

SPIRITUAL ANATOMY

Twelve points of spiritual health for individuals and churches

Having good health is important for those who want to live long and happy lives. Since good physical health is more than just not having pains, we will regularly see a doctor for a physical exam. He will check to see that various physical organs are working the way they should. How much more important is spiritual health for those who want to live joyful eternal lives! Spiritual health, too, is more than just not feeling bad. But if we were to have a spiritual exam, what should be checked to see if we are functioning the way God intended? Here are twelve parts of spiritual life, identified with twelve parts of the body to illustrate their importance for spiritual health. At the same time, it can be noticed that the spiritual health of individual Christians also ties into the spiritual health of the church, the body of Christ.

Internal organs “Remain Faithful”

One of the first things a doctor will do is to listen to the heart and lungs. This will tell much about one's health. There are also vital spiritual organs that lie under the covering of the breastplate of righteousness.

1. A Faithful heart

Undeniably, the most important organ for life and health is the heart. If it is working, you are alive - If it is not, you are dead! The spiritual heart of the Christian is faith. Everything else in Christian life starts here. God's word says, “But my righteous one will live by faith... And without faith it is impossible to please God,” (Heb. 10:38a; 11:6a) A strong faith beats with fear, love and trust in God above all else. Is our heart of faith strong and clear or is it weak and faint? Jesus says, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment.”

The heart of spiritual health in the church is unity in the one true faith. The faith which we share is what makes each of us a part of the church. Knowing and agreeing on the content of our faith is basic for spiritual health in the church and gives the church the endurance to survive many other problems. “Doctor” Paul calls the church in Corinth, “those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ - their Lord and ours,” but he urges the ailing church, “I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.” (1 Cor. 1:2, 10)

2. Worshiping lungs

A second essential for sustained life is lungs that breathe in and out to supply oxygen to the heart and the rest of the body. The lung of spiritual life is worship. Here God's people breathe in the presence of God, breathe out confession of sins, breathe in forgiveness, breathe out praise, breathe in God's word, breathe out affirmation of faith, breathe in encouragement, breathe out prayer, breathe in benediction, etc.. Are we able to fill our lungs of worship to full capacity, or are we in need of artificial resuscitation? “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.” (Col. 3:16)

Dynamic group worship is essential to the life of the church. It is to be inspiring in many senses of this word. Here the Holy Spirit is at work “filling” God's people with the rich oxygen of the gospel. “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” (Heb. 10:25)

3. A communing stomach

A third essential internal organ is the stomach which processes the food the body needs to move and grow. The food for the spiritual stomach of the Christian is Holy Communion. We dare not starve ourselves by infrequent eating. Is our stomach regularly filled with heavenly food or in need of breaking a forgiveness fast? Jesus himself says, “Take and eat.” “Take and drink.” “Do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” (1 Cor. 11:25)

Along with worship attendance, regular reception of Holy Communion is a key symptom of spiritual life in a congregation. If a Christian's diet is filled with spiritual junk food of sights and sounds that may be interesting and enjoyable, but do not meet the minimum requirements for the essential ingredient of forgiveness of sins, the appetite for wholesome food may be affected and spiritual health will suffer.

These things are basic, but there are more important elements of spiritual health. It is possible for people to appear strong and good looking but be internally ailing. Congregations also can have large numbers in worship and communing so that they are bulging their clothing (buildings) at the seams, yet actually be fat without true strength.

The Head “Be in the Word”

A relatively vulnerable part of the body which is essential for life and health is the head. If spiritual life and health are to be preserved, there are elements which are to be kept safe under the helmet of salvation.

4 Learning ears

In the physical body, it is through the mouth that the lungs breathe and the stomach receives food, but in spiritual life it is especially through ears that hear plainly that we take in

the priceless elements we need for spiritual health as we keep learning from preaching and teaching. "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ "(Rom. 10:17) Jesus says, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it." (Luke 11:28) Peter encourages us to have ears with a healthy appetite. "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good." (1 Peter 2:2-3)

In the healthy church there are many opportunities for Bible centered teaching and learning God's word throughout life. This must be a lifelong activity for everyone in the church, but it is especially important for any in positions of leadership. As the head directs the body, the regular practice of hearing, reading, studying and discussing God's word must guide everything else that happens in the life of the believer and the church. Jesus encourages, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples." (John 8:31)

5 Devotional eyes

Eyes that see clearly are no less important than ears. The believers eyes are used for personal devotions and Bible reading. Paul says, "I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you." (Eph. 1:18a) The believer can no more survive without regular intake of God's word than a body can survive without eating. In spiritual life we need to keep growing stronger in our ability to sink our teeth into God's word so that we might read, mark, learn and inwardly digest it. Paul says, "But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil."

In the healthy church, resources are supplied which promote personal and family devotions. This is one part of a strong communication network. Christian magazines which

encourage and inform about Christian living, missions, evangelism, citizenship, etc. are also made available. Information about the activities and opportunities in the church at large and especially the local congregation is kept before the eyes of every household by mail and at services of worship. Internal communication between workers and groups is both oral and written. The more the members of the church are informed of what is happening at their church, the more they are able and encouraged to be active and involved.

One who does not always keep eyes and ears open could be surprised by disastrous injury at any moment. Eyes and ears deserve special attention, but too often, these organs are taken for granted until there is real difficulty. How sad it would be to be spiritually limited to strained foods and barely able to hear and see.

The Torso "Live in Peace"

6 A backbone of godliness

The backbone is integrally connected to the head. Those who may be otherwise healthy are too often held back by a bad back. The backbone of spiritual life is moral obedience and godly relationships. Like vertebrae of the spine, there are many parts to keeping God's commandments, each of which should be kept properly aligned. Paul writes, "Finally brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are now living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more." (1 Thess. 4:1)

In the church as a whole, the strength in its backbone of godliness comes from strong small group and family relationships. To preserve the health of the church and its ability to work well, good care must be given to spouses, parents, children, youth and the elderly so that they remain tightly and properly linked together. In today's fragmented society,

interest or activity based small groups are valuable for relationship functions originally performed by extended families. Peter sums up his instruction on godly relationships by writing, "Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another, be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble...keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander." (1 Peter 3:8, 16)

7 Shoulders of leadership

Strong bodies able to do hard work are characterized by strong shoulders. Spiritually healthy people want to have load bearing shoulders of leadership. Every disciple has been given spiritual gifts which are to be used in supporting, initiating and guiding Christian activities. This includes active involvement in the organization of the church. Paul writes, "...in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others... If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith,...if it is teaching, let him teach;...if it is leadership, let him govern diligently;" (Rom. 12:5-8)

The shoulders of the church are its conscientious leaders who carry the burden of seeing that the Lord's work is done. It is also by the shoulders that hard working arms are attached to the rest of the body. It is important that those in these positions are supported by strong backbones of godliness and also that they closely connected to the church's head through personal and group Bible study. An early sign of stress on the church is when these leaders become tense and aching. Providing relief is valuable for long term health and strength. Paul writes, "Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other." (1 Thess. 5:12-13)

How sad to see believers with sagging spiritual shoulders as if they were helpless or useless for carrying a cross or lifting it high for others. Spineless behavior, and crooked ways will also keep people from being able to bear burdens or do useful work in the kingdom.

The Arms “Care for One Another”

Those who want to excel in health work hard on upper body strength. Strong arms are a sign of physical health and ability to work hard. Christian individuals and churches that excel in health work hard on reaching out to care for others.

8 Serving hands

Healthy people rely on strong and flexible hands to do many things. A believer’s spiritual hands are the ability to be active in loving service, reaching out to others in need of help. Paul writes, “There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.” (1 Cor. 12:5-7)

The hands of the church are human care ministries that reach out to meet needs of people in the community. Through his church, God wants to reach out with open arms to all. Jesus praises those who serve him when by meeting the needs of the hungry, lonely, sick, etc. (Matt. 25:35-36)

9 Open arms of fellowship

Outreaching arms can embrace tenderly or carry heavy burdens. Spiritually healthy people celebrate, uplift, receive, comfort and are lifted up as they reach out to others with arms of fellowship. Paul exhorts, “And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other

and to everyone else.” (1 Thess. 5:14-15)

A church glows with health when many join hands in loving Christian fellowship to encourage each other in Christian living. God’s word says, “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” (Heb. 10:24-25)

Arms that are used for hard work grow stronger. Those that folded in uncaring and self serving ways quickly become weak. Weak or painful hands are sources of misery instead of sources of help for others. Lack of outgoing friendliness and caring interest in others leaves Christian individuals and churches in helpless misery.

The Legs “Tell the Good News”

In maintaining good health, the ability to go places by walking is one of the most important and yet sometimes the most difficult to preserve and strengthen. Regular activity and stretching is often helpful. In spiritual life, it is important that believers are on the go to all nations, with feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.

10 Hips with give

People with hip problems can be severely held back from going very far or very fast. Even sitting in one place for very long can be difficult. In spiritual health, the hip, that is, where the pocket book is kept, is an important point. God calls us to stand up and be a part of the action in the kingdom also through joyful, proportionate, firstfruit giving. Paul encourages, “But just as you excel in everything, in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us - see that you also excel in this grace of giving...Now finish the work, so that

your eager willingness to do it may be matched by our completion of it, according to your means. For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.” (2 Cor. 8:7, 11-12)

In the church, financial support can be an indicator of the level of spiritual health. Funds are needed to provide for adequate facilities where people can sit for worship and find spiritual rest in other activities as well. But churches that have and encourage healthy levels of giving for both home and mission work are also able to be on the go, walking around their neighborhoods and being “armchair ambassadors” around the world. Healthy spiritual hips have a lot of flexible give and are able to stretch when necessary.

11 Praying knees

It has been rightly said that Christians move forward on their knees. Regular and sincere prayer is important, not only when one has been knocked to one’s knees by specific problems. It is an essential starting point for those who want the strength and agility to get up and go forward when God opens doors. Working on one’s knees in this way can be hard work but it is an essential exercise for those who would be truly strong. Paul encourages, “...pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus,” (1 Thess. 5:16-18) and “I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving be made for everyone.” (1 Tim. 2:1)

In the church, regular prayer by all members for its many people and activities is important, especially as a part of alert pastoral care. In the healthy church, not only the pastor but also many other helpers will often need to spiritually get down on bended knee to help individuals who have been knocked down by sickness, grief, confusion, temptation, and other emotional and spiritual problems. Taking a

personal approach in applying God's word and prayer can strengthen weak knees and to prevent a fall and can bring healing that keeps a fellow pilgrim from being hobbled or left behind, unable to get up and follow Christ. James urges, "Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray... I any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him... If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." (James 5:13-16)

12 Feet for witness

Going with the gospel begins on the knees and continues on the feet as believers witness about good news about Jesus everywhere they go. "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Rom. 10:15b) Learning to "walk the talk and talk the walk" is a part of maturing spiritually for every child of God. Peter writes, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander." (1

Peter 3:15-16) As those young in heart enjoy jumping, running and dancing, the spiritually lively enjoy speaking about their Lord in many ways.

Churches that are spiritually strong are on the march with energetic gospel outreach and have many openings through which people can come and go with the word of God. God does not want to find us standing around idle when he promised to give his church the strength to travel near and far with the wonderful news of salvation. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Acts 1:8

Those who have spiritual hip pocket problems and prefer to sit on their God given resources may find it painful to do otherwise and may even have trouble even sitting in the same place. Difficulty in praying with weak spiritual knees can plague those who suffer from old injuries or those who may feed themselves spiritually but fail to exercise their faith much. Those who are not used to running with the good news may find that they are slow in speech and have

little to say until after the opportunity has escaped. Like human bodies, churches that grow in size without growth in strength may find that they have problems with weak hips, knees or feet that fail to provide adequate support. It is tragic when otherwise healthy people and churches become spiritually hobbled by lack of giving, praying, and witnessing for God's kingdom.

Equally tragic is failure to reach out in fellowship and service. Regular exercise with both arms (deeds) and legs (words) not only strengthens these parts of the body but also is important for the strength and health of the heart (unity in faith) and lungs (worship) and even aids good digestion (Holy Communion).

It is a joy to be physically fit and healthy. It is a joy to God and his people when we are spiritually strong, and even more so when we are continuing to grow. As Paul says, "Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love as each part does its work." (Eph. 14:15-16)