

Dear friend,

What is (are) the sign(s) that God is at work in the midst of a church? What is the evidence that God is present to bless the work of a church? While few would be so crass as to admit it, yet for many the primary evidence that God is at work in a church is growing attendance. If more people are showing up at Sunday worship or more people are “getting saved”, then it seems obvious that God is at work. (In one of the most recent “measurements” of church health the standard is a 10% conversion growth rate each year. That means for every one hundred people in attendance, ten people become Christians and join the church each year.)

There are other measurements of God’s blessing on a church. For some the number of healings or verifiable miracles is the evidence of God’s presence. Others look at the fervency and energy in the singing or praying for the sign of God’s involvement. Some people would examine the per capita giving in the church, while others would look for the church’s involvement in world missions. All of these things are important and are related; some more than others, to God’s work in a church. However, none of them are infallible measures of whether or not God is at work in and through a particular congregation.

I think this is an important question for us to ask at this time as we are going to begin building a sanctuary this month. We have witnessed significant numerical growth during the past six years. During the first four months of this year over \$100,000 was given to build this church. But are these the signs of God’s blessing upon us? Maybe they are and maybe they are not. (If growing membership and revenue were the marks of God’s blessing then we’d have to conclude that God is working in Sam’s Club more than most every church in the world!)

In Psalm 85 we are given the infallible sign that God is at work in a church. In vv. 1-3 the psalmist recalls God’s “restoring the fortunes of Jacob” at an earlier time. He then asks God to do it again. He asks God to withdraw his anger and to be gracious to his people. In vv. 6-7 he says, “Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you? Show us your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation.” The result of God’s reviving his people is that they rejoice in him. The mark that God is at work in a church is that the people in the church are growing in their delight in God. It doesn’t take a work of God to be delighted in a growing congregation, a growing budget or in putting up a new sanctuary. Delight in these things comes natural.

Jesus said as much to his disciples in Luke 10. He sent them out to preach the gospel, to heal and to cast out demons. They returned, we are told, rejoicing that the spirits submitted to them. In vv. 18 –20 Jesus tells them two things. First, the spirits submit to them because of him, not because of them. He has given them power over all the power of Satan. Their success in ministry is due to his grace, not their faith or goodness or anything else about them. Second, he tells them, “You are excited about the wrong thing. Don’t rejoice that the spirits submit to you, rather rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” Nothing is more amazing than when sinners love God, are delighted with God, rejoice in the prospect of living with God forever. There is no greater miracle, nor more powerful work of God than his work through Christ to reconcile a sinner to himself and to give them a heart that delights to be reconciled to him.

If we go back to the psalm again, the evidence of God's reviving power is that his people rejoice in him. What does that mean? What would it mean to say that a man rejoices in his new car? It would mean that the thought of his car fills him with happiness. It would mean that he spends time driving his new car and showing his new car off to his friends. It would mean that he invests time and money keeping his car clean and in good repair. His "rejoicing" in his car will produce all manner of emotions, thoughts and behaviors that reveal his delight. He will say no to many other good things in his life in order to spend time rejoicing in his car.

Here is a clear expression of our ambition for our families, our church and ourselves. We want God to revive us, to work in us and among us so that we individually and corporately rejoice in him. We are not aiming to rejoice in obedient children, loving spouses, healthy bodies, a growing congregation or a new sanctuary. We are asking God and yearning for him to so work among us that he becomes the center of our affections and the source of our joy. We want to rejoice in him more than sports fans rejoice in their teams, lovers rejoice in their partners, new home owners rejoice in their homes, new parents rejoice in their babies, healed people rejoice in their health. We know that this will only happen as a result of his "reviving" work. It is only by the Spirit of God, through the word of God that sinners like us will ever rejoice in God more than in anything else. I would urge you to make Psalm 85:6 your prayer and the prayer of your family that we might be a church where God is at work.

Seeking God's reviving Spirit,