



**BUILT UPON
THE ROCK:
THE CHURCH**



Built upon the Rock: The Church

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Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Dual Identity inc.

First printing 2012

Printed in the United States of America

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-2524-7

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-2525-4

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-2526-1

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-2527-8

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

LB 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

Introduction	7
What a Church Is . . . and Isn't, <i>by Mark Dever</i>	9
WEEK 1	
The People of God	15
WEEK 2	
The Body of Christ	19
WEEK 3	
The Temple of the Spirit	23
WEEK 4	
The Living Church	27
WEEK 5	
The Growing Church	31
WEEK 6	
The Distinct Church	35
WEEK 7	
The God-Glorifying Church	41
Teacher's Notes	45

INTRODUCTION

What does the local church mean to you?

Maybe you love your church. You love the people. You love the preaching and the singing. You can't wait to show up on Sunday, and you cherish fellowship with other church members throughout the week.

Then again, maybe your church is just a place you show up to a couple times a month. You sneak in late, duck out early.

We at 9Marks are convinced that the local church is where God means to display his glory to the nations. And we want to help you catch this vision, together with your whole church.

The 9Marks Healthy Church Study Guides are a series of six- or seven-week studies on each of the “nine marks of a healthy church” plus one introductory study. These nine marks are the core convictions of our ministry. To provide a quick introduction to them, we've included a chapter from Mark Dever's book *What Is a Healthy Church?* with each study. We don't claim that these nine marks are the most important things about the church or the only important things about the church. But we do believe that they are biblical and therefore helpful for churches.

So, in these studies, we're going to work through the biblical foundations and practical applications of each mark. The ten studies are:

- *Built upon the Rock: The Church* (the introductory study)
- *Hearing God's Word: Expositional Preaching*
- *The Whole Truth about God: Biblical Theology*
- *God's Good News: The Gospel*
- *Real Change: Conversion*
- *Reaching the Lost: Evangelism*
- *Committing to One Another: Church Membership*

BUILT UPON THE ROCK

- *Guarding One Another: Church Discipline*
- *Growing One Another: Discipleship in the Church*
- *Leading One Another: Church Leadership*

Each session of these studies takes a close look at one or more passages of Scripture and considers how to apply it to the life of your congregation. We hope they are equally appropriate for Sunday schools, small groups, and other contexts where a group of two to two-hundred people can gather to discuss God's Word.

These studies are mainly driven by observation, interpretation, and application questions—so get ready to speak up! We also hope that these studies provide opportunities for people to reflect together on their experiences in the church, whatever those experiences may be.

The study you are now holding is called *Built upon the Rock* because Jesus promised to build his church upon the “rock” of people like Peter when they confess that he is the Messiah. Not only that, Jesus promised that the church would prevail against the gates of hell (Matt. 16:16–18). Clearly the church matters to Jesus, and it should matter to us, too!

That's why this study works through seven biblical aspects of the church. By looking at these seven biblical concepts, we're going to discover a big-picture vision of the church. What is the church? Why did Jesus establish a church? How does the church fit into God's plans in Scripture? What's the big deal about church anyway? Does it matter whether I'm a member? What should life in the church be like?

Are you ready?

WHAT A CHURCH IS . . . AND ISN'T

BY MARK DEVER

(Adapted from chapter 1 of What Is a Healthy Church?)

What is a church? That's a tough question. And Christians today are looking for all sorts of different things in their churches.

A JARRING CONVERSATION

During my graduate studies, I remember one conversation with a friend who worked for a Christian ministry that was not affiliated with any one church. He and I did attend the same church for a couple of years. But while I joined the church as a member, my friend didn't. In fact, he only came for the Sunday morning service and would slip in about halfway through, just in time for the sermon.

One day, I decided to ask him about his halfhearted attendance. "I don't really get anything out of the rest of the service," he replied.

"Have you ever thought of joining the church?" I asked.

He appeared genuinely surprised by my question and responded, "Join the church? I honestly don't know why I would do that. I know what I'm here for, and those people would just slow me down."

As far as I could tell, he didn't say those words disdainfully, but with the genuine zeal of a gifted evangelist who did not want to waste one hour of the Lord's time. He had given some thought to what he was looking for in a church. And on the whole it didn't involve the other members of the church, at least not that church. He wanted a place where he could hear good preaching from God's Word and get his spiritual jolt for the week.

BUILT UPON THE ROCK

Yet his words reverberated in my mind—“those people would just slow me down.” There were a number of things I wanted to say, but all I said was, “But did you ever think that if you linked arms with those people, yes, they may slow you down, but you may help to speed them up? Have you thought that might be a part of God’s plan for them, and for you?”

I, too, wanted a church where I could hear good preaching every Sunday. But the words “body of Christ” mean more than just that, don’t they?

A PEOPLE, NOT A PLACE

The church is not a place. It’s not a building. It’s not a preaching point. It’s not a spiritual service provider. It’s a people—the new covenant, blood-bought people of God. That’s why Paul said, “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25 NIV). He didn’t give himself up for a place but for a people.

That’s why the church I pastor starts its Sunday morning gatherings not by saying, “Welcome to Capitol Hill Baptist Church,” but, “Welcome to this gathering of the Capitol Hill Baptist Church.” We are a people who gather. Yes, this is a small thing, but we’re trying to point to a big reality even in the words we use to welcome people.

Remembering that the church is a people should help us recognize what’s important and what’s not important. I know I need the help. For example, I have a temptation to let something like the style of music dictate how I feel about a church. After all, the style of music a church uses is one of the first things we will notice about any church, and we tend to respond to music at a very emotional level. Music makes us feel a certain way. Yet what does it say about my love for Christ and for Christ’s people if I decide to leave a church because of the style of its music? Or if, when pastoring a church, I marginalize a majority of my congregation because I think the style of music needs to be updated? At the very least, we could say that I’ve forgotten that the church, fundamentally, is a people and not a place.

At the same time, the Bible teaches that Christians should very

much care about what happens at a church—what it does. In fact, the latter half of this book is devoted to such a discussion.

How do we balance these two things—caring about a people but also caring about what they do? If this were a book about raising Christian families, we would talk about doing certain things: eating dinner together, reading Scripture together, laughing together, praying for one another, and so on. Yet throughout the discussion, hopefully we would all remember that parents make mistakes and that kids will be kids. The family is not just an institution; it's a group of people.

So it is with a church. Does a particular church fail to meet your expectations in terms of what it does, as in whether it follows what the Bible says about church leadership (one topic that I'll cover later)? If so, remember that this is a group of people who are still growing in grace. Love them. Serve them. Be patient with them. Again, think of a family. Whenever your parents, siblings, or children fail to meet your expectations, do you suddenly throw them out of the family? I hope you forgive and are patient with them. You might even stop to consider whether it's your expectations that should be adjusted! By this same token, we should ask ourselves whether we know how to love and persevere with church members who have different opinions, who fail to meet expectations, or even who sin against us. (Don't you and I have sin that ever needs to be forgiven?)

Somewhere, of course, there is a line. There are some churches you may not want to join, or pastor, or remain joined to. We'll return to this question in the section on the essential marks of a church. For the time being, the basic principle remains the same: the church is a people. And whatever we're looking for, or whatever we're saying the church should be, must be guided by that basic, biblical principle.

A PEOPLE, NOT A STATISTIC

Let me put up one more road block to bad thinking about the church, thinking especially common among pastors. Not only is the church not a place, but it's also not a statistic.

When I was in graduate school, I remember encountering a letter of counsel written by John Brown, a pastor in the nineteenth cen-

BUILT UPON THE ROCK

tury, to one of his students who had just been ordained over a small congregation. In the letter Brown 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 considered the congregation over which God had given me charge, I felt the weightiness of this day of accounting before God. Did I want the church I pastored to become big? Popular and much discussed? A church that in some way looked impressive?

Was I motivated in any way to just “put up with” or “tolerate” the group of people in front of me, to bide my time and wait for opportunities to make the church into what I thought it should be? Not that having desires for a church’s future is bad, but were my desires leading me to be indifferent, even annoyed, with the saints surrounding me in the present?

Or would I remember what was infinitely at stake for the several scores of souls, most of them elderly, already sitting in front of me on Sunday mornings in a room big enough for eight hundred? Would I love and serve these few, even if their unbiblical committees, and old-fashioned traditions, and not-my-favorite music selections stood in the way of my (I think legitimate) hopes for the church? And I know it’s not only pastors who fall into “tolerating” the people around them, biding their time until the church becomes what they envision it can be.

The church is a people, not a place or a statistic. It’s a body united into him who is the head. It’s a family joined together by adoption through Christ.

I pray that we pastors would increasingly recognize our awesome responsibility for the particular flocks over which God has made us undershepherds.

¹ James Hay and Henry Belfrage, *Memoir of the Rev. Alexander Waugh* (Edinburgh: William Oliphant and Son, 1839), 64–65.

BUILT UPON THE ROCK

But I also pray that you, Christian, whether an elder or an infant in the faith, would increasingly recognize your responsibility to love, serve, encourage, and hold accountable the rest of your church family. When it comes to your flesh-and-blood siblings, I trust that you already recognize where Cain went wrong when he dismissively said to the Lord, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” But even more I hope that you recognize, if you haven’t already, your higher responsibility to the brothers and sisters of your church family.

A crowd was sitting around [Jesus], and they told him, “Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.”

“Who are my mother and my brothers?” he asked.

Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.” (Mark 3:32–35 NIV)



WEEK 1

THE PEOPLE OF GOD

GETTING STARTED

Alyssa is a thirty-two-year-old single woman who is a member of your church. By all appearances, Alyssa would make a great wife and mother, and she deeply desires to get married and start a family. Mr. Right hasn't come along yet, but she keeps hoping.

One day, you find out that she is seeing someone. When you ask her about it, the conversation reveals that he is not a believer. She knows the Bible speaks against this, but she's tired of waiting. Things are getting pretty serious, and they are even talking about marriage.

1. *What do you do when you find out about Alyssa's relationship?*
2. *Do you think that the church should do anything about this? Is it the business of members to stick their noses in people's private lives?*

Independence and Autonomy

In the modern West, we like to think that we don't depend on anyone else and that we can do whatever we want. We like to think of ourselves as both independent and autonomous.

Do you see how these two things go together? We like to be free from entangling commitments to others (independent) so that we are free to do what we want (autonomous, literally, "a law unto oneself"). Think of how American culture glorifies the rugged individualist or the self-made millionaire who grows so powerful that he gets to make his own rules.

So most people would say of Alyssa's relationship, "What she does with her life is her business, and the church should stay out of

BUILT UPON THE ROCK

it.” But as we’re going to see from Scripture, God’s claim on our lives demands much more.

MAIN IDEA

Through Jesus Christ, God is saving not only individuals but also a *people*. The church is the people of God. This means that, as Christians, we are neither independent nor autonomous. Rather, we belong to God and to the people of God. So we are to submit to God’s will and to one another.

DIGGING IN

In Ephesians 2:11–16, Paul speaks about how our salvation as individuals incorporates us into God’s one redeemed people. Then, in Ephesians 2:17–22, Paul writes:

¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

1. *What phrases does Paul use in verses 17 and 19 to describe what we were as non-Christians? What do those phrases mean?*

2. *In verse 19, what two phrases does Paul use to describe our new state as Christians? What does this teach us about what happens to us when we become Christians?*

3. *Given our new identity which Paul describes in verses 19 through 22, should we Christians view ourselves as autonomous, independent individuals? Explain.*

In 2 Corinthians 6:14–18 we read,

¹⁴ Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light

with darkness? ¹⁵ What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? ¹⁶ What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said,

“I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them,
and I will be their God,
and they shall be my people.

¹⁷ Therefore go out from their midst,
and be separate from them, says the Lord,
and touch no unclean thing;
then I will welcome you,

¹⁸ and I will be a father to you,
and you shall be sons and daughters to me,
says the Lord Almighty.”

4. List the different terms and images that Paul (quoting Leviticus 26:12 and Isaiah 52:11) uses to describe the church in relation to God:

5. In verse 16 God says of Christians, “I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” Christians are possessed by God. What obligations do the people of God have because of this special relationship to God? (Hint: Notice the “therefore” in v. 17.)

6. Whose character are the people of God to represent? What does this say about our desire to be autonomous?

7. Have you ever thought about how becoming a Christian means becoming part of a new people, the people of God? In light of the two passages we’ve discussed, how should this truth change?

- a) Your relationship to other Christians?
- b) Your relationship to non-Christians?

8. If we better grasped this idea of being “a people,” how would that affect our interactions in the local church?

9. Once we grasp the fact that, as a church, we are the people of God, both an encouragement and a challenge follow. The encouragement comes from knowing

BUILT UPON THE ROCK

that we're God's treasured possession, the people he has specially loved and called to himself (Ex. 19:5; Rom. 1:6; 1 Pet. 2:9). This is not because of any goodness in us, but because of his sheer grace (Deut. 7:7–8; 2 Tim. 1:9). Further, it means that God is committed to being our God. He will be with us in the present and will one day bring us to live in perfect, face-to-face fellowship with himself (Matt. 28:20; Heb. 13:5; Rev. 21:3–4; 22:4).

On the other hand, the challenge of being the people of God comes from the fact that God calls us to submit, to obey, and to reflect his character to the world. What are some specific ways that being part of the people of God encourages you? Challenges you?

10. Think back to Alyssa from the beginning of the story. In view of the Bible's teaching that we as Christians are the people of God,

- How would you personally counsel Alyssa about her relationship?
- What should the church do about Alyssa's relationship?

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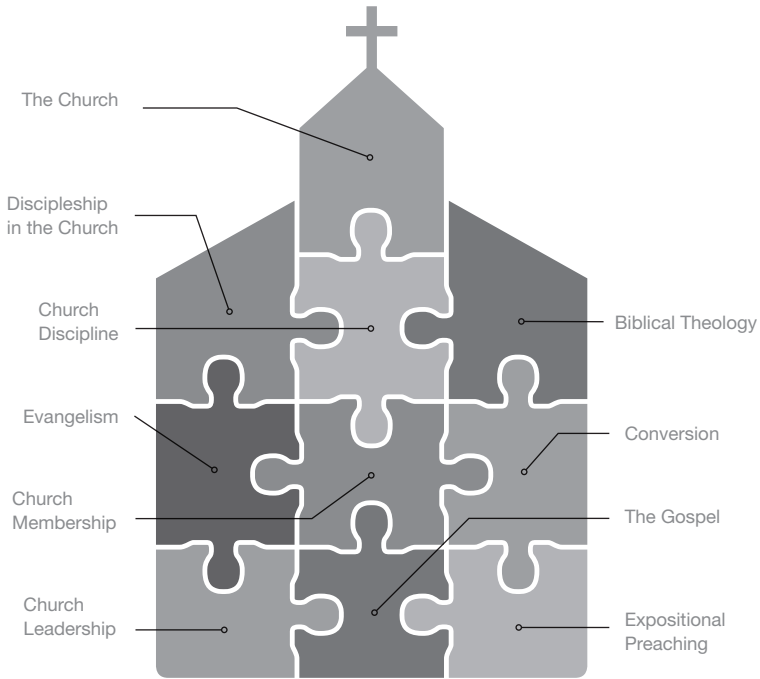
Building Healthy Churches

9Marks exists to equip church leaders with a biblical vision and practical resources for displaying God's glory to the nations through healthy churches.

To that end, we want to see churches characterized by these nine marks of health:

- 1 Expository Preaching**
- 2 Biblical Theology**
- 3 A Biblical Understanding of the Gospel**
- 4 A Biblical Understanding of Conversion**
- 5 A Biblical Understanding of Evangelism**
- 6 Biblical Church Membership**
- 7 Biblical Church Discipline**
- 8 Biblical Discipleship**
- 9 Biblical Church Leadership**

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Be sure to check out the rest of the
**9MARKS HEALTHY CHURCH
 STUDY GUIDE SERIES**

This series covers the nine distinctives of a healthy church as originally laid out in *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* by Mark Dever. Each book explores the biblical foundations of key aspects of the church, helping Christians to live out those realities as members of a local body. A perfect resource for use in Sunday school, church-wide studies, or small group contexts.





THE CHURCH.

The local church is meant to be living, growing, distinct, and God-glorifying. Yet many disagree about what a church really is and what it should look like. This study works through seven biblical aspects of the church and, in so doing, helps participants discover a big-picture vision of the church.

“I am unaware of any other tool that so thoroughly and practically helps Christians understand God’s plan for the local church. I can’t wait to use these studies in my own congregation.”

JERAMIE RINNE, Senior Pastor, South Shore Baptist Church, Hingham, Massachusetts

“Rich exposition, compelling questions, and clear syntheses combine to give a guided tour of ecclesiology—the theology of the church. I know of no better curriculum for generating understanding of and involvement in the church than this.”

RICK HOLLAND, Senior Pastor, Mission Road Bible Church, Prairie Village, Kansas

“I have used these guides for the last year at my own church and appreciate how easy they are to adapt to my own setting. Highly recommended!”

MICHAEL LAWRENCE, Senior Pastor, Hinson Baptist Church, Portland, Oregon

9MARKS HEALTHY CHURCH STUDY GUIDES are a series of ten 6–7 week studies covering the nine distinctives of a healthy church originally laid out in *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* by Mark Dever. This series explores the biblical foundations of key aspects of the church, helping Christians to live out those realities as members of a local body. Conveniently packaged and accessibly written, the format of this series is guided, inductive discussion of Scripture passages and is ideal for use in Sunday school, church-wide studies, and individual or small group contexts.

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