we've enjoyed here at Emmanuel (especially the home group hand outs) which enables you to be encouraged, strengthened and challenged in your daily walk with the Lord.

And, whilst all of us who preach, take it very seriously indeed, and will do all that we can to be faithful to the text and to encourage and invigorate your faith, the issue of discipleship is also a personal one. We can't do it all for you – nor should we. Each one of us should take responsibility for sustaining our own faith: *All scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.* 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

3) A Healthy Church Grows Broader through Ministry: I believe we're all called to minister, albeit in different ways and that all of us have a strategic role to fulfil in the ministry of the church. Again, this was highlighted in our reading from 1 Corinthians 12. *Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace ...* 1 Peter 4:10 (Read also 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4:11-12).

4: Sometimes, it seems as though as mission initiatives are a 'waste' of time and energy, however, 'The Engel Scale' is a helpful tool in enabling us to understand the stages of a person's 'journey of faith.' Consider where a family member or colleague might be on this scale? Where would those who attend midweek church activities be? How can we help them move from -10 to -5?

5: Corporate prayer should undergird all we do as a church family, yet it continues to be a fringe activity. Why might this be so? What can be done to encourage a greater commitment to prayer? Should the format of First Priority be changed? What might you be able to do to help make a difference?

6: Spend some time discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the: '*What does it mean to be an Active Church Member*' book mark. In what ways might this be a fair (or not, as the case may be) summary, of church membership? What would be a barrier to you to making a covenant agreement with the Lord on this issue?



Is there anything you most want to put into practice as a result of this study?



Looking Upwards (40 mins) *Bible Study*

Read through the text for this study, 1 Corinthians 12, and any references given below, alongside those in the sermon notes, then answer the following questions - you may find it helpful to read through the sermon notes as you do so. Discuss your answers with your Home Group.

1: Paul suggested that a healthy church is a balanced church and offered five suggestions as to how we can measure our health. Looking at those five suggestions, is Emmanuel, in your opinion, a healthy church? Why? Why not? In what areas might we be healthy and/or unhealthy? What area of church life concerns you the most?

2: Are you as committed to 'growing warmer through fellowship' as you could be? If not, what, for you, are the hindrances? How might your home group or the wider church, help you to 'grow warmer'?

3: Paul believes that we are all called to minister yet, in a church of over 140 regular attendees; we still struggle to find volunteers willing to serve. Why might this be? Could it be, as Charles Swindoll argues, that: *Our problem is not a lack of potential, but rather a lack of perseverance.*

I'm committed, along with the church council, especially through our Action Groups, to enable each one of you to reach your full potential as an active disciple of Jesus. There's a place for each of you to develop your gifts and talents within the ongoing life of Emmanuel and the wider church community. But so often, it comes down, not to a lack of opportunities, but a lack of willingness to serve - and this is so true in recent times, especially when we consider the areas of church life where we are struggling to find volunteers. Charles Swindoll, a favourite Christian author of mine, suggests that: *Our problem is not a lack of potential, but rather a lack of perseverance.*

4) A Healthy Church Grows Larger through Mission: The church was instigated by Jesus to be mission orientated, of reaching out with God's love to those who are alienated and ostracized and struggling with life in our society and to draw them to the Lord through our acceptance and our love for them. I know the introduction if the Mission Focus Sunday's have met with quite a bit of opposition, but this is a biblical imperative and one area of church life where we have much work to do, both in our attitude towards Mission, home and abroad, as well as the way we support and value mission, and this was supported by the view of the Evangelism Action Group which met on Tuesday.

According to Canon Robert Warren, a former Archbishop's advisor on Evangelism, mission should: ... *dominate the life and worship of a church.* Jesus never instituted the church to perpetuate a social club for Christians to be a holy huddle, he commanded us to make disciples. We are called to live in a wider community than the church community. It's so easy to become caught up in the ghetto of the church, with our friendships and orientation so rooted in church life that we have no time to establish friendships outside.

The way the Christian church will grow in the future is not the way it has grown in the past. Historically, the church sustained itself by internal growth, that is through the 100's of children who attended Sunday school; grew up in the church and passed their faith onto the next generation. On that basis, we do not have much of a next generation at Emmanuel do we? In fact, you could say that the future looks pretty bleak, with 10-15 years of life left at best.

And so we need to engage with a different, though not new, way of bringing people to faith in Jesus. And that is through each and every one of us building relationships. I wonder, how many friends do you have who are not yet Christians? When was the last time you invited someone to a Service; Event; Alpha Course? When was the last time you shared your faith with a stranger? *Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have, 1 Peter 3:15. Go out to the roads and the country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full. Luke 14:23.*

I recognise that it isn't always easy, and it isn't always easy to see where we fit in the bigger picture. We say, I did this once and it didn't work, so my words were wasted. We held a holiday club, but the children never came back. I invited someone to a special event but never returned. And we use all of these as excuses/reasons not to do anything again. But it's worth bearing in mind the evidence which suggests that people need to hear the 'gospel' in several different settings before they will consider becoming a Christian. I want to bring your attention to something called the Engel Scale (see this on page 5). It's a scale which was developed by James Engel who was a missionary in Thailand for many years and it helps us to understand where folk might be on their spiritual journey and to see our mission to them as being links in the chain. So, just for a few moments, consider where a family member or colleague might be on this scale?

Where would those who attend midweek church activities be? How can we help them move from -10 to -5? By inviting folk along to special services and events such as; Alpha; Concerts; Family Craft Afternoon etc.,

This is why special events are so important in the life of the church and I can't understand that some of you avoid our special services such as our Baptism service; Remembrance Sunday; Back to Church Sunday; Christmas Services. If you are not going to attend, then you can't invite someone to come with you, and if you don't invite someone to come with you, then you will never give folk the opportunity to find Jesus on their journey of faith. But if Jesus has touched your heart and changed your life, is it too much to be inconvenienced so that someone else can find his love for themselves?

I always remember the words of William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, to the author Rudyard Kipling, who had expressed his dislike of tambourines: *Young man, if I thought I could win one more soul for Christ by standing on my head and beating a tambourine with my feet I would learn how to do it.*

5) A Healthy Church Grows Stronger through Prayer: I'm not suggesting for one moment that people are not praying – because I know you are and I have greatly appreciated the wonderful prayers of all those who lead our intercessions and your prayers for myself, Paula, Ben and Annabel. It's not been an easy two years here and there's no doubt that I/we have been sustained by your prayers – as have many others in our church family. So I'm not talking about a lack of prayer. However, if our corporate prayer life is anything to go by, then we can't claim to be a healthy church. In fact, on current levels of our commitment, I'd say we're about ready to receive the last rites! If we are not praying and seeking God's blessing and anointing on what we do then we are fighting a losing battle. I've said this many times before and I don't know what I, or Pauline, or anyone else can do or say to enable each of you to recognise/grasp the vital importance of praying together as a church family.

Church life is organised so there's no clash with First Priority. How many of you have attended even one prayer meeting in the past year? It must become central to what we do. Let's make prayer our priority, please! Can I encourage you to: ... *always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually 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.* 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3. There's no doubt that our commitment to prayer must improve if we want to be a healthy church. Prayer must be the highest on the list of our priorities because if we want God to move in a mighty way amongst us then a commitment to prayer is an absolute must.

Conclusion: As a preacher, I am accustomed to publicly sharing things that others may not get the chance to, or even want to. So please allow me to share some personal reflections. Do you wonder where we are heading? So do I! Do you want to know what the Lord has planned for the year ahead? So do I! Do you not like knowing the answers to all the questions you have? Neither do I! But there are, it seems to me, two options. Either I have got it all worked out, and all I need is your submission to my plan. Or we accept that the only one who knows is actually Jesus, and we can trust Him to bless our efforts, wisdom and faith as we move forward, together, step by step.

Strategies and programmes are all well and good, but they do not resolve all the issues in our church: the solution rests with each and every one of us. Someone once asked: *"Are we Christians Undertakers or Midwives?"* Are we burying faith or bringing faith to life? The choices we make will determine what we will become. So, as we look forward to the year ahead, let us lift the name of Jesus high in our lives, with a renewed offering of ourselves in service to Him. Let us choose to be a balanced and healthy church who are committed to: Growing warmer through fellowship; Growing deeper through discipleship; Growing broader through ministry; Growing larger through mission; Growing stronger through prayer.

The Engel Scale

