

Marks of a Healthy Church

Session 1

Welcome...

Opening prayer. (*discernment emphasis*)

Introduction

Thank you for coming and for your concern for the health of your church. The springboard for this short course is Mark Dever's book *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*. Before we jump into the marks in this book, I want to look at a few of the things we often pursue as a church, in our quest to be successful or healthy.

My M.O. pick a topic you can't possibly cover in three weeks, then expand on it!

I. A Church in Pursuit

None of these pursuits is bad in of themselves. The question we need to be asking is if these are things to be pursued directly, or things to be realized as we pursue faithful Kingdom building. Each of these is a reaction to legitimate problems that we recognize in the church.

A. *The Pursuit of Numbers.*

Is a full parking lot a mark of a healthy church? Dr. Dever doesn't think so:

The purpose of too many evangelical churches has fallen from one of glorifying God simply to growing larger, assuming that the goal, however achieved, must glorify God.¹

Os Guinness recognizes the dangers:

Even theologically conservative churches that self-consciously oppose secularism are nevertheless themselves often unwitting bastions of a secularized version of Christianity and the two most easily recognizable hallmarks of secularization in America are the exaltation of numbers and of technique.²

If the aim of the church is to grow, the only 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.³

¹ Dever, Mark, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, Crossway Books, 2000 p. 11.

² Guinness, Os, *Dining With the Devil*, p. 49.

³ Bratton, Carl, *The Gospel for a Neopagan Culture*. p. 19..

B. The Pursuit of Relevance.

In a culture where Christianity is increasingly marginalized and finding itself impotent, we can seek relevance as an end in itself.

In a society where Christianity is being widely and rapidly disowned, where evangelism is often considered inherently intolerant or even officially classified as a hate crime, we find our world changed. *The culture to which we would conform in order to be relevant comes so inextricably entwined with antagonism to the Gospel that to conform to it must mean a loss of the Gospel itself.* In such a day, we must re-hear the Bible and re-imagine the concept of successful ministry not as necessarily immediately fruitful, but as demonstrably faithful to God's Word.⁴

If William Carey would be faithful in India or Adoniram Judson in Burma, it could not be because their immediate success showed them that they were being obviously relevant. It could only be because the Spirit of God in them encouraged them to obedience and trust... *We today, 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.*⁵

C. The Pursuit of Authenticity.

The emerging generation has grown weary of our hypocrisy and impotence and now find themselves in hot pursuit of authenticity. While the previous two are more characteristic of the modernist influences found in the mega-churches and seeker-sensitive churches, the pursuit of authenticity is characteristic of the post-modernist emerging churches.

My exhortation to my emerging church friends in your pursuit of authenticity, take the time to ask yourselves, "an authentic *what?*" Authenticity is a fruit of a healthy Christian and church, let's turn our attention now to what it means to be a healthy church.

II. Marks of the True Church:

In Dever's book, he builds an established understanding of what constitutes a true 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.

⁴ Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, p. 14.

⁵ This is too good to be mine, but I can't recall where I found this—Note to self: find the source.

What I am about in this book is attempting to speak to some marks that set off healthy churches from true but more sickly ones.⁶

Since a healthy church must be a true church, we also need to back up and look first at the “traditional protestant understanding” marks of a true church that Dever mentioned, and add one that he missed.

Historical church documents are pretty consistent:

Calvin--Reformed

Hence the form of the Church appears and stands forth conspicuous to our view. Wherever we see the word of God sincerely preached and heard, wherever we see the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there we cannot have any doubt that the Church of God has some existence.⁷

Augsburg Confession--Lutheran

Also they teach that one holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered.⁸

Articles of the Church of England

The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure word of God is preached and the sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.⁹

Belgic Confession (Article 29)— Reformed

The true church is to be recognized by the following marks: It practices the pure preaching of the gospel.ⁱ It maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them.ⁱⁱ It exercises church discipline for correcting and punishing sins.ⁱⁱⁱ¹⁰

A. *The Right Preaching of the Word of God.*

1. *Scripture is to be Preached and Taught*

Paul—Final Word to Timothy and the Church

^{ESV} **2 Timothy 3:16** All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,¹⁷ that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

⁶ Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, p. 10.

⁷ Calvin, John, *Institutes of the Christian Religion Book IV Ch.1 Section 9*, hosted at reformed.org, accessed Jan 24, 2009.

⁸ *Book of Concord Article VII, Section 1*, hosted at bookofconcord.org, accessed Jan 24, 2009.

⁹ *The Thirty Nine Articles of the Church of England, Article XIX*, <http://mb-soft.com/believe/txc/thirtyni.htm> , accessed Jan 24, 2009.

¹⁰ *Belgic Confession, Article 29*, <http://www.reformed.org/documents/BelgicConfession.html> , accessed Feb 6, 2009.

RiddleBarger, Kim, *A Sermon on Article 29 of the Belgic Confession* internal references:

ⁱ Gal 1:8; 1 Tim 3:15; ⁱⁱ Acts 19:3-5; 1 Cor 11:20-29; ⁱⁱⁱ Mt 18:15-17; 1 Cor 5:4-5, 13; 2 Thes 3:6, 14; Tit 3:10

4:1 I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: ² preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.

2. The Gospel is to be Preached Accurately

^{ESV} **Galatians 1:8** But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.

^{ESV} **1 Timothy 3:15** if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.

B. The Pure Administration of the Sacraments.

1. Observe the Lord's Supper

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 11:23** For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

2. Observe the Lord's Supper Rightly

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 11:20** When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. ²¹ For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. ²² What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not. ²³ For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. ²⁷ Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.

3. Baptize Members of the Covenant Community

^{ESV} **Matthew 28:19** Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

a. Churches Differ On Who To Baptize

§ We at Desert Springs believe that a person becomes part of God's covenant community by rebirth and therefore we baptize believers rather than infants.

§ Some of our brothers carry over the Old Covenant view of entering into God's covenant community by being (physically) born into a covenant family.

b. *Churches Differ On How To Baptize*

§ We at Desert Springs baptize by immersion as more representative of the burial and resurrection of Christ.

§ Some of our brothers use other methods of ceremonial washings such as sprinkling and pouring.

4. *Baptize Rightly*

^{ESV} **Acts 19:3** And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They said, "Into John's baptism." ⁴ And Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus." ⁵ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

C. *Love for the Brethren.*

^{ESV} **John 13:35** By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

1. *Commanded/Commended Repeatedly*

^{ESV} **John 13:34** A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

^{ESV} **John 15:12** "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

^{ESV} **John 15:17** These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

^{ESV} **Romans 12:10** Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.

^{ESV} **1 Thessalonians 4:9** Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another,

^{ESV} **1 Peter 1:22** Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart,

^{ESV} **1 John 3:11** For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.

^{ESV} **1 John 3:23** And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.

^{ESV} **1 John 4:7** Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.

^{ESV} **1 John 4:11** Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

^{ESV} **1 John 4:12** No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

^{ESV} **2 John 1:5** And now I ask you, dear lady--not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning--that we love one another.

2. *Includes Discipline—Ref. Article 29 of the Belgic Confession*

^{ESV} **Revelation 3:19** Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.

^{ESV} **Luke 17:3** Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him,

^{ESV} **Matthew 18:15-17** "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 5:4-5,13** When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵ you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord... ¹³ God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."

^{ESV} **2 Thessalonians 3:6,14** Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. ... ¹⁴ If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed.

^{ESV} **Titus 3:10** As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him,

^{ESV} **Hebrews 12:7** It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸ If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

3. *Necessary but not Sufficient*

We cannot afford to be fooled by the presence of a loving body of people alone. There are cults who recruit by "love bombing" people and false religions that have tremendous mutual love and support.

III. Marks of a Healthy Church:

Since I will be drawing heavily from Mark Dever's book *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*. I'll present them in the same order that they appear in the book. You'll find that we have already discussed some of them in the previous section as marks of the true Church.

A. *Expositional Preaching.*

Paul—Final Charge to Timothy and the Church

^{ESV} **2 Timothy 4:1** I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: ² **preach the word**; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.

...preachers are not commanded simply to go and preach. They are commanded specifically to go and preach the Word.¹¹

1. *Defined*

Best defined in contrast with *topical preaching*:

- *Begins with a particular matter the preacher wants to preach about, and what he wants to say*
- *Scriptures mined for supporting texts*
- *Scriptures woven together around this one topic*

In contrast, expository preaching...

... is that preaching which 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.¹²

2. *Priority*

Dever's View— from p.25

- » Most important of the marks because from it, all the other ones follow
- » The main role of any pastor is expository preaching
- » If you get the priority of the Word established, then you have in place the single most important aspect of the church's life, and growing healthy is virtually assured

3. *Centrality/Authority*

Christ—The Incarnate Word

^{ESV} **John 1:1-3,14** In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ... ¹⁴ **And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us**, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

^{ESV} **Hebrews 1:1** Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but **in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son**, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.

^{ESV} **Romans 10:13-17** For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." ¹⁴ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of

¹¹ Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, p. 27.

¹² Ibid. p. 26.

whom they have never heard? **And how are they to hear without someone preaching?**¹⁵ And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"¹⁶ But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?"¹⁷ **So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.**

It is important that we understand that the preaching of the Word is God's chosen means of reconciling sinners to himself. If preaching is truly the proclamation of God's Word by his appointed mouthpiece it is important that preaching remains central and authoritative in the gathering of his people.

In our isolatingly subjectivist culture where everyone's just into their own thing, in this anti-authority culture where every-one is confused and confusing, there is something appropriate about us all gathering together and listening to one 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.¹³

^{ESV} **Matthew 4:4** But he answered, "It is written, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

Dever concludes the section on the central role of the Word of God:

Living as we do 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 temptation 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 each feels love 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.¹⁴

And quotes Martin Luther:

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."¹⁵ The Word of God brings life.¹⁶

B. Biblical Theology. (week 2)

¹³ Ibid. p. 40.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 36. (emphasis added)

¹⁵ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, (Philidelphia: Fortress, 1959), 51:77 (as cited by Dever, *Nine Marks*, p. 36).

¹⁶ Dever, p. 36.

- C. *Biblical Understanding of the Gospel.* (week 2)
- D. *Biblical Understanding of Conversion.* (week 2)
- E. *Biblical Understanding of Evangelism.* (week 2)
- F. *Biblical Understanding of Church Membership.* (week 3)
- G. *Biblical Church Discipline.* (week 3)
- H. *A Concern for Discipleship and Growth.* (week 3)
- I. *Biblical Church Leadership.* (week 3)