



HEARING GOD'S WORD: EXPOSITIONAL PREACHING



Hearing God's Word: Expository Preaching

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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*

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- *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 school, small groups, and other contexts where a group of two to two-hundred people can come together and 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.

"First things first," goes the old saying. If your house is on fire, you better put that out before you attend to a tea kettle that's starting to boil over.

What do you think is the first thing to attend to in a church?

We're convinced from Scripture that the matter of first importance in the church is preaching. But not just any preaching.

This study is going to focus on expositional preaching—preaching in which the main point of a biblical text becomes the main point of the sermon and is applied to life today. This is how pastors should preach. God calls pastors not to preach their own opinions or agendas; he calls them to preach his Word.

Expositional preaching is what gives life and health to the church. It's what shapes, forms, and reforms the church. It reveals God to us. It confronts our sin. It comforts us. It brings us to Christ. And it teaches us how to live together in a way that puts God's glorious character on display for all the world to see.

So let's jump into these six sessions and talk about:

- Why we need to hear God's Word
- Why the church should be fed by expositional preaching
- How expositional preaching works
- How we all should minister the Word to each other
- And more

AN ESSENTIAL MARK OF A HEALTHY CHURCH: EXPOSITIONAL PREACHING

BY MARK DEVER

(Originally published as chapter 5 of What Is a Healthy Church?)

If a healthy church is a congregation that increasingly displays the character of God as his character has been revealed in his Word, the most obvious place to begin building a healthy church is to call Christians to listen to God's Word. God's Word is the source of all life and health. It's what feeds, develops, and preserves a church's understanding of the gospel itself.

WHAT IT IS

Fundamentally, this means that both pastors and congregations must be committed to expositional preaching. Expositional preaching is the kind of preaching that, quite simply, exposes God's Word. It takes a particular passage of Scripture, explains that passage, and then applies the meaning of the passage to the life of the congregation. It's the kind of preaching most geared to get at what God says to his people, as well as to those who are not his people. A commitment to expositional preaching is a commitment to hear God's Word.

There are many other types of preaching. Topical preaching, for example, gathers up one or more Scriptures on a particular topic, such as the topic of prayer or the topic of giving. Biographical preaching takes the life of someone in the Bible and portrays the individual's life as a display of God's grace and as an example of hope

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and faithfulness. And these other types may be employed helpfully on occasion. But the regular diet of the church should consist of the explanation and application of particular portions of God's Word.

The practice of expositional preaching presumes a belief that what God says is authoritative for his people. It presumes that his people should hear it and need to hear it, lest our congregations be deprived of what God intends to use for shaping us after his image. It presumes that God intends the church to learn from both Testaments, as well as from every genre of Scripture—Law, History, Wisdom, Prophecy, Gospels, and Epistles. An expositional preacher who moves straight through books of the Bible and who regularly rotates between the different Testaments and genres of Scripture, I believe, is like a mother who serves her children food from every food group, not just their two or three favorite meals.

An expositional preacher's authority begins and ends with Scripture. Even as Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles were given not just a commission to go and speak but also to speak a particular message, so Christian preachers today have authority to speak from God so long as they speak his words.

WHAT IT ISN'T

Someone may happily profess that God's Word is authoritative and that the Bible is inerrant. Yet if that person in practice (intentionally or not) does not preach expositionally, he denies his own claim.

Sometimes people confuse expositional preaching with the style of a particular expositional preacher whom they have observed. But expositional preaching is not fundamentally a matter of style. As others have observed, expositional preaching is not so much about how a preacher says what he says but about how a preacher decides what to say. Is Scripture determining our content or is something else? Expositional preaching is not marked by a particular form or style. Styles will vary. Instead it's marked by a biblical content.

Sometimes people confuse expositional preaching with reading a verse and then preaching on a topic loosely related to that verse. Yet when a preacher exhorts a congregation on a topic of his choosing, using biblical texts only to back up his point, he will never

preach more than what he already knows. And the congregation will only learn what the preacher already knows. Expository preaching requires more than that. It requires careful attention to the context of a passage because it aims to make the point of the biblical text the point of the sermon. When a preacher exhorts a congregation by preaching a passage of Scripture in context—where the point of the passage is the point of his sermon—both he and the congregation will end up hearing things from God that the preacher did not intend to say when he first sat down to study and prepare for the sermon. (“Next week, we’ll look at Luke 1 and whatever God has for us in Luke 1. The following week, we’ll look at Luke 2 and whatever God has for us in Luke 2. The week after that. . . .”)

This should make sense as we think about every step of our Christian lives, from our initial call to repentance all the way to the Spirit’s most recent work of conviction. Has not every step of growth in grace occurred when we heard from God in ways we hadn’t heard from him before?

A preacher’s ministry must be characterized by this very practical form of submission to the Word of God. Yet make no mistake: it is finally the congregation’s responsibility to ensure that this is true of its preachers. Jesus assumes that congregations have the final responsibility for what happens in a church in Matthew 18 as does Paul in Galatians 1. A church, therefore, must never give a person spiritual oversight over the body who does not show a practical commitment to hearing and teaching God’s Word. When it does, it hampers its growth, ensuring that it won’t mature beyond the level of the pastor. The church will slowly be conformed to the image of the pastor rather than to the image of God.

THE WAY GOD HAS ALWAYS WORKED

God’s people have always been created by God’s Word. From creation in Genesis 1 to the call of Abram in Genesis 12, from the vision of the valley of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37 to the coming of the living Word, Jesus Christ—God has always created his people by his Word. As Paul wrote to the Romans, “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ”

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(Rom. 10:17 NIV). Or, as he wrote to the Corinthians, “Since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe” (1 Cor. 1:21 NIV).

Sound, expository preaching is often the fountainhead of true growth in a church. Martin Luther found that carefully attending to God’s Word began the Reformation. We, too, must commit to seeing that our churches are always being reformed by the Word of God.

BACK TO THE HEART OF WORSHIP

During a day-long seminar on Puritanism that I taught at a church in London, I remarked at one point that Puritan sermons were sometimes two hours long. A member of the class gasped audibly and asked, “What time did that leave for worship?” Clearly, the individual assumed that listening to God’s Word preached did not constitute worship. I replied that many English Protestants in former centuries believed that the most essential part of their worship was hearing God’s Word in their own language (a freedom purchased by the blood of more than one martyr) and responding to it in their lives. Whether they had time to sing, though not entirely insignificant, was of comparatively little concern to them.

Our churches, too, must recover the centrality of the Word in our worship. Music is a biblically required response to God’s Word, but the music God gave us was not given to build our churches upon. A church built on music—of whatever style—is a church built on shifting sands.

Christian, pray for your pastor—that he will commit himself to study Scripture rigorously, carefully, and earnestly. Pray that God will lead him to understand the Word, to apply it to his own life, and to apply it wisely to the church’s life (see Luke 24:27; Acts 6:4; Eph. 6:19–20). Also, grant your pastor time during the week to prepare good sermons. Preaching is the fundamental component of pastoring. Then speak words of encouragement to him by telling him how the faithfulness he has shown to the Word has grown you in God’s grace.

Pastor, pray these things for yourself. Pray also for other

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churches in your neighborhood, city, nation, and around the world that preach and teach God's Word. Finally, pray that our churches would commit to hearing God's Word preached expositively, so that the agenda of each church will be increasingly shaped by God's agenda in Scripture. Commitment to expositional preaching is an essential mark of a healthy church.



WEEK 1

WHAT IS TRUE SPIRITUALITY?

GETTING STARTED

This entire six-week course is about expositional preaching:

- What it is
- Its biblical basis
- How it builds the church
- Why it's important for every church member to pay close attention to both what is preached and how it's preached

What Is Expositional Preaching?

Simply stated, expositional preaching is preaching that takes the main point of a text of Scripture, makes that the main point of the sermon, and applies it to life today. Expositional preaching is preaching that *exposes* the meaning of Scripture and brings it to bear on our lives.

Since the goal of expositional preaching is simply to explain and apply God's Word, we're going to take a step back for this first study and think about why God's Word is so important for the life and health of the church.

What Is True Spirituality?

In this first study we are going to consider the question, What is true spirituality? That's a question on a lot of people's minds today, not just Christians. While being "religious" is decidedly unpopular, spirituality is in, big-time.

1. *What are some things you've heard non-Christians say about spirituality?*

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2. *What are some things you've heard Christians say that true spirituality consists of?*

MAIN IDEA

True spirituality consists in hearing, believing, and obeying God's Word. That is why God's Word is the source of the church's life and health, and why pastors should preach expositively.

DIGGING IN

In Psalm 19 David writes,

- ¹ The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.
- ² Day to day pours out speech,
and night to night reveals knowledge.
- ³ There is no speech, nor are there words,
whose voice is not heard.
- ⁴ Their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.
- In them he has set a tent for the sun,
⁵ which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber,
and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy.
- ⁶ Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them,
and there is nothing hidden from its heat.
- ⁷ The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the testimony of the LORD is sure,
making wise the simple;
- ⁸ the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is pure,
enlightening the eyes;
- ⁹ the fear of the LORD is clean,
enduring forever;
the rules of the LORD are true,
and righteous altogether.
- ¹⁰ More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;

sweeter also than honey

and drippings of the honeycomb.

¹¹ Moreover, by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.

¹² Who can discern his errors?

Declare me innocent from hidden faults.

¹³ Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins;
let them not have dominion over me!

Then I shall be blameless,
and innocent of great transgression.

¹⁴ Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable in your sight,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

1. Verses 1 through 6 focus on one way God makes himself known and verses 7 through 11 focus on another. How would you summarize the two ways God reveals himself that are celebrated in this psalm?

2. What do we learn about God from his revelation of himself in creation (vv. 1–6)?

3. What can't the creation teach us about God and about how we are to relate to him?

4. What do the terms law (v. 7), testimony (v. 7), precepts (v. 8), commandment (v. 8), and rules (v. 9) all refer to? What does this suggest about how God communicates to us?

5. List all the things David says God's Word does in verses 7 through 11. Describe the human need or situation each of these actions addresses.

6. Based on this passage, how would you respond to someone who said that true spirituality is too deep for words?

Another passage that demonstrates the absolute centrality of God's Word in the Christian life is the familiar story of Mary and Martha from Luke 10:38–42:

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³⁸ Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. ³⁹ And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." ⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, ⁴² but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."

7. Describe Martha's activity and mind-set that we see in this passage.

8. Suppose we didn't have Jesus's words in verses 41–42, and you wanted to defend Martha. How might you make a case for why she is more spiritual than Mary?

9. What does Jesus commend Mary for doing? (Hint: It's not for simply giving herself a break!)

10. What does Jesus mean when he says that listening to his teaching is the "one thing" that is necessary?

A Spirituality of the Word

These two passages teach us that hearing, believing, and obeying God's Word is absolutely central to how we relate to God.

The New Testament teaches that we're born again through the Word of God (1 Pet. 1:23). We obtain faith through the Word of God (Rom. 10:17). We grow in godliness through the Word of God (John 17:17). And we receive encouragement and hope from the Word of God (Rom. 15:4).

These are some of the reasons why God's Word is the source and substance of true spirituality. True spirituality is a spirituality of the Word.

Why Pastors Should Preach Expositionally

Because God's Word is the source and substance of true spirituality, pastors should preach sermons in which the main point of the text

of Scripture is the main point of the sermon. Expository preaching is the starting point for a healthy church: God's Word teaches us who he is, how we have sinned against him, what he has done for us in Christ, what he requires of us in response, and how he provides everything we need—through his Word!—to bring him glory.

11. In light of the two passages we've studied, how would you respond to someone who said that in order to be really spiritual we need to:

- a) Contemplate images and icons that represent God?
- b) Pursue a direct, unmediated, mystical experience of the presence of God?
- c) Devote ourselves to social action, and discover God "at work" among the poor?
- d) Hear God speaking to us inwardly?

12. How should this understanding of Word-centered spirituality shape:

- a) What our churches do in their corporate gatherings?
- b) How we evaluate sermons?
- c) What we hope to get out of sermons?
- d) How we listen to sermons?

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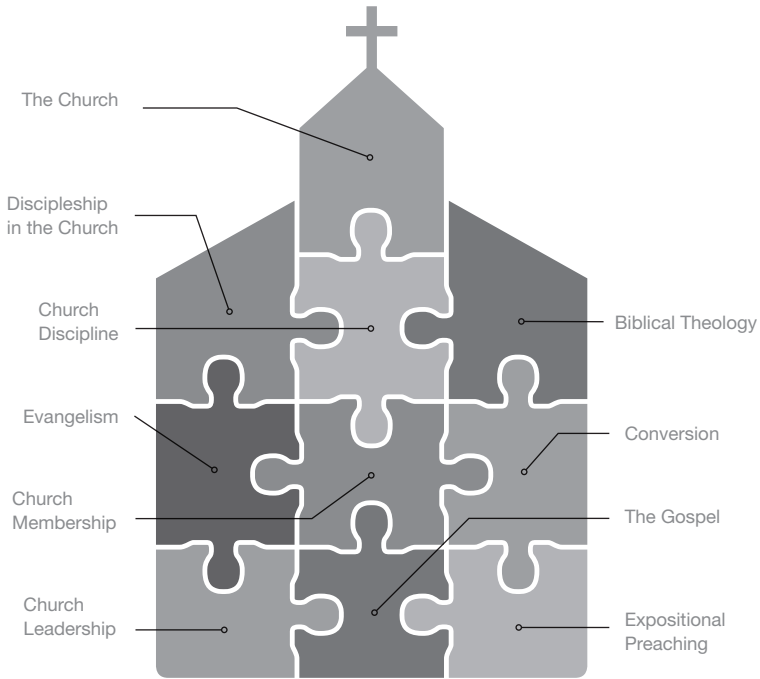
Building Healthy Churches

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** **Expositional 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.





EXPOSITIONAL PREACHING.

Expositional preaching gives life and health to the church. It shapes, forms, and reforms the church, and it reveals the character of God. Participants will learn to understand their joyful responsibility in sitting under a pastor's teaching, and pastors will be encouraged to preach expositively—from the Bible!

“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.

PREACHING

