

**THE WHOLE  
TRUTH  
ABOUT GOD:  
BIBLICAL  
THEOLOGY**



*The Whole Truth about God: Biblical Theology*

Copyright © 2012 by 9Marks

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street  
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law.

Cover design: Dual Identity inc.

First printing 2012

Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (*The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture references marked NIV are taken from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*®, NIV®, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

All emphases in Scripture have been added by the author.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-2532-2

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-2533-9

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-2534-6

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-2535-3

---

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
An Essential Mark of a Healthy Church: Biblical Theology <i>by Mark Dever</i>	9
<b>WEEK 1</b>	
What Is Sound Doctrine and Why Does it Matter?	15
<b>WEEK 2</b>	
Sound Doctrine Is for Love	21
<b>WEEK 3</b>	
Sound Doctrine Is for Holiness	25
<b>WEEK 4</b>	
Sound Doctrine Is for Worship	29
<b>WEEK 5</b>	
Sound Doctrine Is for Witness	33
<b>WEEK 6</b>	
Sound Doctrine Is for Unity	37
Teacher's Notes	41



# 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*

## THE WHOLE TRUTH ABOUT GOD

- *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.

God is a God of truth. He cannot tell a lie. He cannot deny himself. Every word of his proves true.

And God is a speaking God. He has spoken to us in his Word, revealing himself. He has revealed his holy character, his judgment against our sin, his glorious plan of salvation, and his certain promises for the future. And when God speaks, we must listen.

That's what theology is: listening to what God has said to us in his Word. And one of the most important things a church can do is get its theology right, because only a right theology can lead to a right worship and a right obedience. Every church should strive to believe and confess and live in light of a truly biblical theology.

In this study we're going to consider why biblical theology is important and then see how biblical theology fuels our churches' love, holiness, worship, witness, and unity. Let's listen carefully together to what God has said about why we must listen well to him.

# AN ESSENTIAL MARK OF A HEALTHY CHURCH: BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

BY MARK DEVER

*(Originally published as chapter 6 of What Is a Healthy Church?)*

What do you think these italicized words mean: “But we know that when Christ appears, *we shall be like him*, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2 NIV).

If you carefully read through the biblical storyline presented in chapter 3, you would probably know that these words point to how, at the end of time, the church will purely reflect God’s loving and holy character apart from the distorting influence of sin.

Yet if you were sitting in a Mormon tabernacle, you would hear that the words “we will be like him” mean that we will all become gods!

What’s the difference between these two interpretations? One is informed by the theology of the whole Bible; the other is not.

I have argued in a number of places that expository preaching is essential for the health of a church. Yet every method of preaching, however good, is open to abuse. Our churches should not only be concerned with how we are taught, but also with what we are taught. That’s why an essential mark of a healthy church is sound biblical theology, or theology that’s biblical. Otherwise we will interpret individual verses to mean whatever we want them to mean.

## THE WHOLE TRUTH ABOUT GOD

### SOUNDNESS

Soundness is an old-fashioned word. Yet we should cherish soundness—soundness in our understanding of the God of the Bible and his ways with us. Paul uses the word “sound” a number of times in his pastoral writings to Timothy and Titus. It means “reliable,” “accurate,” or “faithful.” At root, it is an image from the medical world meaning whole or healthy. Biblically sound theology, then, is theology that is faithful to the teaching of the entire Bible. It reliably and accurately interprets the parts in terms of the whole.

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul says that “sound doctrine” is doctrine that “conforms to the gospel” and opposes ungodliness and sin (1 Tim. 1:10–11 NIV). Later on, he contrasts “false doctrines” with “the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and . . . godly teaching” (1 Tim. 6:3 NIV).

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul exhorts him, “What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 1:13 NIV). Then he warns Timothy that “the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear” (2 Tim. 4:3 NIV).

When Paul writes another young pastor, Titus, he shares similar concerns. Every man Titus appoints as an elder of a church, Paul says, “must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Titus 1:9 NIV). False teachers must be rebuked “so that they will be sound in the faith” (Titus 1:13 NIV). And, finally, Titus “must teach what is appropriate to sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1 NIV).

Pastors should teach sound doctrine—doctrine that is reliable, accurate, and faithful to the Bible, and churches are responsible for keeping their pastors accountable to sound doctrine.

### UNITY, DIVERSITY, AND CHARITY

We cannot lay out here everything that constitutes sound teaching since that would require us to reproduce the whole Bible. But



in practice, every church decides where it requires complete agreement, where it permits limited disagreement, and where it allows complete liberty.

In the church I serve in Washington, DC, we require every member to believe in salvation through the work of Jesus Christ alone. We also confess the same (or very similar) understandings of believer's baptism and of church structure (that is, who has the final say in decisions). Agreement on baptism and structure are not essential for salvation, but they're practically helpful and health giving for the life of the church.

On the other hand, our church allows some disagreement over matters that are necessary neither for salvation nor for the practical life of the church. We all agree that Christ will return, but there is a range of opinions about the timing of his return.

Finally, our church allows entire liberty on matters still less central or clear, such as the rightness of armed resistance or the question of who wrote the book of Hebrews.

There's a principle running through all of this: the closer we get to the heart of our faith, the more we expect unity in our understanding of the faith—in sound biblical doctrine. The early church put it this way: in essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity.

### **COMPLEX OR CONTROVERSIAL DOCTRINES**

A church that is committed to sound teaching will commit to teaching the biblical doctrines churches too often neglect. To our eyes, certain doctrines may look difficult or even divisive. Yet we can trust that God has included them in his Word because they are foundational for understanding his work in salvation.

The Holy Spirit is no fool. If he has revealed something in his Book for all the world to read, churches should not think of themselves as so wise that they do better to avoid certain subjects. Should they exercise pastoral wisdom and care when speaking about some things? Surely. Should they avoid those things entirely? Surely not. If we want churches that are guided by sound doctrine from the Bible, we must come to terms with the entire Bible.

## **THE WHOLE TRUTH ABOUT GOD**

The biblical doctrine of election, for example, is often avoided as too complex or too confusing. Be that as it may, the doctrine is undeniably biblical. While we may not understand everything about election, it is no small matter that our salvation ultimately issues from God rather than from ourselves. There are a number of important questions that the Bible answers but churches commonly neglect such as:

- Are people basically bad or good? Do they merely need encouragement and self-esteem, or do they need forgiveness and new life?
- What did Jesus Christ do by dying on the cross? Did he actually and effectively satisfy the just wrath of the Father, or did he merely set an example of self-sacrifice for his followers?
- What happens when someone becomes a Christian?
- If we are Christians, can we be sure that God will continue to care for us? If so, is his continuing care based on our faithfulness or on his?

All these questions are not simply for bookish theologians or young seminary students. They are important for every Christian. Those of us who are pastors know how differently we would shepherd our people if our answer to any one of the above questions changed. Faithfulness to Scripture demands that we speak about these issues with clarity and authority, as does our desire to display the character of God in all its fullness.

Just consider: If we want churches that display God's character, don't we want to know everything he has revealed about himself in the Bible? What does it say about our opinion of his character if we don't?

## **RESISTING GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY**

Our understanding of what the Bible teaches about God is crucial. The biblical God is Creator and Lord. Yet his sovereignty is sometimes denied, even within the church. When confessing Christians resist the idea of God's sovereignty in creation or salvation, they are really playing with pious paganism. Christians will have honest questions about God's sovereignty. But a sustained, tenacious denial

of God's sovereignty should concern us. To baptize such a person may be to baptize a heart that remains, in some ways, unbelieving. To admit such a person into membership may be to treat the individual as if he or she were trusting God when in fact he or she's not.

Such resistance is dangerous in any Christian, but it's even more dangerous in the leader of a congregation. When a church appoints a leader who doubts God's sovereignty or who misunderstands the Bible's teaching, that church sets up as their example a person who may be deeply unwilling to trust God. And this is bound to hinder that church's growth.

Too often today, the consumer-driven and materialistic culture around us encourages churches to understand the Spirit's work in terms of marketing and to turn evangelism into advertising. God himself is made over in the image of man. In such times, a healthy church must be especially careful to pray that its leaders would have a biblical and an experiential grasp of God's sovereignty. They should also pray that their leaders would remain fully committed to sound doctrine in its full, biblical glory. A healthy church is marked by expository preaching and by theology that's biblical.





# WEEK 1

## WHAT IS SOUND DOCTRINE AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

### GETTING STARTED

Theology has gotten a bad rap lately. To some, the very word “theology” conjures up images of medieval monks in ivory towers musing over how many angels can stand on the head of a pin. Others think of sleep-inducing lectures. To others, it signifies an outdated way of thinking that simply doesn’t work for postmodern people.

*1. What are some objections to theology that you’ve heard? (Or said!)*

The New Testament consistently places a strikingly high priority on theology and doctrine. According to the New Testament, sound doctrine—that is, teaching that conforms to God’s Word—is of first importance for the Christian life and for the entire church.

### MAIN IDEA

Sound doctrine is teaching that rightly explains what God has revealed to us in his Word. Sound doctrine is essential to the church and the Christian life because it is a central means by which we grow to maturity in Christ.

### DIGGING IN

Throughout 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus, the apostle Paul insists that sound doctrine is of first importance in the life of the church. Consider the following passages:

- 1 Timothy 1:3–5: <sup>3</sup> As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to

## THE WHOLE TRUTH ABOUT GOD

teach any different doctrine, <sup>4</sup> nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. <sup>5</sup> The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.”

- 1 Timothy 4:16: “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.”
- 1 Timothy 6:2b–4a: “Teach and urge these things. <sup>3</sup> If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, <sup>4</sup> he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing.”
- 2 Timothy 1:13–14: “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. <sup>14</sup> By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.”
- 2 Timothy 2:15: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.”
- Titus 1:9–11: “[An elder] must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it. <sup>10</sup> For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. <sup>11</sup> They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach.”
- Titus 2:1: “But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine.”

## WHAT IS SOUND DOCTRINE?

Sound doctrine is the sum total of the Bible’s teaching on any given topic.

In other words, sound doctrine is what we get when we consider what all of Scripture has to say about a given topic: the character of God, sin, salvation, the church, and so on. In the passages above, Paul’s references to sound doctrine especially focus on the good news about Jesus Christ and how we are to live in light of that good news.

**HOW DO WE GET SOUND DOCTRINE?**

Think about what we do when we read different passages that explain God’s character. First John 4:8 says that God is love. Yet in other passages we learn that God is just and holy and therefore that his wrath burns against sin (see Hab. 1:13).

So what do we do? Pick and choose the passages we like? Claim that if God is loving, then he would never punish people for their sin? Of course not. As Christians, we embrace all of what Scripture teaches about God, so we come to understand that God is both just and loving, both kind and severe, both holy and merciful. This developed, comprehensive picture of God’s character is one aspect of sound doctrine.

*1. Drawing on the seven passages listed before, fill in the chart below with characteristics of sound doctrine (What is it? How does Paul describe it?) and results of sound doctrine (What follows when sound doctrine is taught? How does it impact our lives?). Also, list the verse each characteristic or result comes from.*

Characteristics of Sound Doctrine	Results of Sound Doctrine

*2. Is there anything that surprised you about sound doctrine as you went through these passages?*

## THE WHOLE TRUTH ABOUT GOD

3. Based on Paul's teaching in these passages, how would you respond to someone who said that sound doctrine is something that changes through time?

4. Based on these passages, how would you respond to someone who said that sound doctrine is an optional add-on for intellectual Christians who enjoy that sort of thing?

5. Based on these passages, would you say that Paul understands sound doctrine to be something purely intellectual? (See especially passages 1, 3, and 4.) Explain.

6. In the chart below, list the characteristics and results of false teaching (see especially passages 3 and 6).

Characteristics of False Teaching	Results of False Teaching

7. Is there anything that struck you or surprised you about false teaching?

8. Based on Paul's teaching in these passages, what are pastors supposed to do about false teaching? What should you do about false teaching?

9. Can you think of some examples of the practical consequences of abandoning sound doctrine? What might happen in our lives if we forsake the biblical doctrines of:

- a) The inspiration and authority of Scripture?
- b) Salvation by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone?
- c) The sovereignty and goodness of God?



## THE WHOLE TRUTH ABOUT GOD

10. *Why would you say that sound doctrine is important for:*

- a) The corporate life of the church?
- b) How a pastor prepares a sermon or you prepare a Bible Study?
- c) Your growth as a Christian?

11. *Name something you struggle with in the Christian life. What biblical doctrines can help you address this struggle? How can you practically seek to grow in understanding and applying sound doctrine as it relates to this area?*

12. *Can you think of a struggle that you've seen a church have, which was then addressed and remedied by sound doctrine?*

# **IX** 9Marks

## **Building Healthy Churches**

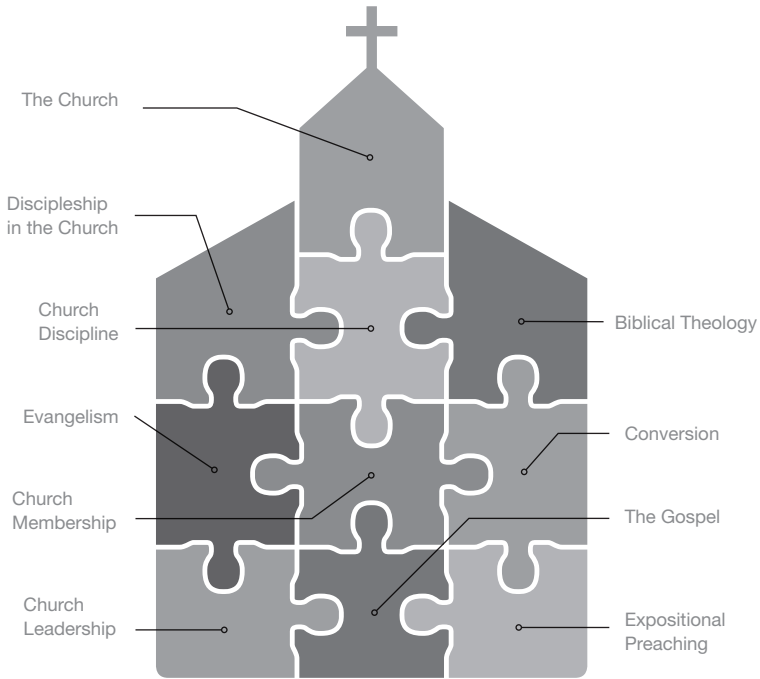
**9Marks exists to equip church leaders with a biblical vision and practical resources for displaying God's glory to the nations through healthy churches.**

**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**

---

**Find all our Crossway titles  
and other resources at  
[www.9Marks.org](http://www.9Marks.org)**




---

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.





# BIBLICAL THEOLOGY.

Only right theology can lead to right worship and right obedience. Every church should strive to believe, confess, and live in light of a truly biblical theology and sound doctrine. This study looks at why biblical theology is important, and then shows participants how biblical theology can fuel their love, holiness, worship, witness, and unity.

“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.

THEOLOGY

