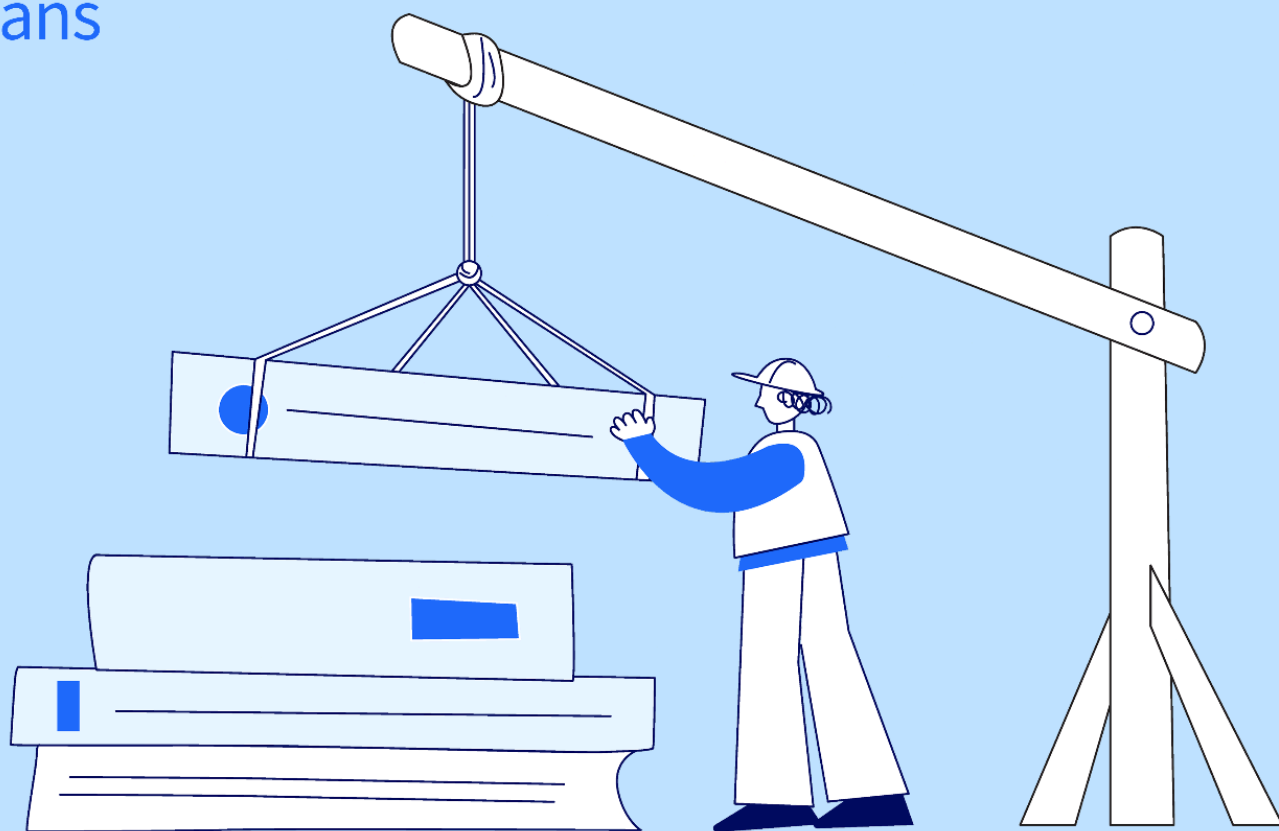


Why Church Culture Breaks —& How to Build It Right

Mark Brians



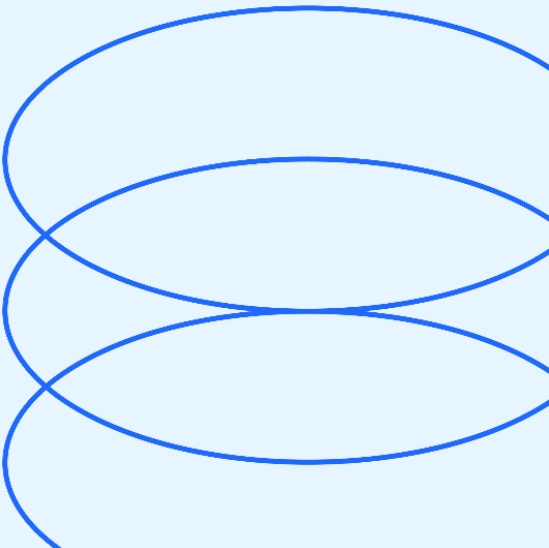
About the Author

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Intro



There is so much today written about what happens when churches and Christian ministries get culture wrong. The examples are so numerous and so public that there is little need here to cite them. Even if you have been spared a painful experience of unhealthy church culture, you probably know someone who hasn't been.

Cultural problems have this unique capacity to distort things that are more essential to the ministry of the church. For example, the preaching may be excellent or the worship and liturgy glorious and biblically faithful. Any number of programs (like childcare, discipleship, catechesis, etc.) may be powerful and well done. Yet it is the culture that chiefly determines the reception of these elements. It is not uncommon, for instance, to have people say something like, "The theology was great, but the pastor was really controlling!" or "We loved the pastor, but the youth and family culture was just degrading."

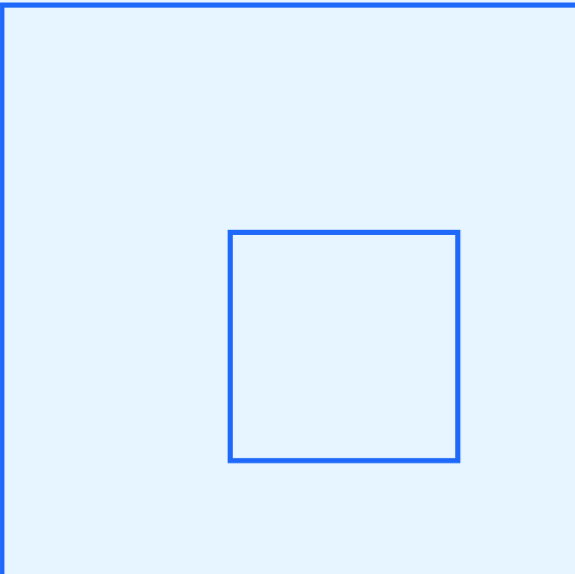
On the other hand, precisely because "church culture" has become such a master concept in contemporary church life, it is easy to misuse the term. It is often deployed as a catch-all for anything we don't like, struggle with, or find difficult about life together in the kingdom of Jesus. Churches with unhealthy cultures are often not called out, whereas churches with healthy cultures are occasionally accused of being unhealthy or toxic.

The problem is further complicated by the way in which these two very different circumstances of church culture—that is, a church whose culture is unhealthy but whose key leaders refuse to acknowledge it, and a healthy church which has been falsely accused of being unhealthy—each seem to provide the supporting evidence for the opposite situation. The church with the unhealthy culture can point to the falsely-accused church as evidence that the same thing is happening to it, just as the accusers of the healthy church can point to the unhealthy church as a demonstration that the same problems present there are also present here.

A final and critical aspect of church culture that makes it both important and difficult to talk about is the way it seemingly defies easy definition. What is church culture? What are the critical things that make it healthy or otherwise? What is the difference between a church culture that is toxic and abusive and one that is merely strange without being morally deficient? How much of a church culture can be reified and scrutinized apart from the unique and particular makeup of individuals and households which constitute it? What—in other words—are we even talking about when we talk about a local church's culture?

In this guide, we will identify the four major ingredients of a life-giving church culture.

Ecclesia



Any healthy and robust account of church culture must begin with the gospel of Jesus Christ and with what the Bible says about the nature of the church. Amidst the various contextual, cultural, and denominational differences among the various churches across the globe, there is a defining identity that makes the church what it is. Against this identity metrics like “healthy” or “unhealthy” ought to be measured. All variations must be local expressions of this singular identity.

It is not the case that the church is simply another social organization in the caste of things like businesses, clubs, schools, or sports teams. A local church may run a ministry that helps local businesses or operates a school or sponsors a civic club, but it can only do these things because it is a totally different species of social group. A sports team doesn’t have a church, nor do businesses plant new parishes, nor can the boundaries of a political organization ever be strictly coterminous with the local congregation.

The church, globally, while in some places achieving tax-exempt and nonprofit status, is not just another religious nonprofit or nongovernmental organization.

Ecclesia as unity in Christ

The Scriptures speak of the church with the language of symbol and typology: The church is the universal, trans-temporal, trans-spatial people of God (Deut 7:6; Rom 9:25–26; 1 Pet 2:9), the spiritual Israel (Gal 6:16), and therefore the children of Abraham who have received the promise of the Lord’s salvation by faith (Gal 3:29). It is the social body of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 12:12–27), his kingdom and the living domain of his realm (Luke 17:20–21; Rom 14:17). It is the family, the household, of the living God (1 Tim 3:15; cf. Gal 6:10), the temple of God made with living stones (1 Pet 2:5), and the heavenly city of Jerusalem (Gal 4:26; Heb 12:22–28; Rev 21:9–27). The church is the Bride of Christ (Isa 54:5; Eph 5:25–27; 2 Cor 11:2; Rev 19:7) to whom the heavenly Bridegroom is forever faithful and true (Rev 19:11).

The local church, before it is anything else, is an outpost of these realities in whatever era or location it finds itself planted.

Ecclesia as ruling body

Particular emphasis can be placed on the language that Christ used when speaking about the church to his disciples in its formation: “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it” (Matt 16:18 LEB).

The word used here for “church” is *ecclesia* (ἐκκλησία)—a term lifted from Greco-Roman political tradition. It refers to those who have been called out and appointed to lead: a ruling body of a state or polity. Among the other types and images which the Scriptures use to identity of the church, Christ’s designation of it here as those who rule and reign with him in the kingdom (cf. Eph 2:6; 2 Tim 2:12) anchors its identity as in union with himself and his mission. “Kingdom” and “mission” are not two things among the many that the church does. They are the very definition of what it means to be a part of the church. This means we must move away from addressing local church health according to any line of questioning which fails to reckon with it as it is: **a branch of the kingdom of Jesus, the Son of David who was vindicated by the Father when he was raised from the dead** (2 Tim 2:8).

Conclusions

Unless this identity of the local church as an outpost and member of Christ’s one holy *ecclesia* is recognized as essential, any given church culture risks being defined and normed by whatever is on offer in the wider society. If, for instance, we were to conceive of the local church along managerial or corporate idioms, it would fundamentally alter what it means to have a healthy church culture. In this case the metrics of corporate business “health” (i.e., 24/7 productivity, consumer appeal, media-oriented production value of events) would begin to overshadow metrics like biblical fidelity, concern for the needy, and authenticity of confession.

Our inquiry into the health of a church culture must be normed by these scriptural images and not by recourse to influences that are not anchored in our identity in Christ.

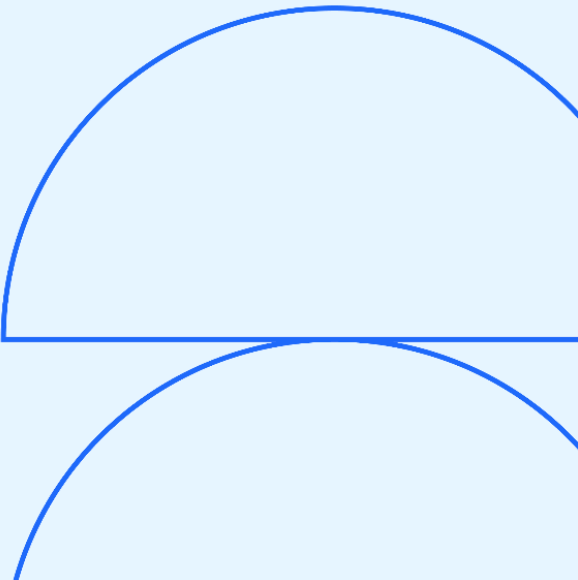
A particular church in a particular place is the local outgrowth and adaptation of this central identity. Only when this identity is maintained can real clarity be had about what it means when we talk about the culture of a particular church.

Questions such as “Is this church demonstrating the joy of the kingdom?” or “Is this church being pure and true in its doctrine as a faithful bride to Christ?” or “Is this church laboring for the peace and unity which should mark the heavenly Jerusalem?” help to anchor the local church in who it is, even as they inquire into the church’s health.

On the other hand, questions like “Is this church successful?” or “Is this church’s youth group super fun?” or “Does this church’s preaching staff all have graduate degrees in theology?” implicitly seek to measure things that, as good as they may or may not be, do not originate us in what the church has been called by Christ to be.

Once this essential identity is in place of who and what the church is, and therefore what the essential identity of any particular local church is, a few key aspects of church culture emerge that enable us to carefully assess its vitality.

Ethos



Ethos names the whole character of a person or a group, what we might call the “personality” or “vibes.” It names not only how I feel about a gathering or individual. It names the whole freight of my relationship and disposition towards them. It is a complex and multifaceted concept. It cannot, often, be described in single words like “trust” or “love” or “suspicion.” It often needs to be accounted for in an array, such as:

“I-love-him-but-can’t-quite-trust-him-when-he’s-trying-to-be-funny” or
 “She’s-my-boss-and-I’m-friends-with-her-son-and-I-spent-thanksgiving-with-them-last-week-end-and-we-all-go-to-church-together.”

When a commercial features a famous actor or a person in a medical coat, they’re making an appeal to *ethos*. That commercial is attempting to establish a relationship with its audience by capitalizing on the relationship it guesses they have with the type of person in the commercial.

Homes, restaurants, and companies all have an *ethos*. When you walk into a house or try out a new restaurant or interview for a job, prior to any conversation or food or unfolding event, you establish a kind of relationship—a stance and posture towards and an emerging history with the establishment.

Every church also has an *ethos*. It may begin in various ways: the website the person saw or the invite from a friend or an experience at a youth group. But it goes beyond marketing and posturing from the front on Sundays. *Ethos*, as relationship with a person or group, is something that can’t be curated. It can only be cultivated.

Ethos vs. optics

A healthy church culture is one which attends to *ethos*—attends and cares for the persons with whom it is in relation. This has little or nothing to do with what is called “image management” and everything to do with the real and embodied experience of cultivating mutual trust and respect.

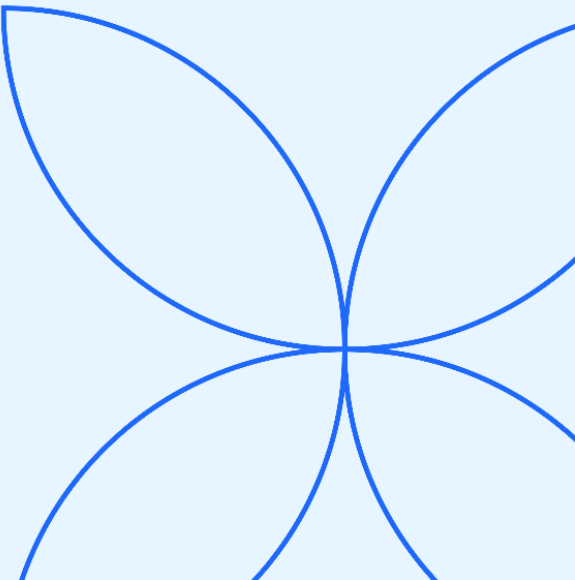
It may seem like Jesus and Paul were at odds when Christ declared woes on those who care what people say of them (Luke 6:26), whereas the apostle rebuked the Roman church for the way in which “The name of God is blasphemed among the gentiles” because of them (Rom 2:24). But it only *seems* like that. They are actually on the same page. They are both taking a deeply anti-hypocrisy, anti-mere-image-management, anti-superficial stance.

Healthy churches are real churches whose projected image is not altogether different from the lived reality. What gains both true respect and, in some parts of the globe, true persecution is the local church which practices what it preaches. It is “the real deal” whose life is truly animated by the fellowship of the cross and the power of the resurrection (Phil 3:10).

Here are some questions to ask regarding your church's *ethos*:

- Does this church's culture celebrate legitimate authenticity?
- Does this church's culture proclaim simultaneously (1) the holiness of God and (2) the forgiveness of sins?
- Does this church's culture set an expectation for appropriate levels of transparency?
- Do the people in this church know the difference between appropriate transparency and inappropriate transparency?
- Does this culture celebrate "baby steps" of sanctification on the same level as big leaps, knowing that it is the same Holy Spirit who gives the grace for transformation?
- Is this church's identity primarily anchored in how it is "so thankful that it is not like that church over there" (cf. Luke 18:11)? Or is it primarily anchored in what God has called it to be?
- Do this church's leaders walk in real accountability with both peers and with those who have the ability to exercise authority over them?
- Are the things this church says it values, or the things it proclaims about itself in its media, actually the things it aspires to live out?

Persons



A local church's people define its particular culture: their quirks, their gifts, their histories, their shared and conflicting tastes, the inside jokes, the marriages and family relations, etc.

There is this delicate balance in the cultivation of healthy church culture between making room for individuality on the one hand and ensuring unity on the other. Thanks be to God that this very tension is rooted in the nature of the triune God himself, in whom there is no friction between the Persons of the Trinity and their unity as One Lord (Deut 6:4).

There must be a very clear and biblically-based value around those things on which the local church is decidedly unified. Beyond the gospel essentials (e.g., the articles of the Nicene Creed, or the plain and consensual reception of Scripture), every church is called to play somewhat of a unique role in the regional and global body of Christ. Not every congregation is going to do everything. The *global* church is called to do everything.

There will, therefore, be certain things that this or that local church is called to live into in particular ways that will shape its special call and ministry. On these things, it is essential that the local church's culture knows how to articulate, equip, and disciple its members in those unique features of its call.

At the same time, it is essential that the local church culture celebrates the gifts and persons that make up its membership, even when they don't clearly fit within its specific ministry contexts.

Diverse churches, diverse people, diverse gifts

The instruction given in Romans 12 about the church's members having many different gifts (vv. 1–6) is true about both the members in a local congregation and the role that each local congregation is called to play within the global body of Jesus.

Healthy church culture is fostered when its leadership understands that there are many gifts given by the same Spirit (Rom 12:4–5; 1 Cor 12:4–11) and treats each member as more than a replaceable part of a machine. Building up and equipping the saints for the ministry of the kingdom is, therefore, not so much a work of arithmetic as of chemistry. We are not trying to reduce the particulars of people's gifts, callings, and personal stories by some abstract common denominator to balance our staffing equation. We are instead developing a *culture* in a way analogous to leavening dough. The chemical dynamics of a team surpass a merely additive calculus. I cannot merely attend to the question of whether or not we have

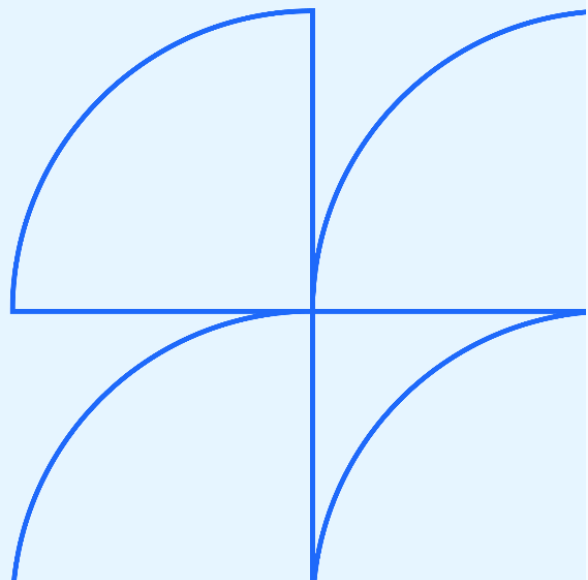
enough folks to play music, for example. I must also attend to the relational dynamics of *these* particular people with *these* musical capacities and *these* extenuating circumstances.

This relational, personal, chemical element in the culture of a local church ought to turn the local church outwards in partnership with the wider Body of Christ. This promotes a balance to both the gifts and needs of the local church. A healthy church culture is one that is connected by gospel relationships beyond itself and, like Paul, is both supported by and rejoices in the faith and ministry of other churches (e.g., Col 1:24–2:7).

Here are some questions to ask regarding your church's people:

- Does this church celebrate and work to glorify the gifts and callings of its members?
- Does this church relate to all its members as unique persons, knowing that although the roles within a church might be general (e.g., sound guy, acolyte, missions pastor), the people filling them are particular?
- Does this church avoid doing interpersonal discipleship, pastoral care, and ecclesiastic discipline in overly general ways or in ways that evidence real understanding for each individual?
- Does this church's culture allow itself to be dominated by a few specific personalities? If so, whose? And why?
- Regardless of size, does this church foster a culture of welcome, friendship, and of "showing hospitality to the saints" (Rom 12:13)?
- Is there a shared common life between the leaders of the church and the congregation, or are they really two groups each with its own culture?
- Is the church unified by a common vision? How well does each member of the church understand their role in that vision?
- Does the church celebrate healthy boundaries around pastoral relationships while also ensuring that its pastors (and their families, where appropriate) are truly known and loved?
- Do those in charge of leading specific ministries of the local church (e.g., music team leader, children's coordinator, etc.) understand their role as being in the service of the saints being equipped for ministry (cf. Eph 4:12), and not merely as private support staff for the glory of the ministry leader?

Environment



As important as the individuals who make up a local church are for its culture, it is important to identify another interrelated factor: environment. This final aspect of church culture has to do more with the structures, processes, and ecosystems of a local church's life and ministry than with the individuals who occupy and fill them. It's a discussion of church culture as a kind of habitat which fosters or hinders certain kinds of growth before God.

Liturgy/worship

The first feature of a local church's environment is its liturgical life: the structures and rhythms of worship, prayer, devotion, and the way they administer the sacraments of baptism and communion. The glory of God is the beginning and end of all things and the chief end of humanity, and the central life of the church is the way it worships the God of glory.

Everything from the order of the service to the style of the sermon to the musical selections—all of it shapes a liturgical environment in which the peculiar witness and life of the local church is formed. The personal devotional life of the members of the church will flow downstream from corporate worship. A local church which conceives of worship primarily as a show will have a very different liturgical environment than one which conceives of worship as primarily about hearing from God's Word or eating at his table.

A healthy church culture is one that is more concerned about the rightness of its worship and its witness to the world of God's goodness than about its next level of production or attendance. "One thing I desire of the Lord" sings the psalmist, "that I may dwell in the house of Yahweh all the days of my life, / to behold the beauty of Yahweh" (Ps 27:4). Keeping this "one thing" primary is critical to fostering a cultural environment in which people are inwardly renewed and have their priorities set by the gospel.

Included here also is the whole calendar of parish life events (Christmas, Easter, summer youth retreat, etc.) which shape the life of the local church and its culture. A church's plan of movement together through time, bearing witness to what God has done, is doing, and promised to do in the future, is of utmost importance to its culture. A culture, for instance, that celebrates Martin Luther King Jr. Day is different from one that does not. So also, a church's culture is profoundly shaped by the calendrical map of events which mark the passing of the year.

Healthy church cultures will lean into the biblical and historical pattern of seasons and festivals which proclaim the gospel. Unhealthy churches will tend to see the marks on a calendar as having meaning insofar as they "do" or "achieve" something immediately measurable on the scales of contemporary society's definitions of success.

Doctrine

The next key aspect of a church culture's environment is the church's formal doctrinal or dogmatic theology: the confessions, founding documents of a denomination, creeds, catechisms, statement of belief, values and vision statement, etc. A life-giving church culture is one that is normed by Scripture's authoritative standard and whose formal theology can be clearly drawn from and reckoned by the Bible.

It is imperative that the local church must be consistent with the denomination and/or tradition in which it finds itself a part. There is nothing more disastrous than a teaching or pastoral team that cannot actually abide with the ecclesial and theological commitments of their respective tradition.

Additionally a local church culture must be very clear about where there is room for the variety of its people (e.g., eschatology), while being also abundantly clear about the theological parameters on which its members must be unified (e.g., the literal resurrection of Jesus). Church cultures that are not clear about this perpetrate the very "church culture hurt" that so many folks today seem to have. Either they will have no room for any kind of variance from the pastor's understanding, or they will lose themselves, and perhaps their share in the faith, in a flood of confusion about those very things on which everyone in the local church must be unified (e.g., paedobaptism). Without clarity and intentionality around the church's theological culture, it will risk being co-opted either by the whim of people in power or the dogma of whatever prevailing social trends demand obeisance.

Policy

A final aspect of the church's cultural environment is what I will call "policy"—by which I mean the regulations, rules, standards, postures, staff job descriptions, calendars, etc., which shape the relationships and the persons within it. This includes everything from high-level, denomination-wide canons or the local articles of incorporation to the communication processes, codes of conduct, or safe-church procedures of day-to-day operation.

These things are best understood as *tools* and not so much as *norms*. But these tools within a local ecclesial body play a significant role in shaping the environment of a local church culture. They establish the procedures for hiring new culture-shaping staff members. They place boundaries around the kinds of relationships pastors may have with the people under their care. They designate the powers and accountabilities that the leadership has. The list goes on. These kinds of things answer questions such as: "Is my kid safe at church?" and "What is the

formal relationship between the staff and the head pastor?” Walking into a church, one can feel the effects of these policies.

A church committed to fostering a gospel-oriented and life-giving culture ought to aim at the kinds of procedures and policies that make human relationships in the church flourish, making room for good things to run wild. They should not be primarily motivated to limit human interaction in order to remove any possibility of liability. Rather, they should convey that each individual is known and cared for.

Making sure that each individual is known (not everyone can know everyone, people can still be known by others) is, in fact, a much wiser avenue for policy health in a church. No amount of policy will be as effective against threats to the health, safety, and integrity of the members of a local church as thick bonds of human knowledge. Doing full background checks for church staff, for instance, can either be motivated by a desire for control or by a desire to truly know and, now knowing, guard and show care for those for whom it is needed. These kinds of policies, in other words, if they are to be healthy, must be akin to a shepherd’s holy curiosity about the welfare of his flock—not like an industrial factory-manager’s fear of human interaction slowing down production.

Here are some questions to ask regarding your church’s environment:

- How does the church’s worshiping and emotional culture shape and form the affections and hopes of its members?
- Does this church foster a culture in which the love of God and the worship of God are central to life? Or does it foster a culture in which other things, even good things, take preeminence over worship and prayer?
- What is this church’s theological position?
- How does this church communicate its unique position?
- Does the church’s cultural posture about its position undercut or support its theological life?
- Does this church clearly articulate the primacy of Scripture and its relation to the tradition/denomination of which it is a part?
- Do the policies of the church serve to foster in the congregation a real care and concern for its members?
- How are this church’s pastors and leaders held accountable?
- What are the expectations for how to respond when church crises arise?
- Do the policies of this church seek to love and protect the needy and the vulnerable?

- How does this church conceive its role in moving through the calendrical year in a way that proclaims Jesus as our Lord and Savior?
- What are the processes for responding to conflict in the local church?

About Logos

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