



CHURCH 101 **Part V: Staying Healthy**

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This is our very last week in our official study of the church. I hope it has been helpful and clarifying as to who the church is, what New Day is about and how that impacts your life.

There is so much about the church that could still be said, and we will revisit the subject often. For this series, I wanted to end up talking about being a healthy church.

A few weeks ago, I was talking with someone about a crisis that was happening in another church. The other person commented, "I guess it's only a matter of time until we have to deal with that here at New Day." It was a depressing thought, although there is undoubtedly some truth to it.

Praise God that so far, we've had a relatively healthy infancy as a church. We haven't had any major power struggles yet. There really hasn't been any politicking going on. No major fights happening, no money crisis. But is that just because we're new? Is it just that our health hasn't been tested yet?

In the last three years, I have talked with many of you about your previous church experiences. There have been so many stories of hurts and abuses and just plain strangeness that it seems like there are more unhealthy churches than healthy ones out there. And they couldn't have all started out that way. The majority probably start out on a strong note. What happened? And is it only a matter of time until it happens at New Day as well?

There undoubtedly will be crisis points. While were in Minnesota, we drove past a terrible car accident on the freeway. We found out later that it had been a van full of people who were driving to the airport to go on a mission trip to the Ukraine. Four of the people were killed instantly. The group was from a little church about our size that is part of the same affiliation of churches we are. We later drove past the church while the funeral was going on, and it looked as if the entire town had turned out.

An event like that will shape that church for years and years to come. Tragedies are unpredictable and unavoidable. But a crisis like that isn't what determines the health of the church. As odd as it sounds, churches can be very healthy even in the midst of death or physical illnesses or accidents that happen to its members.

The difficulties of life are not what define the health of a church – the way the church chooses to deal with those difficulties does. And as I said a minute ago, the majority of churches seem to struggle at some point in their life span. There’s an old saying that you’re never going to find the perfect church. And if you do, don’t join it – you’ll ruin it! Is it the inevitable fate of all churches to end up unhealthy?

It would be naïve of me to say that New Day is immune to the threat. We’re not under the illusion that we’re building a perfect church that won’t have any problems. But I believe there are some strategies we can adopt as a church that can help us avoid some of the deepest potholes.

Paul wrote a letter to the church in Philippi, encouraging them to be a healthy church. He identifies several “health threats” to the church and then suggests some remedies.

Philippians 4:2-20

I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.

Health threat: Tunnel vision

Remedy: New Glasses

Remember girl fights in grade school? Those were the ones everybody wanted to watch, because you could usually count on some good hair pulling and scratching. They were far more interesting than the boy fights, maybe because they were so much more rare.

There was a girl fight going on in this church, and it wasn’t very pretty. Neither one of them was backing down. Paul doesn’t like it and he steps in like the playground teacher to break it up. He begs them: Please Euodia. Please Syntyche. Stop fighting.

We don’t know the details of the conflict. We just know that it must have been a pretty serious disagreement for Paul to call them both by name in his letter and ask them to knock it off. Their rift was disrupting the life of the church.

Each woman had a perspective, or a point of view that they didn’t want to give up. And because they were so committed to their own way of thinking, they were getting tunnel vision and losing sight of the bigger picture.

Paul doesn’t side with either woman. He doesn’t ask for clarification on the dispute and say, “Okay, tell me all the details and we’ll try to reach a compromise.” He doesn’t care what the fight was about or who was right. Whatever the argument was, it was secondary

to more important things, and Paul's goal is to get them back to thinking about what really matters, to look through new glasses and see the bigger vision.

Rather than get bogged down in discussing the details of the debate, Paul redirects everybody to some important facts:

1. ***There's only one team.*** Paul says that both women had contended at his side for the cause of the gospel. They shared a common goal and had suffered together for it at one time. Paul calls them back to that. No matter how big their fight, they had to remember that they were both there to reach more people who needed the message of hope found in Jesus. There was something larger that united them more than the issue that divided them.
2. ***There's a whole lot of good.*** Paul counts the women among those whose names were written in the book of life. God has given each of them forgiveness. They have this incredible gift to be thankful for. Paul repeated his call to rejoice twice.
3. ***There's a world watching.*** Paul asks them to let their gentleness be evident to all. The word for gentleness there could also be translated as patience. Euodia and Syntyche needed to learn to put up with each other. The way they chose to handle a disagreement was being watched, and it could either be a tool that would point people to Christ, or it could be a fight like anybody else's that would just be sad and ugly.
4. ***The Lord is near.*** Whether you interpret near as meaning "The Lord is coming back soon" or "The Lord is right here with us" doesn't really matter. The effect is the same. Attitudes shift and perspective changes when you take into account Jesus being near. Arguments seem more petty and less important.

I have seen enough church fights in my life to know that keeping perspectives in perspective is much easier said than done. Nobody likes to back down. We always want the other person to change first. I once attended a church where the argument between some people was so old, I didn't even know what had triggered the fight. But it had gone on for years and years, and as it went unchecked, camps began to form around each party until there was an unspoken divide in the church that you could sense but not quite put your finger on.

People would rather walk away from a church or work around one person in a church than just deal with an issue head on. And when we do that, the tension comes out sideways in all kinds of unhealthy patterns. We shut down our feelings. We don't speak what we mean. We bottle up resentment and bitterness about the other person.

Paul knew human nature, and he knew that these two women were not likely to patch things up on their own. So he brought the argument out of the dark and into public discussion. And he asked the people around them to step in and help them.

When we detect an unhealthy rift between two other people in the church, we have a responsibility to help them. When somebody complains to you about somebody else, you have the responsibility to call them on it and not just let it pass. When we see an

unthoughtful action or hear a negative comment, we can say something on the spot. All these can help maintain the health of the church.

Health threat: High stress

Remedy: Deep knee bends

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

Paul tells the church at Philippi not to be anxious or worry. When they're feeling stressed out, he says they should hit their knees and pray. When they do that, the cause for worry may not go away, but God will bring a peace that will ease the stress. Paul isn't saying we should pretend things don't make us worry – that wouldn't be healthy either. He's saying we shouldn't keep that worry to ourselves but should give it over to God.

I've heard that message many times before, always in the context of applying it personally. But I've never really thought of it in terms of church stress – that as a group we need to be aware of the dangers of anxiety. What does it look like for a whole church to worry? I vividly remember being in a church one time and having the distinct impression that the whole congregation was living under a cloud of fear. A church can be afraid of communicating truth to one another. A church can be afraid of hurting anyone's feelings. A church can be afraid it doesn't have the resources or manpower to do the job. A church can also be afraid of God doing something that might be uncomfortable.

And Paul says we should take those fears and turn them into a cry to God for help. But we get it in our heads that there are more direct ways to address our anxiety. We put plans together and strategize and work harder, which in the end can create a new kind of anxiety and stress. My sister was involved in one church that fed on stress and had developed a culture where all the staff people were running on adrenaline all the time, always feeling a little bit anxious. Over the long haul that will take its toll on the health of a church.

Several of you have read Jim Cymbal's book, *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*, which is all about learning to pray as a congregation. Jim tells a great story of when his daughter Chrissy was really struggling. She had drawn away from her parents and away from God, to the point where she wasn't living at home anymore and most of the time they didn't know where she was. Jim was a wreck. He would drive to church on Sunday mornings and cry for the 25 minutes it took him to get there. He wasn't sure how he would get up in front

of everybody, but he didn't want to burden the church by asking them to pray for him. His wife was desperate to move to get their other two children away from New York City where they lived. Jim said they were praying, but really he was still trying to force something to happen with Chrissy himself, and it was making the situation worse. He realized that God wanted him to obey the verse he had been preaching:

Call upon me in the day of trouble, and I will answer you.

Months went by, and he began to pray in earnest for his daughter. One night he was leading a prayer meeting in church, when an usher passed him a note from a young woman in the congregation that said: Pastor Cymbala, I feel impressed that we should stop the meeting and all pray for your daughter.

That's what they did, and they took it seriously. He said it was like being in a labor and delivery room, where people were groaning to God, taking all his anxiety and fears to God and petitioning him just like Paul said to do. Afterwards, Jim had a peace that God was going to take care of it. He went home and told his wife that the struggle was over.

Thirty two hours later, a knock came on the door, and it was Chrissy. She was crying and apologizing, and she said "Who was praying for me Tuesday night?" It turned out that the night of the prayer meeting, God had given her this dream of a bottomless pit that she was about to fall into and it scared her to death. But she also felt he was wrapping his arms around her and keeping her from falling any further.

And she said, "Daddy, tell me the truth – who was praying for me Tuesday night?"

Call upon me in the day of trouble, and I will answer you. A healthy church is one that stays on its knees.

Health threat: Obsession with appearance
Remedy: Turning weak features into gifts

I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles.

Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter. The Philippians had gathered up a collection and sent him some support. What a humbling position for Paul to be in. Here he is, one of the more famous apostles, having to accept charity from the very people who looked up to him. He didn't appear very strong in that situation.

All too often, church people can have an unhealthy obsession with appearances. We want so badly to put on a good show for people. I think I told you before about the morning I went to lead worship at another church and I was not in the right frame of mind for it. Before the service started, I met with the pastors for prayer and just kind of blurted out in my prayer how I was feeling. Nobody in the room was quite sure what to do with what I said, but as we were going into the service, one of them turned to me and said, “Just remember – a smile covers over a multitude of sins.” It was as if to say, “Just pretend everything is fine even though it isn’t and it will all be good.”

But look at Paul here. He could have felt ashamed, but instead he talks about how genuinely happy he is. Because his situation created an opportunity. His position of weakness and helplessness gave the church in Philippi the chance to exercise some spiritual muscle and show concern for him in a tangible way. He saw that his weakness was really a gift.

Paul Scazzerro wrote an outstanding book called “The Emotionally Healthy Church.” In it, he tells the story of a water carrier in India. This water carrier had two jars that hung down from a pole he carried across his shoulders. One of the jars was perfect, but the other one was cracked and had a hole in it.

Every day the water carrier would trek down the path with his jars to collect water from the river, and every day by the time he got back home, the perfect jar was full, but the cracked jar only was half full.

Well, the cracked pot started feeling bad about this, so he said to his owner, “I’m really sorry. I’m a failure as a jar. All these cracks in me mean you’re only getting half of what you should. You should find yourself another perfect jar, because I’m not good enough for this job.”

The water carrier said, “Come here. I want to show you something.” He took the pot to the path, and there along one side of the path were all these beautiful flowers. And the water carrier said, “I knew all along you were cracked. That’s why I planted all these flower seeds on this side of the path. You’ve been watering them every day.”

Becoming a pastor has been somewhat of a revelation for me, because the role let’s me get close to people’s brokenness like I never had before. And I’ve heard enough stories to conclude that we’re nothing more than a collection of cracked jars. There are no perfect ones. And that’s true of all churches.

There are two ways to respond to that realization. We can wish we were perfect and try to hide our flaws so nobody sees them. We can say, “Just smile and it will all be fine.” Or we can unhide. We can accept our weaknesses and own them, and ask God to use them as a chance for his grace to flow through and water some flowers.

This morning, some of you are wracked with shame because of your past failures. Some of you are frustrated by your own limitations or an inability to solve your own problems. Some of you have suffered such physical or spiritual or emotional abuse that you don't believe you can really be used of God. Maybe it's illness or a broken marriage or a dead-end job. I want to grab hold of each one of you and say, "God knows. He knows what you've been through. He knows what you've done. And he's chosen to put his treasure in your jar of clay because he loves you and knows he can do powerful things through you."

A church full of people who live like that isn't just a healthy church – it's an unstoppable one. That's a church that has learned to walk the way of the cross, a church that isn't obsessed with keeping up appearances, a church that has experienced God's power that can only be seen when we choose to admit and accept our own weakness.

Health threat: Dislocated arms

Remedy: Stop twisting them.

Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account.

As we said before, Paul was extremely happy that the Philippians thought of him and sent him a gift. But he goes out of his way here to say, "My interactions with you have not been about trying to get something from you. I wasn't looking for a gift."

I have a friend who makes me cringe every time he calls, because there is always an agenda. He will want to get together with me because he wants me to do something for him. But he won't come right out and say that up front, so we have to go through the motions of getting together for lunch or talking on the phone for a while before he gets around to asking whatever it is he's wanting to ask. And I always feel this pressure and uncomfortable feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Some churches get into an unhealthy pattern of subtle arm twisting and manipulation. Like the church that sent out several pieces of mail to its members one year, with every one ending up being an appeal for more money. That tells the congregation, "What we really value you for is your wallet." It can happen in recruiting for ministries or small groups as well, because it is easy to imply that God is the one calling them, when that may or may not be true.

It's really difficult to fight against that when the needs are great. When there is no obvious resource to fund or staff a ministry, it takes a tremendous amount of faith for a church to resist the temptation to use guilt or pressure tactics to squeeze the congregation into a response.

It takes an equal amount of courage for individuals to say “no” in the face of church pressure. Some of us can’t stand the thought of an unmet need, and so we volunteer for things way beyond our healthy limits. We secretly like to think we can be like God and solve the problem ourselves, and that feeds into the whole unhealthy situation.

Pete Scazzerro’s church moved away from using the arm twisting techniques, and he said, “Is it more difficult to get people to serve at New Life now than in previous years. Yes. Without shame, guilt, or pressure, people are free to say, ‘No, thank you.’ The result, however, is the quality of what we are doing is more loving. People are less cranky and cantankerous, and they tend to serve for a longer period of time because they are internally motivated...Perhaps most importantly, they feel loved and not used to build the church.”

Church should not leave people feeling used. If you ever get the feeling the only reason New Day wants you here is because you have something to offer, whether it is your time, your talents or your money, then we are experiencing a health crisis as a church. You are wanted here because Jesus loved you enough to die for you and we think you should know that. Period.

Health threat: An ingrown heart

Remedy: Keep a generous attitude.

I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Paul wraps things up by sharing with the Philippians how great their generosity is and how much God likes what he sees when we’re generous. And he reminds them that they don’t need to worry that they may have given away too much, because God will take care of their needs.

Many church health problems boil down to an ingrown heart – a focus only on what’s happening inside the church walls. Budgets are built around activities for church people only. Discussions and arguments are over internal issues that nobody on the outside would ever care about. The color of the carpet. The style of music chosen for Sundays. The length of the sermon. When I was little, there was an elderly man in church who would stand up when it was noon. If the pastor was still preaching, he would hold up his wrist watch and tap it.

Silly, sad things start to happen when all of a church’s energy is being consumed for its own benefit. To stay healthy, a church needs to look outside itself and practice generosity. When you’re engaged with the needs of the rest of the world, some of the needs within the church start to seem less significant.

We've begun discussing the potential for New Day to get involved in some short term mission projects, where we send a team somewhere for a week to serve in another part of the world. I was talking a little bit with Tom Parks about what our goals for that type of project should be, and without blinking he said, "That's easy. We send people out to revolutionize things at New Day when they get back home."

People who go other places to serve God will tell you when they get back that it had far more impact on them than they had on the people they went to help. God shapes our heart in healthy ways when we practice living generously.

Will New Day be able to stay healthy? That's my prayer. We're not perfect, and there are no doubt areas where we've already got issues. As Eugene Peterson said, "What do you expect when you get 100 sinners together?" Perfection isn't the point – adopting a healthy approach to church is.