

# Symptoms of the Success Syndrome

by Charles Ryrie

**W**ithout question, American evangelicalism is a roaring success. More than 20 percent of the population of the United States claims to be born again.

Larger crowds and greater triumphs than Pentecost routinely occur. Our many-thousand-seat auditoriums outdo Herod's temple in the number of people they can accommodate.

In a single year, I easily travel twice the distance the Apostle Paul traveled in his entire lifetime—and a traveling ministry is not my principle occupation.

The quantity of Christian literature circulating in New Testament times was only a trickle compared to the flood that pours from Christian presses today.

Paul could write of the conversion of some of Caesar's employees, but we can point to believers in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of many levels of government.

Millions more dollars than the early church collected in several centuries now flow into relief projects in a matter of months.

From all outward appearances, evangelical Christianity has achieved success. But there are two cracks in the foundation:

## Bigger Is Not Better

We think that because there are still unreached people we should strive to increase the size of our organizations

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and the number of our workers.

Because there are more believers to be trained, we want to increase the enrollments in our schools.

We feel that larger churches have more clout than smaller ones because they are able to underwrite more programs like radio and TV and are able to wield more influence in the community.

But continual increases don't have to be a part of the goal-setting process. Increase in size, number, or budget is not proof positive of God's blessings.

And the blame shouldn't fall only on leaders.

People expect glowing reports of increases. Most readers of "prayer and appeal letters" assume increasing figures prove God's hand is in that particular work.

Leaders want to see their ministries grow in size. Potential supporters expect such growth. Appeal letters become growth reports because they have to generate funds necessary for future growth.

How would you respond to an appeal that proposed decreasing its number of workers or limiting rather than expanding the sphere of ministry?

Bigger is better if it is in God's will. Outside of His will, bigger can easily become a human, ego-building goal. It can create a hungry monster that demands to be fed, regardless of what is really being accomplished for the Lord. And satisfying that appetite forces individuals to continually invent gimmicks designed to bring home the bacon.

How can we avoid falling into this

trap? By testing the validity of our plans. Simply setting goals isn't enough. Every goal must pass the test of God's Word. It must adhere to the stewardship responsibility of the organization or individual for that particular time.

For the individual, an important test is: "Why do I give to this organization and not to that one? What criteria do I use?" Setting goals is good, but testing them is more important.

Zechariah challenged his people to test their values. He recognized the folly of "bigger is better" thinking.

"Who has despised the day of small things?" (Zech. 4:10). He chided the people for assuming that smaller was worse, and therefore, a proof of God's disfavor.

When the band of about 50,000 Israelites returned to Palestine from exile in Babylon, they immediately laid the foundation for a new temple. Seventy years earlier, Solomon's magnificent temple had been razed. Because the people's aspirations and worship centered in that temple, they gave top priority to constructing a new one.

But when the foundation was laid, some of the older people who had worshiped in Solomon's temple before the exile compared the new one with Solomon's. And it didn't measure up. So they began weeping because they concluded the new temple's smaller dimensions proved God was not blessing them the way He had in former days.

Zechariah denounced this kind of thinking. Actually, his question is really a prohibition: "Let no one

despise the day of small things.”

Why not, Zechariah? Because the Lord, whose eyes range to and fro throughout the whole earth, knows what He is doing. It remained only for the people to build that temple which had stood uncompleted since laying the foundation fifteen years earlier.

In other words, it was not their responsibility to determine the temple's size—to set the goal. God commissioned them only to complete the smaller temple—to fulfill the goal.

A temple the size of Solomon's would have been an unsuccessful project, regardless of its beauty or the amount of priests and worshippers it could have accommodated.

Bigger is not necessarily better.

### **Being Healthy, Wealthy, and Wise Does Not Equal God's Blessing**

In other words, if I'm not healthy, wealthy, or wise, I am abnormal. I'm not experiencing God's blessing.

A Christian is a winner; we are told. Being sick certainly provides no way to win. Neither does poverty or ignorance. Therefore, if I experience any of those things, it's an obvious sign of God's disfavor. Or is it?

*Health.* At one time or another, many of us have watched an acquaintance become afflicted with a troublesome sickness, and we've wondered, "Has he done something to displease God?" We easily conclude: "There must be some sin in his life; otherwise, he wouldn't be sick."

Sometimes sickness *can* result from sin. A number of Corinthian believers became ill because they came to the Lord's Supper with unconfessed sin in their lives (1 Cor. 11:30). Some sin can cause physical death (1 John 5:16).

But those are not the only reasons why Christians become sick. Like Epaphroditus, they sometimes work too hard (hopefully, like him, in the Lord's work). As years pass, the natural consequences of living in a fallen body take over; regardless of personal stamina. Limitations of age often bring sickness not related to personal sin.

At times, people are physically afflicted to bring greater glory to God. Christ gave this reason to explain a man's congenital blindness (John 9:3), as He restored his sight.

Paul's "thorn in the flesh" posed recurrent physical problems for him. But the Lord left it in his body to teach him the sufficiency of God's grace.

When Paul prayed about it (more than once), God answered not with healing, but with the grace to bear it. And this constituted a blessing Paul could not have known apart from that affliction. In that situation, being sick, not healthy, was the sure sign of God's blessing.

Early in my teaching ministry, I met a very dear, older Christian lady who was an invalid. She had to be lifted in and out of her wheelchair. Although she was physically helpless, her mind and voice were clear and sharp.

As our friendship grew, she pledged to pray for me regularly and specifically. And she did. At that time I didn't realize the impact her prayers gave to my ministry and relationships. Actually, until I enter heaven, I'll never know all that her prayers did for me.

If the truth were known, I'd confess I pitied her sometimes because she couldn't move around and have an "active" ministry as I was having. But I now realize she did have a dynamic ministry, one she likely could not have experienced had she not been sick.

*Wealth.* Similarly, wealth is no sign of God's special favor any more than poverty is a sign of His disfavor. Both wealthy and poor Christians can be in God's will.

Because our society dictates that success means wealth, we've assumed the successful Christian is a wealthy Christian. Some ads even picture successful Joe Christian standing by his new car and offering to give you the secret behind his success—if you will just return the coupon!

Certainly, money is no evil, but the love of it is (1 Tim. 6:10). The Lord Himself commanded: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, . . . but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, . . . for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matt. 6:19, 20 NASB).

*Wisdom.* To conclude that wisdom indicates God's blessing is to deny Paul's words—not many wise are chosen to salvation and service (1 Cor. 1:26-29).

According to the Word, God's blessing may mean sickness, poverty, and no Ph.D. □

## **The Cure**

If aiming for bigness, prosperity, and wisdom may show symptoms of an abnormality in the church, what is the cure? What is normal? By what can we truly measure the degree of success we've attained?

Our measuring rod should be Christlikeness. That's the true hallmark of "success."

In eternity past, God predestined us to be conformed to the image of His Son (Rom. 8:29). Only in heaven will He totally accomplish that. But in the meantime, the Lord commands us to aim for Christlikeness (1 John 2:6). Through the Holy Spirit's power, God graciously enables us to obey and to produce His fruit—a true sign of Christlikeness (Gal. 5:22-23).

We can apply this standard to every circumstance in life. We can be Christlike in a large or small ministry. We can be Christlike in health or sickness. We can be Christlike in poverty or wealth.

The converse is also true. We can appear to be Christlike but in reality be victims of the success syndrome. Adverse circumstances can quickly penetrate the thin veneer of pseudo-Christlikeness.

Christlikeness doesn't promise a life void of adversity. But it does offer protection through the storm.

Difficulties are often God's appointed way to victory. Enduring them is the price we may expect to pay in a world at war with God.

In the midst of the triumphant paragraph concluding Romans 8, Paul inserts a discordant quotation from a Psalm: "For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter" (v. 36 KJV).

If God directs your life in easy, pleasant paths, use those advantages for His glory. If He doesn't, don't assume you are out of His favor and missing His blessing. Rather, serve Him with all you have, whether it be little or much.

When we arrive at the Judgment Seat, our statistics will take on a new glow: "Each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work" (1 Cor. 3:13 NASB). □