

A BIBLICAL MODEL FOR THE WORK OF THE CHURCH

By Bob Young

What is a biblical model?

Much of the work in a local church is measured by church growth. The goal is growth. Growth is expected and programs and activities are judged by whether the church obtains the expected growth. An amazing thing in my observation is that the same expectation is not applied to the mission efforts of the local church. The contemporary church must rethink the work of the church and the evaluation of that work—both on the local front and in the mission field—by asking, “What is the biblical model?”

The biblical model is mutuality. In the New Testament, we find a very different image of the church than the model we know today. The early Christians were very active. They lived out their faith daily. We often find the phrase “one another”: love one another (John 13:34-35), encourage one another (Rom. 1:12), be devoted to one another (Rom. 12: 10-11), accept one another (Rom. 15: 7), admonish one another (Rom. 15:14), serve one another (Gal. 5: 13-14), bear with one another (Eph. 4: 2), help one another (Eph. 4:16), forgive one another (Eph. 4:32), submit to one another (Eph. 5: 21-22), forgive one another (Col. 3:13), teach and admonish one another (Col. 3:16), encourage each other (1 Thess. 4:18), and there are more. We build up one another, carry one another’s burdens, exhort one another, confess our faults to one another, pray for one another, weep with one another, and rejoice with one another.

The biblical model flattens church organizational structures. In the New Testament church, many of the tasks that are today routinely assigned to church leaders—elders, preachers, and deacons—were exercised by all believers mutually. This was possible because the church frequently met in smaller groups, because close relationships were developed, because the body functioned as a unit with every member involved, and because leaders were always in the process of developing more leaders. These factors worked together to build up the body and the faith of every believer. Thus, the body of Christ was edified and the church grew in gifts and grace. The modern church model seldom provides adequate space to exercise these biblical functions. The church has failed to practice “every member” ministry to its own detriment.

Two factors in the growth of the early church

Growth for the sake of numbers is not a sufficient goal. It is true that the early church grew explosively, but it did not grow by focusing on numbers. The growth came when two factors merged—the message and the ministry model the early church used. The first steps toward success in the work of the church today will come when the church commits to be a bearer of the message and to use the New Testament model of ministry.

The church or the mission work that does not proclaim the message cannot bring people to Jesus. There are many good things the church can do in following Jesus, but the one constant that must never be lost is seeking and saving the lost. Salvation is impossible with proclamation. When the church loses its message, it cannot function biblically—whether on the local front or on the mission field. An old three-fold model of church work that I have heard all my life is evangelism, edification, and benevolence. I like the simplicity of this statement: the church exists as an instrument to save people and keep them saved.

In the New Testament, ministry was shared. Only when the church returns to the New Testament philosophy of ministry can the church reach its full potential. This means mobilizing the saints to do the work of ministry. The activities of the New Testament church—evangelism, edification, fellowship, service, and worship—must characterize the lives of the members. These activities help mature and build up believers and lead to the edification of the church. As members develop their gifts discipline-making becomes a daily activity.

The church as the body of Christ

Think about the words of the song, “If We Are the Body”: “But if we are the body, why aren’t His arms reaching? Why aren’t His hands healing? Why aren’t His words teaching? And if we are the body, why aren’t His feet going? Why is His love not showing them there is a way?” (Mark Hall, Casting Crowns, 2003). Only when the church functions through the activity of every member is it genuinely the body of Christ. Loving God, loving one another, and loving neighbors is not something the corporate church can do—only individual Christians can live out this reality. The “one another” passages involve Christians—not the corporate church.

Is the church a living organism or an organization? One of the key differences between the early church we read about in the New Testament and the church model we see in a majority of the churches in the U.S. is the commitment to fellowship, serve, edify, and evangelize in smaller group settings. Mutuality—personal prayers for needs and concerns, specific conversations that seek God’s will in difficult times, carrying the burdens of others to the Lord—occurs best in personal settings. Where will we find the kind of relationships that help people experience every day the love of Jesus Christ? Where will we find the kind of relationships that bring people to Jesus through experiencing caring and love in tangible ways?

A biblical model for the church includes mutuality, a focus on the message, and shared ministry.