

IX 9Marks

Foreword by David Platt

NINE MARKS *of a*

HEALTHY CHURCH

MARK DEVER



"It is astonishing that the apostle Paul describes the local gathering of Christians as 'the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood' (Acts 20:28, ESV). That raises the stakes of church life and health and mission about as high as it can be. We are dealing with a blood-bought body of people. I do not want human ideas. I want God's word about the church. I turn with hope and confidence to Mark Dever's radically biblical commitment. Few people today have thought more or better about what makes a church biblical and healthy. I thank God for the book and for 9Marks ministries."

John Piper, Founder, desiringGod.org; Chancellor, Bethlehem College & Seminary

"Books on the church are a dime a dozen. This one is different. Only rarely does a book on the church come along that marries responsible biblical and theological reflection to godly, experienced, good judgment and practical application. This book is one of them. If you are a Christian leader, be careful of the work you are now holding in your hand: it may change your life and ministry."

D. A. Carson, Research Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

"In a day when a church is most likely evaluated on her cosmetics, it's vital to know how to assess her true health. They put cosmetics on corpses! Mark Dever gives the biblical criteria for discerning the spiritual well-being of a church, not what it looks like on the outside before the world, but what it is on the inside before God. This is a foundational work which I highly recommend."

John MacArthur, Pastor, Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, California

"*Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* is one of the very best, most readable, and useful books for learning how to lead a church into spiritual change. Its focus is not on church growth but on church health, which is the proper goal of a God-centered ministry. Each chapter gives the biblical rationale and offers practical suggestions for preaching, evangelism, discipleship, or some other aspect of church life. These principles and practices have been tested in Dever's own dynamic ministry as senior pastor of a thriving urban congregation."

Philip Graham Ryken, President, Wheaton College

"Postmodern America is awash with spirituality—but not with authentic Christianity. Clear evidence of this fact is seen in the loss of a biblical ecclesiology in so many sectors. Reformation is always directed to the church—and we must pray to see the church reformed in our age. Mark Dever points toward a truly biblical recovery of the New Testament church in his manifesto, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*. Every page is loaded with thoughtful analysis and careful consideration. It belongs in the hands of every faithful pastor and all those who pray for reformation in this age."

R. Albert Mohler Jr., President and Joseph Emerson Brown Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“The future of biblical Christianity in the Western world is inextricably bound to the future of the local church. Mark Dever knows this, and his *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* is a biblical prescription for faithfulness.”

J. Ligon Duncan III, Chancellor, CEO, and John E. Richards
Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology,
Reformed Theological Seminary

“A powerful and passionate call for congregations to take seriously their responsibilities, for the glory of God and the saving of lost souls.”

Timothy George, Founding Dean, Beeson Divinity School; General Editor,
Reformation Commentary on Scripture

“In the tradition of Martyn Lloyd-Jones and John Stott, Mark Dever calls the church to rediscover her biblical heritage. Perhaps never in history has the church tried so hard to be relevant to a culture and become less relevant in doing so! While many modern church gurus encourage us to be ‘in the world,’ Mark reminds us that our calling is to do so without being ‘of the world.’ This volume is consumed with church ‘being’ rather than church ‘doing.’ After all, being comes before doing, for what we ultimately ‘do’ is always determined by who we ‘are.’ Let the church be the church! Read it and reap!”

O. S. Hawkins, President and Chief Executive Officer,
GuideStone Financial Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention

“For a young pastor wrestling with questions of what success and faithfulness look like for a church, Mark Dever’s book is a godsend. It helps you see past the hype and fanfare of numbers, statistics, and the latest methodology. Instead it guides you back to the old paths and the simple, world-changing beauty of God’s plan for the local church.”

Joshua Harris, author, *Dug Down Deep*

“Books that affirm the priority of the church are rare. Books that define the practice of the local church from the pages of Scripture rather than from cultural trends are even more rare. Mark Dever has given us just such a book. Written by a pastor and theologian who has built a strong local church in Washington, DC, this is the best book I have read on this topic of critical importance.”

C. J. Mahaney, Senior Pastor, Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville

Nine Marks of a Healthy Church

Third Edition

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The Gospel and Personal Evangelism

What Is a Healthy Church?

The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made

The Message of the New Testament: Promises Kept

The Deliberate Church: Building Your Ministry on the Gospel,
with Paul Alexander

NINE MARKS *of a* HEALTHY CHURCH

Third Edition

Mark Dever

Foreword by David Platt

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Foreword

Nine Marks of a Healthy Church

David Platt

To my shame, I used to sleep through discussions of ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church). I would think to myself, “Does all of this really matter?” Unfortunately, I don’t think I was alone. All across our culture and all around the world, we as Christians are prone to cheapen the church in different ways.

In our independence, we ignore the church. We are self-reliant, self-sufficient people, and the thought of mutual submission, accountability, and interdependence seems foreign, if not frightening, to us. We sometimes pride ourselves on independence from the church, as some self-professing Christians say, “I can grow in Christ and even accomplish more for Christ doing things on my own, apart from the church.”

Further, in our pragmatism, we pollute the church. We’re fixated on what works, and if something doesn’t seem to work according to our standards of success, then it must not be right. Oftentimes, with the best of motives, we do whatever it takes to attract as many people as possible to the church. Almost un-

knowingly, however, we subtly compromise God's Word in our efforts to supposedly reach the world. As we draw people into the church, we end up polluting the very church we are drawing them into.

Even in our missions, we minimize the church. Parachurch organizations have arisen all over our culture focusing on various facets of ministry, yet many of them virtually ignore the local church. Or they dilute the church in dangerous ways. Many mission organizations boast thousands of churches planted in different countries, yet their definitions of "church" are frankly untrue. Biblically, the construction of a building or the gathering of two or three believers does not constitute a church. If we want to truly accomplish the Great Commission, we would be wise not to minimize *the agent* that God has promised to bless for the spread of the gospel in the world: the local church.

We also cheapen the church when we elevate our traditions over God's truth. So much of our approach to the church today is based upon the ways we've done it before instead of upon the Word God has spoken forever. We value our preferences over God's priorities, organizing the church around what is most pleasing to us instead of what is most faithful to Christ. In the end, we practically define the church according to our own personal comforts. A church is a good church if it makes us feel good, so we hop and shop from one church to the next, looking for the place and programs that most cater to our needs.

For all of these reasons, we desperately need to hear what God says about his church in our day. Instead of cheapening the church, we need to recover a cherishing of the church. Over and above the cultural tides and church traditions that dominate our contemporary thinking, we need to ask God, "What do *you* value in *your* church?"

We need to ask this question in the church because we desire God's glory in the world. According to Jesus in John 17, the unity of the church is intended to be a reflection of the Godhead. A watch-

ing world will know that Jesus has been sent from God when they see his glory on display in his people (John 17:20–23).

We need to ask God what he values in his church not only because we desire his glory, but also because we adore his Son and we treasure his Spirit. Jesus is the one who established the church, and the church is his to grow, not ours to manipulate. Jesus is the one who purchased the church; in the words of Acts 20:28, “He obtained [the church] with his own blood” (ESV). And the church is the chosen dwelling place for the Holy Spirit of God (1 Cor. 3:16–17; Eph. 2:19–22).

We need to ask God what he values in his church because we love his gospel in our lives and we want to accomplish his mission in the world. The church is the means God has established for the defense, display, and declaration of the gospel. God has designed this distinct community called the church to satisfy and gratify his people while we spread his grace among all peoples.

As a result of all these things, we need, want, and long to hear God’s Word concerning God’s will for his church. For this reason, I am grateful to God for this book. As a pastor swimming amid a sea of principles and practices for church health and church growth, this one book has impacted and influenced my understanding of the church far above any other. Such impact and influence owe to the fact that this book is grounded in God’s Word. The nine marks contained here may not be the marks you would immediately identify as central in the church. You may think some of them are questionable and others of them are controversial. But brother or sister, these nine marks are biblical, and that is why they are so valuable.

Mark Dever has not written this book in an attempt to appeal to popular trends in our time. He has written this book in an effort to be faithful to divine truth that supersedes all time. I am overjoyed to see yet another edition of it, which I trust is a testimony to the timelessness of the Word it reflects. In addition, this book is a testimony to a pastor and a people at Capitol Hill Baptist Church

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in Washington, DC. As they would humbly admit, they are not the perfect church. But after many hours in front of crowds and many days behind the scenes with this pastor, and after worshiping, praying, and serving alongside this people, I can confidently commend to you not only this book, but also this pastor and this people. Simply put, together they are a clear, compassionate, poignant, powerful, beautiful, and most of all biblical portrayal of the bride of Christ.

In turn, my hope and prayer is that these nine marks would be found in increasing measure in the church that I pastor, in churches across our culture, and in churches around the world. May we leave behind all cheapening of the church to cherish the church in ways that reflect God's grace to us and resound to God's glory through us. "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen" (Eph. 3:20–21 ESV).

Preface to the Third Edition (2013)

Few authors get a third chance to try to get a message across to their readers. As I finish this revision, I'm now closing in on twenty years of pastoring the same congregation. When I first preached this series of sermons to our church, I hadn't been pastoring them even five years. My family was young. Our church was small and older. Now the church is larger and younger and my family is smaller and older. It is from this changing perspective that I take up the topic of church health yet again.

For this opportunity I am profoundly grateful to our friends at Crossway. Lane Dennis, Al Fisher, and many others have been allies in ministry since before they first approached me about doing this book some fifteen years ago.

The nine marks that I've chosen to cover seem every bit as relevant now as they did then. Many other aspects of the church can be fruitfully discussed, but I would like to continue pressing on these topics. Conversations with pastors and other church leaders in the intervening years have done nothing to cause me to think otherwise.

In this revised third edition, some arguments have been added (on, for example, expository preaching, the nature of the gospel, and complementarianism), illustrations updated, and appendices changed and added. But the basic structure of the book remains the same.

Preface (2013)

Extensive help has been given to me in these revisions by friends too numerous to mention. Three that I cannot omit, however, because of the amount of attention they gave to this project and the help they were to me, are Mike McKinley, Bobby Jamieson, and Jaime Owens. Beyond that, my dear wife Connie reread the entire book, making thoughtful comments for the improvement of it throughout.

As with every edition, all errors of expression and judgment are my own. For any good done through it, all the glory goes to God.

Mark Dever
Senior Pastor
The Capitol Hill Baptist Church
Washington, DC
September 2012

Preface to the New Expanded Edition (2004)

Ten Years of Nine Marks

As I'm writing this preface to the new expanded edition of *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, I'm also about to celebrate ten years pastoring the same congregation. To some reading this sentence, that sounds like an eternity; to others, it may seem as if I've just begun. To be honest, to me it feels a bit like both.

I confess that pastoring a church sometimes feels like difficult work. There have been times when my tears have not been tears of joy, but of frustration, or sadness, or even worse. The people who are least happy and who leave have often been those who have required the most time, and who have talked the most to others as they have gone. And sometimes their talk has been neither edifying nor encouraging. They have little thought of how their actions affect others—the pastor, the pastor's family, those who have loved them and worked with them, young Christians who are confused, others to whom they talk wrongly. There are things I work for that don't work out, and things I care about that nobody else does. Some hopes go unfulfilled, and occasionally even tragedies intrude. It is in the nature of sheep to stray and of wolves to eat. I guess if I can't deal with that, I should just get out of under-shepherding.

But most of my work is, to be honest, exhilarating! I thank God for those many times when I have known tears of joy. In God's grace, the number of people leaving the congregation unhappy has been dwarfed by the number of people leaving with tears of gratitude, and by those coming in. We have known growth in our congregation that hasn't been dramatic when considered in any one year, but which staggers me when I pause and look back. I've seen young men become converted and then eventually go into the ministry. While I'm writing this, two of the men now on our pastoral staff were first friends of mine when they were non-Christians. I studied the Gospel of Mark with them. By God's grace, I saw both of them come to know the Lord, and I now sit and listen to them preach the everlasting gospel to others. My eyes moisten even while I write these words.

The church as a whole has prospered. It seems clearly healthy. Strains in relationships are dealt with in godly ways. A culture of discipleship seems to have taken root. People go from here to seminary, or to their work as teachers, architects, or businessmen with more resolve in both their work and their evangelism. We've seen many marriages and young families begun. We've seen political types instructed in their worldviews; Christians in all walks of life helped in their understanding of the gospel; and discipline exercised to try to disabuse those who may be self-deceived. Pain has been exceeded by joy. God's grace toward us seems only to increase with every life encountered.

As God's Word has been taught, the congregation's appetite for good teaching has increased. A palpable sense of expectation has developed in the congregation. There is excitement as the congregation gathers. Older saints are cared for through their difficult days. One dear man's ninety-sixth birthday was celebrated by a bunch of the younger people in the church taking him to McDonald's (his favorite restaurant)! Wounded marriages have been helped; wounded people have found God's healing. Young people have come to appreciate hymns, and older people the vigorous

singing of choruses. Countless hours have been given in quiet service to the building up of others. Courageous choices have been prayed for, made, and celebrated. New friendships are being made every day. Young men who have spent time with us here are now pastoring congregations in Kentucky and Michigan and Georgia and Connecticut and Illinois. They are preaching in Hawaii and Iowa. Missions giving has gone from a few thousand dollars a year to a few hundred thousand dollars a year. Our compassion for the lost has grown. I could go on. God has obviously been good to us. We have known health.

My Surprising Change

I didn't intend all of this when I came. I didn't come with a plan or program to bring all this about. I came with a commitment to God's Word, to give myself to knowing, believing, and teaching it. I had seen the blight of the unconverted church member, and was particularly concerned about that, but I didn't have a carefully worked out strategy to deal with the problem.

In God's providence, I had done a doctorate focusing on a Puritan (Richard Sibbes) whose writings about the individual Christian I loved, but whose concessions on the church came to seem increasingly unwise to me. Unhealthy churches cause few problems for the healthiest Christians; but they are cruel taxes on the growth of the youngest and weakest Christians. They prey on those who don't understand Scripture well. They mislead spiritual children. They even take the curious hopes of non-Christians that there might be another way to live, and seem to deny it. Bad churches are terribly effective antimissionary forces. I deeply lament sin in my own life, and sin's corporate magnification in the life of so many churches. They seem to make Jesus out to be a liar when he promised life to the full (John 10:10).

This all became more central to my life when, in 1994, I became the senior pastor of the congregation I now serve. The responsibility weighed on my mind. Texts such as James 3:1 ("judged more

strictly”) and Hebrews 13:17 (“must give an account”) loomed larger in my mind. Circumstances conspired to emphasize to me the importance with which God regards the local church. I thought of a statement by nineteenth-century Scottish pastor and trainer of pastors, John Brown, who, in a letter of paternal counsel to one of his pupils newly ordained over a small congregation, wrote,

I know the vanity of your heart, and that you will feel mortified that your congregation is very small, in comparison with those of your brethren around you; but assure yourself on the word of an old man, that when you come to give an account of them to the Lord Christ, at his judgment-seat, you will think you have had enough.¹

As I looked out over the congregation I had charge of, I felt the weightiness of such an accounting to God.

But it was ultimately through preaching expositional sermons, serially going through book after book, that all of the Bible’s teachings on the church became more central to me. It began to seem obviously a farce that we claimed to be Christians but didn’t love each other. Sermons on John and 1 John, Wednesday night Bible studies going through James for three years, and conversations about membership and church covenants all came together.

The “each other” and “one another” passages began to come alive and en flesh the theological truths that I had known about God caring for his church. As I’ve preached through Ephesians 2–3, it has become clear to me that the church is the center of God’s plan to display his wisdom to the heavenly beings. When Paul spoke to the Ephesian elders, he referred to the church as something that God “bought with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). And, of course, on the road to Damascus earlier, when Saul was interrupted on his course of persecuting Christians, the risen Christ did not ask Saul why he persecuted these Christians, or even the church; rather, Christ so identified with his church that the accusing question he put to Saul was, “Why do you persecute me?”

(Acts 9:4). The church was clearly central in God's eternal plan, in his sacrifice, and in his continuing concern.

I've come to see that love is largely local. And the local congregation is the place which claims to display this love for all the world to see. So Jesus taught his disciples in John 13:34–35, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." I have seen friends and family alienated from Christ because they perceive this or that local church to have been such a terrible place. And, on the other hand, I have seen friends and family come to Christ because they have seen exactly this love that Jesus taught and lived—love for one another, the kind of selfless love that he showed—and they've felt the natural human attraction to it. So the congregation—the gathered people of God as the sounding board of the Word—has become more central to my understanding of evangelism, and of how we should pray and plan to evangelize. The local church is God's evangelism plan. The local church is God's evangelism program.

Over these last ten years, the congregation has also become more central to my understanding of how we are to discern true conversion in others, and how we are to have assurance of it ourselves. I remember being struck by 1 John 4:20–21 when preparing to preach on it: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. . . . Whoever loves God must also love his brother." James 1 and 2 carries the same message. This love doesn't seem to be optional.

More recently, this consideration of the centrality of the congregation has brought about in my thinking a new respect for the local congregation's discipline—both formative and corrective. We've had some painful cases here, and some wonderful recoveries; and all of us are clearly still works in progress. But it has become crystal clear that if we are to depend upon each other in our congregations, discipline must be part of discipleship. And if there

is to be the kind of discipline that we see in the New Testament, we must know and be known by others, and we must be committed to one another. We must also have some trust of authority. All the practicalities of trusting authority in marriage, home, and church are hammered out on the local level. Misunderstanding these matters and coming to dislike and resent authority seems very near to what the fall was all about. Conversely, understanding these matters seems very near to the heart of God's gracious work of reestablishing his relationship with us—a relationship of authority and love together. I've come to see that relationship with a local congregation is central to individual discipleship. The church isn't an optional extra; it's the shape of your following Jesus. I've come to understand that now in a way I never did before I came to this church. And I think that I'm seeing something of the health that God intends us to experience in a congregation.

What This Book Is Not

I should just say another word about what this book is not. Let me front-load your disappointment. This book leaves out a lot. Many of our favorite topics may not be covered. Rereading this book now, after a few years of others reading it too, I am even more aware of much I have not said. Friends have said to me, "What about prayer?" or "Where's worship?" John Piper asked, "Mark, why isn't missions in this?" I don't really like to disappoint friends who've taken the time to read the book; and I certainly don't like disappointing John Piper! But this book is not an exhaustive ecclesiology. We've been given good ideas for "more marks" that we could add. And a second edition might seem just the time to do this.

But we've decided not to. I continue to think that common errors in these particular nine matters are responsible for so much that goes wrong in our churches. It seems to me economical, strategic, faithful, and simply correct to continue to try to focus the attention of Christians on these particular matters. More missions, persevering prayer, wonderful worship—all will be best encour-

aged, I think, by tending better to these basic matters. Nobody is going to believe in the need that missions presupposes if they're not taught about that need from the Word. No one is going to go if they don't have an understanding of God's great plan to redeem a people for himself. And they won't do missions well if they don't understand the gospel.

If people do begin to think more carefully about conversion, it will affect their prayers. If we are more biblical in our practice of evangelism, we will find ourselves giving more of our prayer time to praying for non-Christians, and we will realize more of why we must pray for people to be converted. If we come to understand more about biblical church membership, we will find our corporate prayer times more central, better attended, more invigorating to our faith, and more challenging and reordering to our priorities.

If we begin to appreciate again the significance of church discipline, our times of corporate worship will be infused with more of a sense of awe at God's grace. If we find ourselves in churches that are increasingly marked by discipleship and spiritually flourishing members, the excitement and anticipation for singing praises and confessing sins together will grow. If we work to be led by those who meet the Bible's qualifications, we will find joy and confidence in our times together growing, we will be more free and enlivened in our times together, and our obedience will be more consistent.

This book isn't a complete inventory of every sign of health. It is intended to be a list of crucial marks that will lead to such a full experience.

An Outward-Looking Church

If I had to add one more mark to what you're about to read, it wouldn't be missions or prayer or worship; but it would touch on all of those things. I think that I would add that we want our congregations to be outward-looking. We are to be upwardly focused—God-centered. But we are also, I think, supposed to reflect

God's own love as we look out on other people and on other congregations.

This can show itself in many ways. I long for our congregation to integrate better our vision for global missions and our efforts in local evangelism. If we have a commitment to help evangelize an unreached people group abroad, why haven't we done a better job in trying to find members of this people group in our metropolitan area? Why aren't our missions and evangelism better integrated?

We do pray in the pastoral prayer each Sunday morning for the prosperity of the gospel in other lands and through other local congregations. We're just now bringing someone on staff to help us plant another church. We as a church help to sponsor 9Marks, and through it work with many other churches for their benefit. We have "Weekenders" at which we welcome guest pastors and elders, seminarians and other church leaders to be with us for a weekend. They sit in on a real elders meeting, in real membership classes. We put on special lectures and have attendees in our homes to eat and talk. We have internships for those preparing for the pastorate. We have curriculum we write and talks we give. All of this is for the building up of other congregations. As a pastor, I am certain that I need to realize that, under God, the local church is responsible for raising up the next generation of leaders. No Bible college, course, or seminary can do this. And such raising up of new leaders—for here and abroad—should be one of the goals of our church.

Looking back, I'm encouraged by how I've seen God's work here and in so many other congregations. In this congregation's life together I've seen evident, increasing, joyful, God-glorifying health.

Some people don't think this image of "health" is a good one. They may think that it's too man-centered, or too therapeutic. But as I've considered this, it seems to me more and more that health is actually a very good image for soundness, wholeness, correctness, and rightness.

Jesus talked of the health of our bodies as an image of our spiritual state (see Matt. 6:22–23 [Luke 11:33–34]; cf. 7:17–18). He

said that, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick” (Matt. 9:12 [Mark 2:17; Luke 5:31]). Jesus brought soundness to people’s bodies to point to the soundness he offered for their souls (see Matt. 12:13; 14:35–36; 15:31; Mark 5:34; Luke 7:9–10; 15:27; John 7:23). The disciples in Acts continued the same health-giving Christ-exalting ministry (Acts 3:16; 4:10).

Paul used the image of the church as Christ’s own body, and he described its prosperity in organic images of growth and health. For example, Paul wrote that “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. 4:15–16). Paul described correct doctrine in Titus 2:1 as “sound” or “healthy” doctrine. John greeted fellow Christians by telling them that, “I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well” (3 John 2).

None of this is to say that we can know it’s God’s will for his children to experience good physical health in this life, but simply to say that health is a natural image that God himself has sanctioned for that which is right and correct. As I said above, some Christians, out of concern over a wrongly therapeutic culture, shy away from using such images. But the abuse of the language shouldn’t detract from its appropriate use. And with such understanding of health—its connection to life and prosperity; the objective norms of what is good and right that are presumed in it; the joy involved in it; the care to be taken over it—we can easily see the wisdom in our desiring to pursue the spiritual health of our own souls, and to work for healthy churches. It is to that end that this book was first written. And it is to that end that I pray that God will now use it in your life, and in the life of your church.

Mark Dever
Washington, DC
June 2004

Introduction

Author and theologian David Wells reported some interesting findings of a survey taken in seven seminaries in 1993. One in particular struck me: “These students are dissatisfied with the current status of the church. They believe it has lost its vision, and they want more from it than it is giving them.” Wells himself agreed: “Neither their desire nor their judgement in this regard is amiss. Indeed, it is not until we experience a holy dissatisfaction with things as they are that we can plant the seeds of reform. Of course, dissatisfaction alone is not enough.”¹

Dissatisfaction, indeed, is not enough. We find dissatisfaction with the church on every hand. Bookstore shelves groan under the weight of books with prescriptions for what ails her. Conference speakers live off the congregational diseases that always seem to survive their remedies. Pastors wrongly exult and tragically burn out, confused and uncertain. Christians are left to wander like sheep without a shepherd. But dissatisfaction is not enough. We need something more. We need positively to recover what the church is to be. What is the church in her nature and essence? What is to distinguish and mark the church?

For Historians

Christians often talk about “marks of the church.” In his first published book, *Men with a Message*, John Stott summed up the teaching of Christ to the churches in the book of Revelation this way: “These then are the marks of the ideal Church—love, suffering,

holiness, sound doctrine, genuineness, evangelism and humility. They are what Christ desires to find in His churches as He walks among them.”²

But this language has a more formal history as well, which must be acknowledged before engaging in the task of a book-length consideration of “nine marks of a healthy church.”

Christians have long talked of the “marks of the church.” Here, as in so much of the church’s thinking—from earlier definitions of Christ and the Trinity to Jonathan Edwards’s musings upon the work of the Spirit—the question of how to distinguish true from false has led to a clearer definition of the true. The topic of the church did not become a center of widespread formal theological debate until the Reformation. Before the sixteenth century, the church was more assumed than discussed. It was considered to be the means of grace upon which the rest of theology rested. Roman Catholic theology uses the phrase “the mystery of the church” to refer to the depth of the reality of the church, which can never be fully explored. Practically, the church of Rome links its claim to being the true, visible church to the succession of Peter as the bishop of Rome.

With the advent of the radical criticisms of Martin Luther and others in the sixteenth century, however, discussion of the nature of the church itself became inevitable. As one scholar explains, “The Reformation made the gospel, not ecclesiastical organization, the test of the true church.”³ Calvin questioned Rome’s claims to be the true church on the basis of apostolic succession: “Especially in the organization of the church nothing is more absurd than to lodge the succession in persons alone to the exclusion of teaching.”⁴ Since that time, therefore, the *notae, signa, symbola, criteria*, or *marks* of the church have been a necessary focus of discussion.

In 1530, Melancthon drew up the Augsburg Confession, which in Article 7 stated that “this Church is the congregation of the saints in which the gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments are rightly administered. And for that true unity of the Church it

is enough to have unity of belief concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments.”⁵ In his *Loci Communes* (1543), Melancthon repeated the idea: “The marks which point out the church are the pure gospel and the proper use of the sacraments.”⁶ Since the Reformation, Protestants have typically viewed these two marks—the preaching of the gospel and the proper administering of the sacraments—as delineating the true church over against imposters.

In 1553 Thomas Cranmer produced the Forty-Two Articles of the Church of England. While not officially promulgated until later in the century as part of the Elizabethan settlement, they show the thinking of the great English Reformer concerning the church. Article 19 read (as it still does in the Thirty-Nine Articles): “The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men in which the pure word of God is preached and the sacraments be duly administered, according to Christ’s ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.”⁷

In John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the issue of the distinction of the false from the true church was taken up in book 4. In chapter 1, section 9, Calvin wrote, “Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.”⁸

A third mark of the church, right discipline, has often been added since then, though it is widely acknowledged that this is implied in the second mark—the sacraments being rightly administered.⁹ The Belgic Confession (1561), Article 29, said,

The marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if she maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church.¹⁰

Edmund Clowney has summarized these marks as “true preaching of the Word; proper observance of the sacraments; and faithful exercise of church discipline.”¹¹

We can see in these two marks—gospel proclamation and observance of the sacraments—both the creation and the preservation of the church—the fountain of God’s truth and the lovely vessel to contain and display it. The church is generated by the right preaching of the Word; the church is contained and distinguished by the right administration of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. (Presumed in this latter mark is that church discipline is being practiced.)

The Church Today Reflects the World

This book is a lesser thing than a consideration of these marks of the church. I accept the traditional Protestant understanding of the true church being distinguished or marked off from the false by the right preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments. But inside the set of all true local churches, some are more healthy and others less so. This book describes some marks that distinguish the more healthy churches from the true but more sickly ones. Therefore this book does not attempt to say everything that should be said about the church. To use theological language, it is not a full ecclesiology. To use an image, it is more a prescription than a course in general anatomy of the body of Christ.

Certainly no church is perfect. But, thank God, many imperfect churches are healthy. Nevertheless, I fear that many more are not—even among those that affirm the full deity of Christ and the full authority of Scripture. Why is this the case?

Some say the ill health of many churches today is related to various cultural conditions that have infested the church. Carl Braaten has expressed his alarm over the presence of a subjective, ahistorical neopaganism in some churches.¹² Os Guinness, in his provocative little book *Dining with the Devil*, has suggested that the

problem is secularization. Guinness writes that even theologically conservative churches that self-consciously oppose secularism are nevertheless often unwitting bastions of a secularized version of Christianity, and that “the two most easily recognizable hallmarks of secularization in America are the exaltation of numbers and of technique.”¹³

Some of the most common scapegoats have been the institutions that prepare people for the ministry. Richard Muller has described something of what he has seen of the seminaries’ defaulting on their stewardship:

Seminaries have been guilty of creating several generations of clergy and teachers who are fundamentally ignorant of the materials of the theological task and prepared to argue (in their own defense) the irrelevance of classical study to the practical operation of ministry. The sad result has been the loss, in many places, of the central, cultural function of the church in the West and the replacement of a culturally and intellectually rich clergy with a group of practitioners and operations-directors who can do almost anything except make sense of the church’s theological message in the contemporary context.¹⁴

This book, then, is a plan for recovering biblical preaching and church leadership at a time when too many congregations are languishing in a notional and nominal Christianity, with all the resulting pragmatism and pettiness. The purpose of too many evangelical churches has fallen from glorifying God to growing larger, assuming that numerical growth, however achieved, must glorify God.

One problem, theologically and even practically, with lowering our vision is the self-defeating pragmatism that results:

If the aim of the church is to grow, the way to do it is to make people feel good. And when people discover that there are other ways to feel good, they leave the church they no longer need. The relevant church is sowing the seeds of its own irrelevance,

and losing its identity to boot. The big question today has become how to get the baby boomers back, what techniques and methods will do the trick. Polls are taken on what baby boomers want and churches are competing to make sure they get it.¹⁵

Neopaganism, secularization, pragmatism, and ignorance are all serious problems facing churches today. But I am convinced that the problem most fundamentally lies in the way Christians conceive of their churches. Too many churches misunderstand the priority that they are to give to God's revelation and to the nature of the regeneration he offers therein. Reevaluating these must be a part of any solution to the problems of today's churches.

Popular Models of the Church

Three models of the church are found today in my own association of churches (Southern Baptist Convention) and in many others as well. We might summarize these models as liberal, seeker-sensitive, and traditional.

Drawing with bold lines for a minute, we might conceive of the liberal model as having F. D. E. Schleiermacher as its patron saint. In an attempt to be successful in evangelism, Schleiermacher tried to rethink the gospel in contemporary terms.

We might find something of the same goal in the seeker-sensitive model, seen in the writing and ministry of Bill Hybels and his associates at Willow Creek and the many churches associated with them. They have tried to rethink the church, like the liberals, with the goal of evangelism always in mind—from the outside in, again, in an attempt to make the gospel's relevance obvious to all.

The patron saint of traditional evangelical churches could be said to be Billy Graham (or perhaps one of several other great evangelists of the present or preceding generation). Again, the motive is to be successful in evangelism, with the local church treated as a stationary evangelistic rally. Actually, the "traditional" evangelical church in America is much like the seeker-sensitive model, only to an older culture—the culture of fifty or a hundred years ago.

So instead of Willow Creek skits, the First Baptist Women's Trio is regarded as the thing that will draw nonbelievers in.

While there are important doctrinal distinctions between these various kinds of churches, all three have important commonalities. All assume that evident relevance and response is the key indicator of success. The social ministries of the liberal church, the music of the seeker-sensitive church, and the programs of the traditional evangelical church all must work well and work *now* to be considered relevant and successful. Depending on the type of church, success may mean so many fed, so many involved, or so many saved, but the assumption the three kinds of churches share is that the fruit of a successful church is readily apparent.

From both a biblical and a historical standpoint, this assumption seems incalculably dangerous. Biblically, we find that God's Word is replete with images of delayed blessing. God, for his own inscrutable purposes, tests and tries his Jobs and his Josephs, his Jeremiahs, and even Jesus himself. The trials of Job, the beating and selling of Joseph, the imprisonment and mocking of Jeremiah, the rejection and crucifixion of Jesus all remind us that God moves in mysterious ways. He calls us more fundamentally to a relationship of trust with him than to a full understanding of him and his ways. The parables of Jesus are full of stories of the kingdom of God beginning in surprisingly small ways but growing finally to a glorious prominence. Biblically, we must realize that the size of what our eyes see is rarely a good way to estimate the greatness of something in the eyes of God.

From a historical standpoint, we would do well to remember that looks can be deceiving. When a culture is saturated with Christianity and biblical knowledge, when God's common grace and even his special grace are spread widely, one might perceive obvious blessings. Biblical morality may be affirmed by all. The church may be widely esteemed. The Bible may be taught even in secular schools. In such a time, it may be hard to distinguish between the apparent and the real.

But in a time when Christianity is being widely and rapidly disowned, where evangelism is considered intolerant or even classified as a hate crime, we find the stakes are changed. On the one hand, the culture to which we would conform in order to be relevant becomes so inextricably entwined with antagonism to the gospel that to conform to it must result in a loss of the gospel itself. On the other hand, it is more difficult for nominal Christianity to thrive. In such a day, we must rehear the Bible and reimagine the concept of successful ministry not as necessarily immediately fruitful but as demonstrably faithful to God's Word.

Great missionaries who have gone to non-Christian cultures must have known this. When they went to places where there were no obvious "fields white unto harvest" but only years and even decades of rejection, they must have had some other motivation to keep them going. William Carey was faithful in India and Adoniram Judson in Burma not because their immediate success showed them that they were being obviously relevant. They were faithful because the Spirit of God in them encouraged them to obedience and trust. We in the secular West must recover a sense of satisfaction in such biblical faithfulness. And we must recover it particularly in our lives together as Christians, in our churches.

Needed: A Different Model

We need a new model for the church. Actually, the model we need is an old one. Even though I'm writing a book about it, I'm not quite sure what to call it. "Mere"? "Historic"? "Biblical"?

Simply put, we need churches that are self-consciously distinct from the culture. We need churches in which the key indicator of success is not evident results but persevering biblical faithfulness. We need churches that help us to recover those aspects of Christianity that are distinct from the world, and that unite us.

What follows is not intended to be a full portrait of this new (old) model of the church but a timely prescription. It focuses on two basic needs in our churches: preaching the message and leading disciples.

Preaching the Message

The first five marks of a healthy church we will consider reflect the concern to preach rightly the Word of God. *Mark One* is about preaching itself. It is a defense of the primacy of expository preaching as a reflection of the centrality of God's Word.

Why is the Word central? Why is it the instrument of creating faith? The Word is so central and so instrumental because the Word of the Lord holds out the object of our faith to us. It presents God's promise to us—from all kinds of individual promises (throughout the Bible) all the way to the great promise, the great hope, the great object of our faith, Christ himself. The Word presents that which we are to believe.

Then, as *Mark Two*, we consider the framework of this message: biblical theology. We must understand God's truth as a coherent whole, coming to us first and foremost as a revelation of himself. Questions of who God is and of what he is like can never be considered irrelevant to the practical matters of church life. Different understandings of God will lead us to worship him in different ways, and if some of those understandings are wrong, some of those ways in which we approach him can also be wrong. This is a major theme in the Bible, even if it is almost entirely neglected these days.

In *Mark Three* we consider the heart of the Christian message as we seek a biblical understanding of the gospel. How many other messages are churches hawking as the saving good news of Jesus Christ? And yet how discerning are we in how we understand the gospel ourselves, how we teach it, and how we train others to know it? Is our message, though larded with Christian pieties, basically a message of self-salvation, or is there something more in it? Does our gospel consist only of universal ethical truths for our daily lives, or are there once-for-all, historical, special saving actions of God in Christ at the root of it?

That brings us to the reception of the message, *Mark Four*: a biblical understanding of conversion. One of the most painful tasks

pastors face is trying to undo the damage of false converts who have been too quickly and thoughtlessly assured by an evangelist that they are indeed Christians. Such apparently charitable activity may lead to short bursts of excitement, involvement, and interest, but if an apparent conversion does not result in a changed life, then one begins to wonder at the unwitting cruelty of convincing such people that because they once prayed a prayer, they have fully investigated all the hope that God has for them in life. “If that failed,” we may leave them to think, “then Christianity has nothing more to offer me. No more hope. No more life. I tried, and it didn’t work.” We need churches to understand and teach what the Bible teaches about conversion.

Mark Five sets forth a biblical understanding of evangelism. If, in our evangelism, we imply that becoming a Christian is something that we do ourselves, we disastrously pass on our misunderstanding of the gospel and of conversion. John Broadus, well-known New Testament scholar and nineteenth-century preacher, wrote a catechism of Bible teaching and in it posed the question, “Does faith come before the new birth?” And he answered, “No, it is the new heart that truly repents and believes.”¹⁶ Broadus understood that in our evangelism we must be partners with the Holy Spirit, presenting the gospel but relying on the Holy Spirit of God to do the true convicting and convincing and converting. Are your church’s or your own evangelistic practices in line with this great truth?

Leading the Disciples

The other nexus of problems in today’s churches has to do with the right administration of the borders and markers of Christian identity. More generally put, they have to do with problems in leading disciples.

First, in *Mark Six*, we address the question of the whole framework for discipleship: a biblical understanding of church membership. In this past century, Christians have all but ignored biblical

teaching on the corporate nature of following Christ. Our churches are awash in self-centered narcissism, hyperindividualism thinly veiled in everything from “gift inventories” to “targeted churches” that “aren’t for everybody.” When we read 1 John or the Gospel of John, we see that Jesus never intended us to be Christians alone and that our love for others who aren’t just like us shows whether we truly love God.

Many churches today have problems with the basic definition of what it means to be a disciple. So in *Mark Seven* we explore a biblical understanding of church discipline. Is there any behavior that churches should not tolerate? Are any teachings in our churches “beyond the pale”? Do our churches indicate a concern for anything beyond their own institutional survival and expansion? Do we evidence an understanding that we bear the name of God and live either to his honor or to his shame? We need churches to recover the loving, regular, and wise practice of church discipline.

In *Mark Eight* we examine Christian discipleship and growth. Evangelism that does not result in discipleship is not only incomplete evangelism but is entirely misconceived. The solution is not that we need to do more evangelism but that we need to do it differently. We don’t simply need to remember to tell people to come to church after we have prayed the prayer with them; we need to tell them to count the cost before they pray that prayer!

Finally, *Mark Nine* focuses on the need to recover a biblical understanding of church leadership. Leadership in the church should not be granted as a response to secular gifts or position, to family relationships, or in recognition of length of service in the church. Leadership in the church should be invested in those who seem to evidence in their own lives, and who are able to promote in the life of the congregation as a whole, the edifying and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

The end and purpose of all this is the glory of God as we make him known. Throughout history, God has desired to make himself known. This is why he delivered Israel from Egypt in the exodus,

and why he delivered them again from the Babylonian exile. Scores of passages in Scripture tell of God's desire to make himself known (e.g., Ex. 7:5; Deut. 4:34–35; Job 37:6–7; Pss. 22:21–22; 106:8; Isa. 49:22–23; 64:4; Ezek. 20:34–38; 28:25–26; 36:11; 37:6; John 17:26). He has created the world and has done all that he has done for his own praise. And it is right and good that he should do so.

Calvin used to call this world the theater of God's splendor. Others have referred to history as one great parade culminating in the glory of God. Mark Ross has put it this way:

We are one of God's chief pieces of evidence. . . . Paul's great concern [in Ephesians 4:1–16] for the church is that the church manifest and display the glory of God, thus vindicating God's character against all the slander of demonic realms, the slander that God is not worth living for. . . . God has entrusted to His church the glory of His own name.¹⁷

Everyone—those who are church leaders and those who are not—is made in the image of God. We are to be walking pictures of the moral nature and righteous character of God, reflecting it around the universe for all to see—especially in our union with God through Christ. This, therefore, is what God calls us to and why he calls us to it. He calls us to join together with him, and together in our congregations, not for our glory but for his own.

This Book

This book comes from a series of sermons. According to George Barna, sermons should be easier to understand, less abstract, more spontaneous, shorter, filled with more stories of the preacher's personal experience, and they should even allow for the participation of the audience.¹⁸ Barna is not alone in suggesting that we do something to mitigate the one-sidedness and the bare appeal to reason that marks so much preaching, particularly expositional preaching. David Hilborn, in *Picking Up the Pieces*, has suggested the same thing.¹⁹ Permit me to suggest that the one-sidedness of

preaching is not only excusable but is actually important. If in our preaching we stand in the place of God, giving his Word by his Spirit to his people, then surely it is appropriate that it be one-sided—not that it should be one-sided in the sense that the one preaching is never to be questioned; but, in the event of preaching itself, the univocal character of God’s Word comes as a monologue to us, not hoping to elicit interest and participation but requiring that we respond. Something of this character must be retained. This does not mean that the sermon must be deliberately boring, obscure, or abstract. I hope that, in these sermons masquerading as chapters, something of a serious engagement with the great truths of the Bible and with the context today will come through.

OTHER RESOURCES

- For group study: *Built upon the Rock: The Church*, a seven-week inductive Bible study from 9Marks
- For pastoral application: *The Deliberate Church*, by Mark Dever and Paul Alexander
- For handing out to church members: *What Is a Healthy Church?*, by Mark Dever



Going Deeper with the Nine Marks

9Marks Healthy Church Study Guides

Designed as a companion to Mark Dever's *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, this series of 6–7 week studies explores the biblical foundations of key aspects of the church, helping Christians to live out those realities as members of a local body.

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