

A Balanced Body

Avoiding Unhealthy Extremes in your Local Church

by Rob Buzza

I just celebrated my 34th anniversary as a licensed Foursquare pastor. No cake, no candles, just me in my office reflecting on how much I love the church, especially my own church family. NorthRidge, the church we planted 2 years ago, had just faced its first “crisis” (it had to do with our rental arrangements). Everyone pulled together to resolve the problem and the end result was actually better than before! As I was having these warm and fuzzy thoughts about how great it is when a church rallies together, someone walked into my office with news of another church, from my own beloved denomination, splitting apart.

I’m not used to hearing about church splits within the Foursquare family. We are far too level-headed for that! We are known for bringing churches and church members together, not driving them apart. In fact, thanks to some well-respected leaders, Foursquare has this world-wide reputation for maintaining a wonderful sense of balance, both in our theology and in our philosophy of ministry. Because of that moderate approach to church life, Foursquare has often provided a bridge between church groups, especially the evangelical and charismatic communities. Our outgoing US president, Jack Hayford, embodied that spirit in his writings and extensive speaking schedule. He could be the keynote speaker at the National Association of Evangelicals one week and the Pentecostal World Conference the next.

This reputation started with our founder, Aimee Semple McPherson, who managed to gather a variety of churches together at her meetings, some who wouldn’t normally associate with each other. They were attracted by what she called “a middle-of-the-road policy in public worship between extreme fanaticism and ultra-ritualism”. Middle-of-the-road does not mean wishy-washy or namby pamby – those words certainly didn’t apply to Sister Aimee. Staying in the middle of an already narrow road actually intensifies our focus. When we wander too close to the edges, it’s easy to become distracted.

Unfortunately, that is exactly what is happening to churches all around us, especially in North America. Pastors and their parishioners, looking for fresh excitement, are drifting precariously toward the steep embankments on either side of the narrow road of church life. They are losing their focus and falling into dangerous extremes. As churches become unbalanced they tend to fall down, fall apart, or worse yet, plummet over the edge.

Students of recent church history will recognize the same pattern that started in the wheat fields of North Battleford, Saskatchewan, in 1948. The Latter Rain (LR) movement seemed to start out as a genuine move of God, but many of the break-off groups lost their balance, degenerating into various combinations of sign-seeking, unrestrained manifestations, hero worship, factions, authority abuse, false doctrine, cult-like tendencies, immorality, and a vapour trail of church splits.

It’s a pattern we’ve seen repeated several times since North Battleford and yet we still have trouble learning from our mistakes. We could have avoided a whole lot of confusion, shattered churches, disillusioned Christians, and countless lost souls who rejected this warped representation of Jesus.

All we had to do was pay attention to God's Word as applied to one of the first churches to lose their balance - the apostle Paul's church plant in Corinth.

Here was an unusually gifted church, birthed in a time of explosive revival, that quickly drifted toward extremism. In his first letter, written to address their issues, Paul reminded them they were the body of Christ. By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he exhorted them to keep their head on straight, respect every part of their body, strengthen their backbone, and stay focused on the finish line.

Keep Your Head On Straight (ch. 1-4)

The Corinthian Christians were lining up behind popular leaders, like Paul, Apollos, and Peter, then squaring off against each other. This is a tell-tale sign that a church has become unbalanced. When we look to a particular church leader, a certain church model, or the latest church movement for our direction we start losing our head.

The North Battleford movement fell into this same pattern. Key leaders, who appeared to be especially anointed as prophets or miracle-workers, began forming their factions. The Branhamites (William Branham), the Walk (Stevens), the Shepherding movement (Mumford, Baxter, Basham, Prince, and Simpson), the Word Faith movement (Kenyon, Hagin), Kingdom Now (Paulk), and the Kansas City Prophets (Bickle, Cain, Jones) all trace their roots to the Latter Rain movement. While the range of doctrines and practices between these groups was wide they did have at least one dangerous extreme in common: acceptance of extra-biblical revelation.

An emphasis on "extreme prophecy" allowed for new revelations loosely tied to the Bible, as well as doctrinal insights that drifted far beyond Scripture. Some believed that the Bible was limited in its teaching in that it only applied to a particular time and culture. The presupposition that God reveals Himself to us in new ways opens the door to new manifestations of His Spirit and new doctrines (eg. the "manifest sons of God", "little gods", "serpent's seed").

We have similar problems today as self-appointed apostles and prophets, without discernible accountability, roam from church to church expecting unquestioned submission to their messages from God. Some promise healings if you follow their faith-building principles and procedures. Others offer trance-like trips to heaven if you "sow financially into their anointing." It seems their experiences shed new insight into their understanding of Scripture.

I recently talked to a pastor of one of our churches who asked me what I thought about a book he was currently using as a source for his sermons. It was written by someone who often experienced trances while her spirit visited heaven. On several occasions she said she met with Jesus who showed her the treasuries of heaven and the various mansions being prepared for us. His message to her was that the size of our mansion and the amount of loot we inherit was proportional to our performance on earth. I asked him if he thought that sounded like the Jesus he knew, the One who walked this earth with few possessions decrying against an attitude of materialism. He admitted that it didn't sound quite right but how could he disagree with someone who talked directly to Jesus. That's when I reminded him that we interpret experiences based on God's unchanging Word, instead of interpreting the Bible based on our experiences. Then I suggested he try preaching the timeless truths of Scripture instead of Christian fiction.

To be fair, these prophets often justify their out-of-body experiences and prophetic revelations by referencing Paul's vision of the third heaven (2 Corinthians 12:2). Ironically, Paul condemned such self-promotion and said that no one should be permitted to talk about their heavenly experiences. In calling for order in the gathered church he urged them to limit prophecies to two or three at the most, and to make sure the rest of the congregation confirms their conformance to what God has already said (1 Corinthians 14:29). In other words, he is telling us to judge prophecy and prophetic experiences based on God's revealed Word, not the other way around. Interpreting Scripture to fit our ecstatic experience is a sure fire way to divide a church!

The Head of the church is Jesus. Check out the last verse of the first three chapters of 1 Corinthians: "Let him that boasts, boast in the Lord"; "We have the mind of Christ"; "You belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God". When we line up behind Him, His Word, and His plans for the church, we find ourselves shoulder to shoulder again working together toward the same objective. The Bible provides the network of nerves that connect and coordinate the body of Christ with the Head. Paul's final word on lining up under Jesus centers on our commitment to Scripture: *now, brothers, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, "Do not go beyond what is written." Then you will not take pride in one man over against another* (4:6).

Respect Every Part of your Body (ch. 10-13)

The Corinthians were warned, in the context of the Communion service (11:17-34), to honour each other. At a time when the church should be remembering the ultimate example of selflessness, Christ's death on the cross, they were hoarding food and getting drunk. This is what is meant by not discerning the Lord's body (vs. 29). It's also implied that the Corinthians were judging each other on the basis of their type of giftedness. Paul had to remind them that it was the same God behind every kind of gift and that the Holy Spirit distributes these gifts as needed for the common good. Every person and every contribution is to be valued and loved. He reminds us all that we together are members of the Body of Christ. No one part is more important than another. When we overemphasize certain parts of the body and ignore others we become unbalanced and unhealthy.

The factions that formed from the Latter Rain movement were often guilty of "gift projection" - the idea that my gift or my experience is better than yours. Like the Gnostics who infiltrated the early church, some LR groups looked down on those who had not yet arrived at their level of spirituality. This was the essence of the "manifest sons of God doctrine" which labeled other uninitiated churches and church leaders with the spirit of the Antichrist.

That same elitism is seen in some of the neo-charismatic movements today. They promote the impartation of their anointing upon other leaders and churches who lack their special knowledge and experience. Trying to import that impartation into another local church body is actually dishonouring to the gifted people that God has already uniquely anointed and placed to serve in their community. An emphasis on certain spiritual gifts at the expense of love and church unity is a symptom of a church that has lost its balance: *If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing* (13:2).

Every part of Christ's body, every person and every local church, has a direct connection with the Head. John 10 provides another analogy that helps us understand how local churches operate.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, speaks to each one of His sheep individually and they know His voice (John 10:1-16). If we pattern our churches after what He is doing with other sheep in other pastures we may miss what He would speak to our flock in our unique community. This is a common cause of church splits. A leader or a group of influencers from within the congregation believe the grass is greener in some other pasture so they try to transplant that grass back home. They forget that the source of revival is already with them, actually within them as well as the other members of the congregation. Importing the experience of another church into your congregation leads to a precarious imbalance and, all too often, a divided church.

Strengthen Your Backbone (ch. 14)

While church leaders should not “lord it over” other church members (Matthew 20:25-28), they do need to lead. They are not the head of the body (Jesus is), but they are like the backbone, bringing structure and order so that each member of the body can do their job. Even though the Corinthian church was choosing sides around certain leaders, at times they seemed leaderless. From the context of Paul’s letter they appeared to be flopping around, out of control, so Paul exhorted them to conduct themselves in a *fitting and orderly way* (14:40).

The LR churches also struggled with leadership issues. On one hand some suffered various forms of authority abuse, like the cult-like groups who followed the self-appointed apostles William Branham and John Stevens. The Kansas City Prophets often told stories of other church members and leaders who met with judgment and even death when they refused to heed their prophecies. The Shepherding movement also illustrated an imbalanced emphasis on authority and submission, with the “Fort Lauderdale Five” founders repenting of their heavy-handedness years later.

Yet in contrast to this autocratic view of authority and submission, at times the LR churches seemed to be out of control. The movement degenerated from a spiritual stirring toward prayer and holiness to large gatherings of frenzied sign-seekers. As their public services became increasingly chaotic the pentecostal denominations (like Assemblies of God) issued statements distancing themselves from the movement.

These trends toward extreme manifestations have continued throughout history, from the ecstatic prophecies of the second century Montanists, through to the Latter Rain churches, up to the more recent Toronto and Florida “revivals.” Churches desperate for more of the Holy Spirit have encouraged their people to set aside the rational side of their minds and embrace a more emotional relationship with the Spirit of God. Anything goes - from twitching, writhing, screaming, barking, roaring, to frenetic dancing. The reason given is that leaders do not want to quench the Spirit.

The problem with that approach is that we are created to be both rational and emotional. The two work together because both characteristics reflect the image of our Creator. Paul, writing with the inspiration of this same Holy Spirit, urges the Corinthian Christians and all of us to stop acting like uncontrolled children and start “thinking like adults” (14:20). He warns us that if we allow everyone to speak in tongues at once, for example, unbelievers who come into the gathering will think we are crazy (14:23)! He reminds us that *the spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. For God is not a God of disorder but of peace* (14:32,33).

Leaders who bring order to our gatherings are not quenching the Spirit. The opposite is true. Allowing rampant emotionalism brings division within a church and nothing grieves the Spirit of

God more than disunity (Ephesians 4:29-32). Riverbanks bring direction, power, and purpose to a river, but a river that overflows its banks brings devastation.

In an article entitled *The Narrow Line or "Is Mrs. McPherson Pentecostal?"*, Sister Aimee describes a time when she stopped a woman from crying out too loudly in one of her services. She asked her if she would be acting so uncontrollably if she knew Jesus was standing right beside her right now. This became a teaching moment on how to respond appropriately to Jesus in worship.

In explaining her practice of maintaining order in her services Aimee made this statement: *we are called upon to walk the narrow gauge line, and must be true to the courage of our convictions, that to be spirit-filled is to be splendidly sane, clean, wholesome, sober, godly, pious, wise, loving, fearless, consistent, balanced, Christ exalting, soul-winning, gentle, and teachable: and not that wild, mirth-provoking, ridiculous, jumping, screaming, muttering, egotistical, unteachable, impractical, reproach - bringing something which some mistakenly call being "Pentecostal."*

Sister Aimee was focused on reaching the lost. She would not allow any disruptions to interfere with the primary purpose of the Spirit of God and those who are filled with this Spirit – to testify about Jesus to a lost world (John 15:26,27).

Stay Focused on the Finish Line (ch. 14,15)

Paul was concerned that the chaotic public services of the Corinthians would scare away the unchurched: *if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?* (1 Corinthians 14:23). We must always remember that what we do is not about us; we are working together to reach those who are not yet part of God's family. When we all work together toward that goal, we will have no time or inclination to fight among ourselves. He concludes the teaching portion of his letter with these final words: *Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain* (15:58).

God's purposes are never incongruent: the church is on earth to represent the love of God to a lost world and to invite them to be part of God's family. When the unchurched see confusion, hypocrisy, or weird behavior in churches they will naturally stay far away from Christians.

We sometimes forget that supernatural signs are not the focus of the church. Jesus resisted those who followed Him looking for signs (Matthew 12:38-40). The only sign He would offer them was the sign of Jonah, a reference to His death and resurrection. Our focus as believers has to be on the gospel message and when we preach that in its purity, confirming signs will follow (Mark 16:15-20).

The miraculous ministry of Jesus and His disciples never frightened people away. In fact, most of the miracles took place in the context of ordinary life, seldom in the gathered "church". They happened while they were out fishing, sitting down eating lunch, walking in the city streets, or visiting in each other's homes. These moments were characterized by being super"natural", not super"spiritual", and that's why Jesus was considered a friend of sinners. He was always welcome to visit their homes, attend their weddings, and talk to their children.

As a Foursquare pastor, I believe in spiritual gifts. They are available to me and other spirit-filled believers to assist us in leading people to Jesus. They are not given for my amusement, as a spiritual

high, to experience trances, ride an angel, check out heaven, talk to departed saints, or discover a new revelation about God. God's Word is complete, nothing should be added or taken away (2 Timothy 3:16,17; Revelation 22:18,19). Spiritual gifts follow those who accurately represent Jesus and His Word.

Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians to prevent them from drifting too far from the center of God's Word. That is also my purpose in taking time on my 34th anniversary of ministry to apply the Scripture to church life today! I long to see souls saved, new Christians disciplined, and healthy churches planted, growing, and reproducing themselves around the world.

I leave you with some final words from the founder of Foursquare, Aimee Semple McPherson:

Thus the narrow gauge line, in the middle of the way, which we have walked without catering or compromising to the favor of either. As we have said before, almost every one longs for the smiling approbation of either the one or the other, but to walk the middle of the road, seeking to give offence to neither, but to keep life and doctrine straight to the Word, and take the hand of the one who is burning with fire and zeal, and put it into the hand of they who are cold, backslidden and dead; and by Word and Spirit lift both to the sane, sweet, powerful, humble, balanced, soul-winning narrow gauge line.

For the Aimee Semple McPherson quotations see *The Narrow Line or "Is Mrs. McPherson Pentecostal?"*
Foursquare Gospel Publications, Los Angeles, CA. 1922

For background sources on the Latter Rain movement see *The Old Lie in a New Age* by Rob Buzza, Trinity Western Seminary, 1989