

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, Desiring God Ministries; chancellor, Bethlehem College and 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, 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, John E. Richards Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary; Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi

“*Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* is required reading for my students in ecclesiology. Even though I do not always come to the same conclusions as the author, the book is one of the few recent serious engagements with trenchantly important ecclesiological issues. This is also a great book for pastors to share with their congregations.”

Paige Patterson, President, Southwestern Baptist 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, Annuity Board 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, Senior Pastor, Covenant Life Church, Gaithersburg, MD; 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, Sovereign Grace Ministries

Nine Marks of a Healthy Church (3rd edition)

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Contents

Foreword: Nine Marks of a Healthy Church by David Platt	9
Preface to the Third Edition (2013)	13
Preface to the New Expanded Edition (2004)	15
Introduction	25
Mark One: Expository Preaching	39
Mark Two: Biblical Theology	65
Mark Three: The Gospel	85
Mark Four: A Biblical Understanding of Conversion	105
Mark Five: A Biblical Understanding of Evangelism	127
Mark Six: A Biblical Understanding of Church Membership	155
Mark Seven: Biblical Church Discipline	181
Mark Eight: A Concern for Discipleship and Growth	207
Mark Nine: Biblical Church Leadership	231
Appendix 1: Tips for Leading the Church in a Healthy Direction	259
Appendix 2: “Don’t Do it!” Why You <i>Shouldn’t</i> Practice Church Discipline	263
Appendix 3: The Original 9 Marks Letter	269
Appendix 4: Medicines from the Cabinet	277
Notes	283
General Index	291
Scripture Index	295

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

Foreword

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 worshipping, 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, expositional 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, Melanchthon 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 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 expositional 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

What's Coming Up

Mark One: Expository Preaching

Expository Preaching

The Central Role of the Word of God

The Role of God's Word in Bringing Life

The Role of God's Word in Preaching

The Role of God's Word in Sanctifying

The Role of the Preacher of God's Word

Mark One

Expositional Preaching

This is how I began my sermon one Sunday morning in January, not too long ago:

So, how's it going? Did you get enough sleep last night? Did you have trouble finding a good parking place this morning? Were the doors clearly marked? Did the people welcome you as you came in? Did the building seem nice and neat? I wonder, did the church's name make it more difficult for you to decide whether to come in? Or maybe that was part of the reason why you decided to come in.

And when you did come in, were the people friendly and welcoming? Any trouble dropping the kids off? And what do you think about the stained glass? I know I have the best view of it, but it's really pretty, isn't it? Then again, maybe it's a little too traditional for you.

Are the pews comfortable? Do you have a good view of all the activities from where you are sitting? Can you see clearly? Can you hear okay? Is it warm enough for you right now? Do you feel pretty comfortable?

And how about the bulletin? Nice, clear, simple, pretty straightforward, wouldn't you say? Not too complicated. Maybe a little too staid. Did you notice all the announcements in it? And did you see all the programs listed in the church card? There are a lot of them, aren't there? Probably more than you've even read.

Of course, it's easy to read, but I guess the print is kind of small, isn't it? And there aren't any pictures. I mean, it's so type-heavy. That probably tells you a lot about the church, doesn't it? You think this is probably the kind of church where they'd rather have the thousand words than the picture, right?

And what about the people sitting around you? Are they the kind you like to go to church with? Yeah, I know you're too nervous to look around you right now, but you know who they are. What do you think? Are they the right age? Are they the right race? Are they the right social class? Are they just like you?

And what about the service so far? I mean, was it too difficult switching between the two hymnals? You know, most churches just use one and here you've got two; you've got to go to the green one and then sometimes the beige one. Has the leader seemed informed, yet not know-it-allish? Competent, yet not overbearing? There weren't too many announcements in the service, were there? I don't think so this morning. Have the prayers been involving? Have they engaged your heart and mind?

It is a bit unusual these days to read so much Scripture in church, isn't it? You don't often find that done.

And of course, there's the music. You know, we're still trying to get some things worked out, as you can tell—contemporary or traditional, classical or more modern, liturgical or more informal. As with every other church in America this very morning, there are probably some people who have come to this church in the past who this morning are out looking at other churches because they would like a different musical experience. And, you know, there are probably some people who are still here, in part, because they like this musical experience.

And how's it been for you with the offering? Can you believe that? They actually took up an offering in public with visitors and all! That is the kind of thing they tell you in seminary these days you should never do. How did it make you feel? Did it make you feel that the church is full of a bunch of money-grubbing people who just want to get from you when you come?

What are you doing here? Whether you've been coming to this church for fifty years or this is your first Sunday—why do you come?

And now, of course, well, you know what's coming now. Maybe it has already begun: the sermon! For some people, this is what you just have to sit through to get to the good bit—maybe some more singing, or meeting and talking to people afterwards.

The preacher does have a difficult job, doesn't he? He has to be someone that you feel you could relate to and talk with and let your hair down with or trust in some measure. But he needs to seem holy, too. But not too holy. He needs to be knowledgeable, but not too knowledgeable. He needs to be confident, but not too confident. He needs to be compassionate, but not too compassionate. And his sermon needs to be good enough, relevant enough, entertaining and engaging enough, and certainly short enough.

There is so much to consider when you are evaluating a church, isn't there? Have you ever really stopped to think about it? There are so many different things to think of and, as much as Americans move these days, we have to evaluate churches. It happens all the time. We have to ask ourselves what makes a really good church.

In my study I have shelf after shelf and stack after stack of books about exactly this question: What really makes a good church? And you would be amazed at how widely the answers vary. They range from friendliness to financial planning to pristine bathrooms to pleasant surroundings to vibrant music to being sensitive to visitors to plentiful parking to exciting children's programs to elaborate Sunday school options to the right computer software to clear signage to homogeneous congregations. You will find books written and sold that advocate all of those things as the key to a good church.

So, what do you think? What makes for a healthy church? You need to know that. If you are a visitor today, looking around for some church where you can come regularly and to which you can commit yourself, you need to consider this question. Even if you are already a member here, you need to consider this question—you might move, you know. And even if you don't ever move again, you need to know what constitutes a healthy church. If you're going to stay in the church and be a part of building it and shaping it, don't you need to know what you're trying to build? What you want it to look like? What you want to aim for? What should be foundational?

Mark One

Be very careful how you answer these questions. As I said, you'll find experts who will tell you the answer is everything from how religion-free your language is to how invisible your membership requirements are.

So, what do you think? Are secure nurseries and sparkling bathrooms, exciting music and look-alike congregations really the way to church growth and church health? Is that really what makes a good church?

And so I began the series of sermons that has become this book—*Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*. The purpose of this book is to ask and answer the question, what distinctively marks a really good church?

I suggest nine distinguishing marks of a healthy church. You can find them listed in the table of contents. These nine marks certainly are not the only attributes of a healthy church. They're not even necessarily the most important things that could be said about a church. For example, I address only in passing the topics of baptism and communion, even though these are essential aspects of a biblical church, commanded by Christ himself. This book is not a complete ecclesiology. It focuses on certain crucial aspects of healthy church life that have grown rare among churches today. Though they may often be misunderstood, baptism and the Lord's Supper have not vanished from most churches; but many of the attributes that we will consider in these pages *have* disappeared from many churches.

Of course, there is no such thing as a perfect church, and I certainly don't mean to suggest that any church I ever pastor will be a perfect church. But that doesn't mean our churches can't be more healthy. It is my goal to encourage such health.

Expositional Preaching

The first mark of a healthy church is expositional preaching. It is not only the first mark; it is far and away the most important of them all, because if you get this one right, all of the others should

follow. This chapter will help you to understand what pastors are to give themselves to, and what congregations are to demand of them. My main role, and the main role of any pastor, is expositional preaching.

This is so important that if you were to miss this one and happen to get all the other eight marks right, in a sense they would be accidents. You would have just happened to get them right. They may be distorted, because they wouldn't have sprung from the Word and they would not continually be reshaped and refreshed by it. But if you establish the priority of the Word, then you have in place the single most important aspect of the church's life, and growing health is virtually assured, because God has decided to act by his Spirit through his Word.

So what is this all-important thing called expositional preaching? It is usually contrasted with topical preaching. A topical sermon is like this chapter—it takes a subject and talks about it, rather than taking a particular text of the Bible as its subject. The topical sermon begins with a particular matter that the preacher wants to preach about. The topic could be prayer or justice or parenting or holiness or even expositional preaching. Having established the topic, the preacher then assembles various texts from various parts of the Bible and combines them with illustrative stories and anecdotes. The material is combined and woven together around this one topic. The topical sermon is not built around one text of Scripture but around this one chosen theme or idea.

A topical sermon can be expositional. I could choose to preach on a topic and pick one passage of Scripture that addresses exactly this concern. Or I could preach with a number of texts that address this same theme. But it is still a topical sermon, because the preacher knows what he wants to say and he is going into the Bible to see what he can find to say about it. For example, when I preached a version of this material as a sermon, I largely knew when I set out what I wanted to say. When I preach expositionally, this is not usually the case. In preparing my normal expositional

sermon, I am often a bit surprised by the things I find in the passage as I study it. Generally, I do not choose series of expositional sermons because of particular topics that I think the church needs to hear about. Rather, I assume that all of the Bible is relevant to us all of the time. Now, I trust that God may lead to some particular books, but very often when I'm working on a text and reading through it in my quiet times the week before preaching, and working with it very seriously on Friday, I will find things in it that I didn't expect to find at all. I will sometimes be surprised by the point of the passage and therefore by what must become the point of my message.

Expositional preaching is not simply producing a verbal commentary on some passage of Scripture. Rather, expositional preaching is preaching that takes for the point of a sermon the point of a particular passage of Scripture. That's it. The preacher opens the Word and unfolds it for the people of God. That is not what I'm doing in this chapter, but it is what I normally intend to do when I step into the pulpit on Sunday.¹

Expositional preaching is preaching in service to the Word. It presumes a belief in the authority of Scripture—that the Bible is actually God's Word; but it is something much more than that. A commitment to expositional preaching is a commitment to *hear* God's Word—not just to affirm that it is God's Word but to actually submit to it. The Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles were given not a personal commission to go and speak, but a particular message to deliver. Likewise Christian preachers today have authority to speak from God only so long as they speak his message and unfold his words. As loquacious as some preachers may be, they are not commanded simply to go and preach. They are commanded specifically to go and preach the Word.

Many pastors happily accept the authority of God's Word and profess to believe in the inerrancy of the Bible; yet if they do not in practice regularly preach expositionally, I'm convinced that they will never preach more than they knew when they began

the whole exercise. A preacher can take a piece of Scripture and exhort the congregation on a topic that is important, but that isn't really the point of that particular passage. You can pick your Bible up right now, close your eyes, open it to a certain place, put your finger down on a verse, open your eyes and read that verse, and you can get a great blessing from it for your soul—but you still might not learn what God intended to say through that passage. What is most important in real estate is most important in understanding the Bible: location, location, location. You understand a text of Scripture where it is. You understand it in the context in which it was inspired.

A preacher should have his mind increasingly shaped by Scripture. He shouldn't use Scripture as an excuse for what he already knows he wants to say. When someone regularly preaches in a way that is not expositional, the sermons tend to be only on the topics that interest the preacher. The result is that the preacher and the congregation only hear in Scripture what they already thought before they came to the text. There's nothing new being added to their understanding. They're not continuing to be challenged by the Bible.

In being committed to preach a passage of Scripture in context, expositionally—that is, taking as the point of the message the point of the passage—we should hear from God things that we didn't intend to hear when we set out to study the passage. God surprises us sometimes. And from your repentance and conversion to the latest thing the Holy Spirit has been teaching you, isn't that what it means to be a Christian? Don't you again and again find God challenging you and convicting you of some things you would never have thought about a year ago, as he begins to unearth the truth of your heart and the truth of his Word? To charge someone with the spiritual oversight of a church who doesn't in practice show a commitment to hear and to teach God's Word is to hamper the growth of the church, in essence allowing it to grow only to the level of the pastor. The church will slowly be conformed to the

pastor's mind rather than to God's mind. And what we want, what as Christians we crave, are God's words. We want to hear and know in our souls what he has said.

The Central Role of the Word of God

Preaching should always (or almost always) be expositional because the Word of God should be at its center, directing it. In fact, churches should have the Word at their center, directing them. God has chosen to use his Word to bring life. That's the pattern that we see in Scripture and in history.

At a reception I once attended, the conversation turned to a book that had recently been published. I had read it, because I was about to give a speech on the topic of the book. My host, a Roman Catholic, had also read it—for a review he was writing. I asked him what he thought.

"Oh, it was very good," he said, "except it was marred by the author's repeating that old Protestant error that the Bible created the church, when we all know that the church created the Bible."

Well, I was in a bit of quandary. It was his gathering and I was a guest. What should I say? I saw the whole Protestant Reformation flash before me!

I decided that if he could politely be so openly dismissive, then I could be as forthright and honest as I wished. So I came right out and said, "That's ridiculous!" Trying to be as pleasantly contradictory as I could, I continued, "God's people have never created God's Word. From the very beginning God's Word has always created his people! From Genesis 1, where God literally creates all that is, including his people, by his Word; to Genesis 12, where he calls Abraham out of Ur by the word of his promise; to Ezekiel 37, where God gives Ezekiel a vision to share with the Israelite exiles in Babylon about the great resurrection to life that would come about by God's Word; to the supreme sending of God's Word in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh; to Romans 10, where we read that spiritual life comes to us by the Word—God has always

created his people by his Word. It has never been the other way around. God's people have never created God's Word."

Now, I can't remember exactly what happened in the rest of that conversation, but I remember that part very clearly because it helped to crystallize for me the absolute centrality of the Word.

Let's follow this path through the Scriptures and see what it tells us about the centrality of God's Word in our lives, and then consider what that means for the nature and importance of preaching in our churches. I want to focus on four points: the role of the Word in bringing us life; the role of God's Word in preaching; the role of the Word in sanctifying us; and, therefore, the role a preacher of God's Word should have in the church.

The Role of God's Word in Bringing Life

Let's start at the beginning, where the Bible starts. In Genesis 1, we see that it was by his Word that God created the world and all the life in it. He spoke, and it was so. In Genesis 3, we see the grim story of what happened next: the fall. There we see that our first parents sinned, and that when they sinned they were cast out from God's presence. They quite literally lost sight of God. But in God's great grace they did not lose all hope. Though God was vanishing from their sight, he mercifully sent his voice to them so that they could hear the word of promise. In Genesis 3:14–15, God cursed the serpent. He warned him that the offspring of the woman would crush him. That word is the first word of hope Adam and Eve had in the aftermath of their own sin.

In Genesis 12, we find that it was by God's Word that Abraham was called out of Ur of the Chaldeans. The word of God's promise, recorded in the first few verses of Genesis 12, was the attractive force, the drawing promise, literally calling Abraham out of Ur to follow after God. God's people were created—they became visible—by hearing that word of promise and by responding to it—by coming out after it. God's people were created by God's Word.

Abraham never set up a committee to craft God's Word. No,

he was made the father of God's people because God's Word came specially to him and he believed it. He trusted God for what he said. Then we read of how the children of Abraham expanded in the Promised Land, then went down into Egypt, eventually falling into slavery there for centuries. Just when that bondage looked so permanent, what did God do? He sent his Word. In Exodus 3:4, God began with Moses, calling out to him. A burning bush was an extraordinary thing to see, but a burning bush in and of itself wouldn't tell Moses anything. Even learned scholars disagree on the symbolism of the burning bush. The key is that God spoke out of the bush. He gave his words to Moses. He called out to him by his Word. God's Word came not just to Moses and his descendants but to the whole nation of Israel, calling them to be his people.

In Exodus 20, we find that God gave his law to his people, and by accepting God's law they became his people. It was by God's Word that the people of Israel were constituted as God's special people.

Continuing through the Old Testament, we see that God's Word plays both a seminal and a discriminating role, as some people hear it and others refuse to hear it. Consider, for example, the story of Elijah in 1 Kings 18: "After a long time, . . . the word of the LORD came to Elijah: 'Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land'" (v. 1). The phrase "the word of the LORD came" or its equivalents occurs more than 3,800 times in the Old Testament. The Word of the Lord came as he created and led his people. God's people were those who heard God's words of promise and responded in faith. In the Old Testament, God's Word always came as a means of faith. It was, in a sense, a secondary object of faith. God, of course, is always the primary object of our faith—we believe in God—but that doesn't mean very much if that object is not defined. And how do we define who God is and what he calls us to do? We could make it up, or our God could tell us. We believe that God has told us. We believe that God has himself actually spoken. His Word is to be trusted and relied upon with all the faith that we would invest in God himself.

So we see in the Old Testament that God led his people by his Word.

Do you see why the Word of God is central as an instrument in creating faith? It presents God and his promises to us—from all kinds of individual promises throughout the Old and New Testaments, all the way to the great promise, the great hope, the great object of our faith, Christ himself. The Word shows us what we are to believe.

For the Christian, the speed of sound (the Word that we hear) is in a sense greater than the speed of light (the things we can actually see). It is as if, in this fallen world, we perceive the future first by our ears rather than by our eyes.

In the great vision of Ezekiel 37, we see most remarkably that life comes by the Word of God:

The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?”

I said, “O Sovereign LORD, you alone know.”

Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.’” (vv. 1–6)

This is one encouraging vision! If you have ever been called to pastor a church that looks like it might be on its last legs, or if you can recall your own feelings of spiritual hopelessness before you found salvation, then you can see why this is a great passage of hope.

In verses 7–10 we see what happens when Ezekiel responds in obedience to the vision:

I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’” So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

Then God interprets this vision for Ezekiel. He says that these bones stand for the whole house of Israel, who say, “Our hope is gone” (v. 11). God’s answer to Israel, as it was to the dry bones, is: “I will put my Spirit in you and you will live” (v. 14). And how does he do this? He does it *by his Word*. To make the point crystal clear, God calls Ezekiel to start preaching to this bunch of dry bones, and through that preaching of the Word God brings life to the bones. God has Ezekiel speak his Word to them while they are dead, and as he does so, they come to life!

The vision of the dry bones reflects the way God called Ezekiel to speak to a nation that wouldn’t listen to him. It also reflects the way God himself spoke into the void and created his world—by the power of his Word. We are reminded, likewise, of what happened when God’s Word came into the world in the person of Christ: “And though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him” (John 1:10). Yet through that Word, through the Lord Jesus, God has begun creating his new society on earth.

God told Ezekiel to speak to the dry bones. Life came through breath; the Spirit traveled through speech; and that Word of God, his breath, gave life. Do you see the close connection between life, breath, spirit, speech, and word? It reminds us of times in Jesus’s own ministry. For instance: “Some people brought to him a man who was deaf. . . . He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, . . . ‘Be opened!’ . . . At this, the man’s ears were opened” (Mark 7:32, 34–35). Jesus spoke to a deaf man, and his ears were

opened. Life came back into his ears! Jesus called his people to himself in just the way that Ezekiel prophesied: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezek. 36:26).

This is the glorious reality that we Christians have experienced. As I once said to a Jehovah’s Witness worker, Christians know that in and of ourselves we are spiritually dead, and that we need God to initiate his life in us. We need him to reach down and rip out our old, stony hearts and put in us new, fleshy hearts of love toward him—hearts that are soft and pliant to his Word. And that’s just what Jesus Christ does for us. He is creating a different *kind* of people, a people who show the life of God in them as they hear his Word and as by his grace they respond to it.

This brings us to the supreme picture of God’s Word bringing life:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. (John 1:1, 3–4)

It is in Christ that the Word of God has fully and finally come to us.

Jesus modeled that great reality in his own ministry. At the very beginning of his ministry, when his disciples told him that many people were looking for him because they wanted him to do some more miracles and to heal them, Jesus replied, “Let us go somewhere else . . . so I can *preach* there also. *That* is why I have come” (Mark 1:38). If we keep reading Mark’s Gospel, we find that Jesus knew that he had come fundamentally to lay down his life for our sins (see 10:45); but in order for that event to be understood, he first had to teach.

It was God’s Word that Peter preached at Pentecost in Acts 2. God brought life through his Word. Men and women heard the truth about God, their sins, and the provision God had sent in Jesus. And when they heard the message, they were cut to the heart, and

they cried out, “Brothers, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). God’s Word created his people. The church was founded by the Word.

I don’t mean to give the impression that Christianity is only a bunch of words—but words are important. In the Bible, we see that God acts, but he doesn’t stop there. After he acts, God speaks. He interprets what he has done so that we can understand it. God doesn’t allow his acts to speak for themselves; he speaks, in order to interpret for us his great saving acts.

This “verbal” nature of God fits with the way he has made us. Consider our human relationships. How do we come to know each other? We can get to know each other through just watching. Husbands and wives can learn about each other through physical intimacy. But there is a profound part of our knowing each other that can come only through some kind of cognitive communication. Words are important for our relationships.

You tell me you have a great relationship with your dog (he’s man’s best friend, after all!), and that you love your dog, though he could never speak to you or cognitively communicate with you. You come home, and he wags his tail. He rushes to you. He wants to lick you. You look in his eyes and see they’re oh-so-sympathetic. He understands all of life and will never desert you. You figure this is love, so who needs words?

Well, words are important. If you went home one Sunday and your dog looked up at you and casually said, “So how was church today?” I submit that that would change your relationship with your dog! It would show you exactly how important words are in relationships.

Because we have separated ourselves from God by our sin, God must speak if we are to know him. This is why the work of one of the former members of our church, Carl F. H. Henry, has been so important. In his *magnum opus*, the six-volume *God, Revelation and Authority*, he makes exactly this point—that God will not be known if he does not speak, and we cannot know him if he has not spoken a word that we can rely on. God must reveal himself.

That's the point of the Bible. Because of our own sins, we could never know God otherwise. Either he speaks or we are forever lost in the darkness of our own speculations.

We see this clearly throughout the New Testament. Consider Romans 10:17: "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." This "word of Christ" is the great message of the gospel: that God has made us to know him, but that we have sinned and separated ourselves from him; that therefore God in his great love has come in the person of Jesus Christ, who has lived a perfect life, taking on our flesh and our infirmities; that he died on the cross specifically as a substitute for all of those who would ever turn to him and trust in him; that he has been raised by God from the dead as a testimony that God has accepted this sacrifice; and that he calls us now to repent and to trust in him, even as Abraham trusted in the Word of God as it came to him in Ur of the Chaldeans so many centuries ago.

Paul writes just before this, in Romans 10:9, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

Trusting in and relying on the truth of God's raising Jesus Christ is the way to salvation, the way to inclusion in the people of God. And so we see, once again, that God has always created his people by speaking his Word. And his greatest Word is Christ. As the writer to the Hebrews began his letter,

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. (Heb. 1:1–2)

As believers living after the fall but before the Heavenly City, we are in a time when faith is central, and so the Word must be central—because God's Holy Spirit creates his people by his Word! We can create a people by other means, and this is the great temp-

tation of churches. We can create a people around a certain ethnicity. We can create a people around a fully-graded choir program. We can find people who will get excited about a building project or a denominational identity. We can create a people around a series of care groups, where everyone feels loved and cared for. We can create a people around a community service project. We can create a people around social opportunities for young mothers or Caribbean cruises for singles. We can create a people around men's groups. We can even create a people around the personality of a preacher. And God can surely use all of these things. But in the final analysis the people of God, the church of God, can only be created around the Word of God.

Asked about his accomplishments as a Reformer, Martin Luther said, "I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word: otherwise I did nothing. . . . The Word did it all."² The Word of God brings life.

The Role of God's Word in Preaching

The most extended treatment in the New Testament of what the Christian gathering should be like is in chapters 11–14 of 1 Corinthians. Paul's chief concern is well summarized in 14:26: "All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church." Throughout 1 Corinthians, this is Paul's standard for deciding what should be done in the congregation. It follows then, that such a standard of usefulness in edification should especially be applied to that which we have said is central to the Christian congregation—preaching. What preaching will most edify the church? The answer must certainly be teaching that exposes God's Word to God's people.

Certainly not all preaching is biblical. John Broadus once quipped that "If some sermons had the small-pox the text would never catch it."³ Do you have any doubt that expositional preaching should be the basic diet of preaching in your congregation? When God gave Moses instructions for the kings that would surely come in Israel, do you remember what God required of them? In Deuter-

onomy 17:18–20 we read, “When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left.” And what marks the righteous man in Psalm 1? “His delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night” (v. 2). This delight is echoed in stanza after stanza of the great 119th Psalm: “Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous laws” (v. 164); “I obey your statutes, for I love them greatly” (v. 167); “Your law is my delight” (v. 174). Given this delight in God’s Word, delivering that Word is to be the wonderful burden of Christian preaching.

Furthermore, we live in a literate age, where the printed word is familiar to us all and where God’s Word has been chapterized and versified and translated and made readily available. Why would we *not* take advantage of that in our preaching? In earlier times, when preachers had few of these advantages, Chrysostom, Augustine, and others preached consecutive series of sermons through portions of Scripture. In his *Third Sermon: Lazarus and the Rich Man*, Chrysostom said, “I often tell you many days in advance the subject of what I am going to say, in order that you may take up the book in the intervening days, go over the whole passage, learn both what is said and what is left out, and so make your understanding more ready to learn when you hear what I will say afterwards.”⁴

In such a commitment to bring his people God’s Word, Chrysostom was following in the footsteps of Moses, whom Jethro charged with teaching the people the law (see Ex. 18:19–20). Moses was following in the steps of Josiah who “read in [the people’s] hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the LORD” (2 Chron. 34:30). And Josiah was following in the steps of Ezra and the returning Levites who “read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving

the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read” (Neh. 8:8).

This pattern of the teaching of God’s Word being central to the gathering of God’s people continued into the time of Christ. The synagogues of Jesus’s day would read through the Scriptures in lectionary cycles of a year or two. Readers of God’s Word would make comments on the text, as Jesus did in Luke 4. Exactly how much the first churches were modeled after the synagogue meetings of the time is impossible to determine. Nevertheless, the expositional series that survive from Chrysostom and other earlier Christian preachers suggest that the consecutive, expositional pattern was widespread. The sermons (or summaries) in the New Testament are few in number, and they show a concern to be relevant to the hearers’ cultural setting, but even more fundamentally to be rooted in the Scriptures. Of course, the early Christians lacked some of our advantages, like having the text of Scriptures available to be examined even during the sermon, so the mechanics of expositional preaching would more often rely on mnemonic devices like the repetition of the lectionary. But, Peter’s sermon at Pentecost seems to have substantially been a meditation, exposition, and application of portions of Joel 2 and Psalms 16 and 110. The writer to the Hebrews also spends long sections instructing on Psalms 95 (chaps. 3–4) and 110 (chap. 7).

In all of this, we see that it is good to preach the truth; it is even better to preach in such a way that people can see where they can get the truth. As C. E. B. Cranfield, former professor of theology at Durham, said, “The practice of preaching through biblical books section by section, in order, can be, I have long believed, if followed intelligently and sensitively, enormously beneficial to the church.”⁵

This is true whether the texts are from the Old Testament or the New, whether they are single verses or long passages.

I love what Hughes Old has said of John MacArthur and his expository preaching: “Here is a preacher who has nothing in

the way of a winning personality, good looks, or charm. Here is a preacher who offers us nothing in the way of sophisticated homiletical packaging. No one would suggest that he is a master of the art of oratory. What he seems to have is a witness to true authority. He recognizes in Scripture the Word of God, and when he preaches, it is Scripture that one hears. It is not that the words of John MacArthur are so interesting as it is that the Word of God is of surpassing interest. That is why one listens.”⁶

The Role of God’s Word in Sanctifying

We must also consider the role of God’s Word in sanctifying us. The Word of God must be central to our lives as individuals and as a church because God’s Spirit uses the Word to create faith in us and to make us grow. We won’t explore this point as carefully as the last, but it is just as clear in Scripture. As Jesus replied to Satan, quoting from Deuteronomy, “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4; quoting Deut. 8:3). We know also those famous words of the psalmist, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (Ps. 119:105).

When we look at the history of Israel and Judah in the Old Testament, we see the sanctifying power of God’s Word again and again. During the reign of King Josiah, in the declining days of Judah (2 Chronicles 34), the Law—the written Word of God—was rediscovered and read to him. Josiah’s response was to tear his clothes in repentance and then to read the Word to the people. A national recovery came as God’s Word went out. God uses his Word to sanctify his people and to make them more like himself.

This is what the Lord Jesus taught, too. In his High Priestly Prayer he prayed, “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17). And Paul wrote that “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word” (Eph. 5:25–26).

We need God’s Word to be saved, but we also need it to continually challenge and shape us. His Word not only gives us life; it

also gives us direction as it keeps molding and shaping us in the image of the God who is speaking to us.

At the time of the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church had a Latin phrase that became something of a motto: *semper idem*. It means “always the same.” Well, the Reformed churches, too, had a “semper” motto: *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei*. “The church reformed, always being reformed according to the Word of God.” A healthy church is a church that hears the Word of God and continues to hear the Word of God. Such a church is composed of individual Christians who hear the Word of God and continue to hear the Word of God, always being refashioned and reshaped by it, constantly being washed in the Word and sanctified by God’s truth.

For our own health, individually as Christians and corporately as a church, we must continue to be shaped in new and deeper ways by God’s agenda in our lives, rather than by our own agendas. God makes us more like himself through his Word, washing over us, refreshing us, reshaping us.

That brings us to a fourth important point.

The Role of the Preacher of God’s Word

If you are looking for a good church, the role of the preacher of God’s Word is the most important thing to consider. I don’t care how friendly you think the church members are. I don’t care how good you think the music is. Those things can change. But the congregation’s commitment to the centrality of the Word coming from the front, from the preacher, the one specially gifted by God and called to that ministry, is the most important thing you can look for in a church.

In *Dining with the Devil*, Os Guinness cites an article from *The New Yorker* magazine lamenting the “audience-driven” nature of much preaching today:

The preacher, instead of looking out upon the world, looks out upon public opinion, trying to find out what the public would

like to hear. Then he tries his best to duplicate that, and bring his finished product into a marketplace in which others are trying to do the same. The public, turning to our church culture to find out about the world, discovers there is nothing but its own reflection.⁷

That's not the way it should be. Preachers are not called to preach what's popular according to the polls. People already know all that. What life does that bring? We're not called to preach merely moral exhortations or history lessons or social commentaries (though any of those things may be a part of good preaching). We are called to preach the Word of God to the church of God and to everyone in his creation. This is how God brings life. Each person who is reading this book—and I, the one who has written it—is flawed and has faults and has sinned against God. And the terrible thing about our fallen natures is that we are greedy for ways to justify our sins against God. Every single one of us wants to know how we can defend ourselves from God's charges. Therefore we are in desperate need to hear God's Word brought honestly to us, so that we don't just hear what we want to hear but rather what God has actually said.

All of this is important, remember, because God's Holy Spirit creates his people by his Word.

This is why Paul told Timothy to “form a committee.” Right? Of course not! “Take a survey”? No! Paul never told anyone to take a survey, either. “Spend yourself in visiting”? “Read a book”? No! Paul never told young Timothy to do any of those things.

Paul told Timothy, straight and clear, to “preach the Word” (2 Tim. 4:2). This is the great imperative. This is why the apostles earlier had determined that, even though there were problems with the equitable distribution of financial aid in Jerusalem, the church would have to find others to solve their problems, because, “We . . . will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:3–4). Why this priority? Because this Word is “the word of life” (Phil. 2:16). The great task of the preacher is to “hold out the word of life” to people who need it for their souls.

Today some critics suggest that we need a less rational, more artistic, less authoritarian and elitist, more communal and participatory way of communicating God's truth than this ancient method of one person standing up front and talking in a monologue to others. We need video clips, they say, and dialogues and liturgical dance. And yet there's something right and good about this ancient method that makes it appropriate, perhaps even especially appropriate, for our culture today. In our isolatingly subjectivist culture where everyone's just into their own thing, in this anti-authority culture where everyone is confused and confusing, it is appropriate for us to gather together and listen to one who is standing in the place of God, giving his Word to us as we contribute nothing to it other than hearing and heeding it. There is an important symbol in this process in and of itself.

Of course there will come a day when faith will give way to sight and sermons will be no more. And let me tell you there is no one who looks forward to that more than I and most of my fellow preachers. When you don't need faith anymore because you can see the Lord—that's the climax of the Bible. "They will see his face" (Rev. 22:4). And at that point this old cane of faith can be cast aside as we run and see him with our own eyes.

But we're not there yet. We're still laboring under the results of the sins of our first parents and of our own sins. On that day, faith will finally give way to sight, but for now we are in a different time—but by God's grace this is not a time of total despair. He gives us his Word and he gives us faith. We are in a day of faith. And so, like our first parents before us, like Noah and Abraham, the Israelites and the ancient apostles, we rely on God's Word.

What does all this mean for our churches? The preaching of the Word must be absolutely central. Sound, expositional preaching is often the fountainhead of growth in a church. Let a good expositional ministry be established and watch what happens. Forget what the experts say. Watch hungry people have their lives transformed as the living God speaks to them through the power of his

Word. As it was in Martin Luther's own experience, such careful attention to God's Word is the way to salvation and is often the beginning of reformation. As Paul said, "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).

This doesn't mean that such a ministry will always be popular and blessed with increasing numbers of people hearing and being baptized. But it does mean that such a ministry will always be right. And it will feed God's children with the food they need. "Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD" (Deut. 8:3).

Are you in a job where you get a lot of phone calls? Some of those calls you know you don't ever have to return. Some of them you know you can return sometime in the next week or month. But some of those calls are of such a nature that you look at the message and know you need to get to them right away. What if the Lord himself phoned you? I think you would snap right to it. We say that we believe the Bible is actually God's Word, God speaking to us, and yet so often we ignore it and set it aside and refuse to give time to thinking about it. Instead, our lives are absorbed by things such as going out to dinner with a friend, watching television, or reading books other than the Bible. None of those things are bad. But what does it mean when we say that the Bible is the Word of God? It means that we must hear it and heed it.

So many people in these strange days, even those who say that the Bible is the Word of God, don't intend to follow it. It is not surprising, then, to hear that 35 percent of self-professed born-again Christians say they are still searching for the meaning of life—the very same percentage as for non-Christians. What good does it do for you to think you have the Word of God, if you won't give attention to it, if you won't read it and pray over it and put your life under it?

Preaching should have a certain content, a certain transparency

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of form. The people listening to preaching should know they are hearing God's Word preached. Church members should encourage preachers, pray for them, and look for such preaching, thanking God for it when it comes. It is good to preach the truth, and to preach it in such a way that people can see where the truth is coming from. That, more than anything else, is what Christians need.

So what makes a really good church?

Even more than parking and pews and greetings and programs and nursery and music and all the things that I asked you about at the beginning of this chapter, even more than the preacher, it is what is preached—the Word of God. Because “man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4).

OTHER RESOURCES

- For group study: *Hearing God's Word: Expositional Preaching*, a six-week inductive Bible study from 9Marks
- For deeper study: *Preach: Theology Meets Practice*, by Mark Dever and Greg Gilbert
- For further meditation: *Reverberation: How God's Word Gives Light, Freedom, and Action to His People*, by Jonathan Leeman

IX 9Marks

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