

Marks of a Healthy Church

Session 2

Welcome/Opening prayer

Introduction

Cultural Context--Postmodernism¹

Americans create designer religions and smorgasbord faiths—“Oh, I’ll take a little of this from Hinduism, a little of this from Christianity, a little of this from my grandmother (I don’t remember what she was)” —and put it all together as their own individual unique religion. Today people *believe* to be true simply what they *desire* to be true.²

Attempts to “rescue the church from irrelevance” continue:

- » *Christianity and Liberalism* by J. Gresham Machen exposes early twentieth century liberalism that tried to rescue the church in modernist culture. This book is still unbelievably relevant today as many of the arguments are the same.
- » *Dining With the Devil* by Os Guinness exposes the deeply rooted influence of modernity on the Mega-Church movement
- » *Becoming Conversant With the Emerging Church* by D.A. Carson does a similar job exposing the attempts of postmodernists to rescue the church.

Review

I. Marks of the True Church:

- A. *The Right Preaching of the Word of God.*
 - 1. *Scripture is to be Preached and Taught*
 - 2. *The Gospel is to be Preached Accurately*
- B. *The Pure Administration of the Sacraments.*
 - 1. *Observe the Lord’s Supper*
 - 2. *Observe the Lord’s Supper Rightly*
 - 3. *Baptize Members of the Covenant Community*
 - a. *Churches Differ On Whom To Baptize*
 - b. *Churches Differ On How To Baptize*
- C. *Love for the Brethren.*
 - 1. *Commanded/Commended Repeatedly*
 - 2. *Includes Discipline – Ref. Article 29 of the Belgic Confession*

¹ I give an introduction to postmodernism in the “Ambassador Essentials” course. You can find all the notes and handouts at objectivegospel.org

² Dever, Mark, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, Crossway Books, 2000 p. 44. (emphasis in the original)

3. *Necessary but not Sufficient*

II. Marks of a Healthy Church:

A. *Expositional Preaching.*

1. *Defined* - that preaching which takes for the point of a sermon the point of a particular passage of Scripture.
2. *Priority* - from it, all the other marks [of a healthy church] follow
3. *Centrality/Authority*

Week 2

B. *Biblical Theology.*

The church's health is not only affected by how it is taught (expositionally) but by what it is taught.

^{ESV} **Titus 2:1** But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine.

“soundness” is an old-fashioned word, with its medical imagery of wholeness or healthiness. Are the teachings presented in accord with the full revelation of God's Word?

1. *Definition*-- The main lines of the Bible's great story: What is God like? Are people basically good or bad? What did Jesus accomplish by dying on the cross? (Biblical theology differs from Systematic theology in that the former traces developing themes historically, whereas the latter investigates discrete topics logically.)³

We must understand God by His revelation of Himself, not by our own hunches, not by our own wishes, not by the way we like to think of God. Too often today we speak as if evangelism were advertising and explain the Spirit's work in terms of marketing.⁴

2. *Biblical Emphasis on Sound Doctrine*— Paul wrote of it often:

^{ESV} **1 Timothy 6:3** If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness,

^{ESV} **2 Timothy 1:13** Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁴ By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.

³ *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* web site. <http://marks.9marks.org/Mark2/LessonB/Slide1of3>

⁴ Dever, Mark, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church – Expanded Edition*, Crossway Books, 2004 p. 73

^{ESV} **Titus 1:9** He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

^{ESV} **2 Timothy 4:3** For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions,⁴ and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

3. *Unity, Diversity, and Charity—*

“In essentials unity, in non-essentials diversity, and in all things charity”

Certain doctrines require unity (salvation through the work of Jesus Christ alone, the deity of Christ, the certainty of Christ’s return in judgment...). Other doctrines leave latitude for disagreement (the timing of Christ’s return, mode of baptism, etc.). Basic principle—the closer we get to the core of our faith, the more we should expect to see unity. Where there is principled disagreement in non-essentials, there should be healthy debate, but done with love and respect.

4. *Developing a Biblical Theology*

- a. Everyone has a theological grid—an understanding of God’s revelation of Himself, his relationship to man, etc. It is influenced by many things:
 - » Scripture—God breathed, authoritative, ...
 - » Experience—often misleading & easily trumped by cultists, positive thinkers, false religions, ... The highest authority in postmodern church.
 - » Reasoning/logic (often useful, but ultimately fallen)
 - » Our sinful nature (pride, idolatry, ...). I prefer to believe in a God like me, only better.
- b. Everyone’s theological grid is wrong—the growing Christian is constantly seeking greater understanding—Theology affects behaviors—Theology matters. As we mature, we grow to depend more upon Scripture and less upon these other means, and this leads us to the important study of Biblical interpretation based on sound exegesis of the text.

5. *Dealing With Complex/Controversial Doctrines—*

Sound teaching includes a clear commitment to doctrines often neglected yet clearly biblical. If we are to learn the sound doctrine of the Bible, we must come to terms with the doctrines that

may be difficult, or even potentially divisive, but that are foundational for understanding God's work among us.⁵

For example doctrines such as *election* the reveal *God's sovereignty* in salvation are often avoided because they seem to contradict other passages that emphasize the *responsibility of man* to respond to the gospel. We'll return to this topic later.

Which has greater authority?

- » Scripture or your concept of human free will
- » Scripture or your experience
- » Scripture or your concept of "fairness"
- » Scripture or popular church culture
 - Scripture's call to pursue wisdom for decision making or rely on superstition and pagan divination to "find the will of God"

Our understanding of the nature of man (good or bad?), the purpose and effect of Christ's atonement (what did he actually accomplish?), how a person becomes a Christian, etc. all deeply affect our attitudes towards God and each other.

If we are to learn the sound doctrine of the Bible, we must come to terms even with the doctrines that may be difficult or even potentially divisive but that are foundational for our understanding of God. You see, theology is not merely an abstruse, abstract, academic affair. Biblical theology is a mark of a healthy church.⁶

C. *Biblical Understanding of the Gospel.*

Scripture reveals mankind as created in the image of God, but tragically fallen, sinful, separated from and unspeakably Holy God, and in danger of just judgment.

Wait a minute! Doesn't "gospel" mean *good* news? It's important to understand that the good news isn't the only news, and in this case the good news makes no sense apart from the reality of the bad news.

The good news is that God has provided a way for sinners to be not only forgiven and justified, but also to reconciled to God as His adopted and cherished children.

What the gospel is not:

- » That you are OK

⁵ Dever, Mark, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church – 4th Edition*, Crossway Books, 2005 p. 18

⁶ Dever, *Nine Marks – Expanded Edition*, p. 62

- » Simply that 'God is Love'
- » That Jesus wants to be your friend, make you happy, improve your golf game...
- » That we should live right

What the gospel is:

So often you ask a person, "Well what is the gospel?" The gospel is that you're to repent and believe in Jesus Christ. Nope. You've started with a response to the gospel. The gospel is, though you are under the righteous condemnation of God by virtue of your sin and rebellion and your participation in Adam's original rebellion, God in His mercy and grace has sent His Son to die on your behalf, that you might become the righteousness of God in Him. That's where the gospel starts. Not with our response. Until you understand that the gospel is about God and His initiative, you don't have a full view of the gospel. And so Paul begins by saying the gospel of God concerning His Son.⁷

- » Reconciliation with God on His terms
- » Exclusive — ^{ESV} **John 14:6** Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.
- » To be proclaimed — ^{ESV} **Mark 16:15** And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.
- » To be kept pure/contended (fought) for--^{ESV} **Jude 1:3b** I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. (refer back to the quotes from 1&2 Timothy and Titus)

D. Biblical Understanding of Conversion.

We are not to judge people. This is both true and popular. We are never to make a judgment over anyone's eternal state, not even our own.

We are called to make judgments of behavior, truth, etc. This truth is not nearly as popular. Scripture passages about how to handle when someone has sinned against you, or sin in the church would be incomprehensible if we are not first called to discern sin.

When I speak of an understanding of conversion, I'm speaking of *what it is* and *how to recognize its fruits*, not giving license to start making judgments of people.

What the conversion is not: (each of these are extremely dangerous errors)

1. ***Repeating a prayer***—I believe this false gospel is the root of the disastrous state of pop-evangelicalism. Let's make it very clear. Romans 10:9 was never

⁷ J. Ligon Duncan's series on Romans:

<http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources/sermons/romans/romansvol1to2/romans01a.htm>.

intended to be turned into a magical incantation that a person could repeat to open the gates of heaven. This is completely foreign to biblical Christianity; you will never see anything like “just repeat this prayer after me ... if you prayed that prayer and you really meant it ...” in the Bible. Prayer is a fruit of conversion, but not what saves you.

2. *Attending/joining a church*— Attending gatherings of Christians does not make you a Christian, but it can give someone a false sense of security. If you ever hear or refer to unbelievers as “the unchurched,” you are witnessing this error. Faithful membership in a body of believers is a fruit of conversion, but not a cause.
3. *Changing your behavior/getting your act together*— People undergo dramatic changes in their lives from a number of influences. A converted person will change, but conversion is not the only cause of change. Change is a fruit of a conversion, but not what saves you.

What the conversion *is*:

1. *A work of God*— Like it or not, salvation is not something you do, it is something that is done to you by God.
2. *Evidenced by Repentance and Faith*— Sometimes appropriately referred to as “inseparable graces.”

Repent— “turn away” (O.T. Hebrew) or “change” (N.T. Greek)

- » *Commanded by God* (implies responsibility of man to respond)

^{ESV} **Acts 17:30** The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent,

- » *Gift of God* (implies sovereignty of God in salvation)

^{ESV} **2 Timothy 2:25b** God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth,

- » Accomplished by God

^{ESV} **John 6:44** No one **can** come to me unless the Father who sent me **draws** him. And I will raise him up on the last day. (emphases added)

“*can*” (δύναμαι *dunamai* - to be able, to have power)

“*draws*” (ἔλκω *helko* - to drag) here is often interpreted as God wooing people. Let’s look at where else this word appears in the Greek NT: (this is all of them)

^{ESV} **John 18:10** Then Simon Peter, having a sword, **drew** it and struck the high priest’s servant and cut off his right ear. (The servant’s name was Malchus.)

^{ESV} **Acts 16:19** But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and **dragged** them into the marketplace before the rulers.

^{ESV} **Acts 21:30** Then all the city was stirred up, and the people ran together. They seized Paul and **dragged** him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut.

^{ESV} **John 21:6** He said to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to **haul** it in, because of the quantity of fish.

^{ESV} **John 21:11** So Simon Peter went aboard and **hauled** the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn.

^{ESV} **James 2:6** But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who **drag** you into court?

^{ESV} **John 12:32** And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will **draw** all people to myself."

Does your Biblical Theology have room for both doctrines? The *sovereignty of God* and the *responsibility of man* are both clearly taught in Scripture. Work through these questions:

- » Do I subject Scripture to my (fallen) philosophy/worldview, or do I subject my worldview to Scripture? If I cannot completely reconcile the two, do I give up one in favor of the other⁸? If so, what keeps you from rejecting the Trinity? The dual nature of Christ? Did Jesus ever command the impossible? (*hint: He did so often that I'm wondering if he ever commanded the possible!*)
- » Am I repulsed or comforted? This boils down to whom we think more trustworthy/able to save, God or ourselves.

E. Biblical Understanding of Evangelism.

This is very related to the previous topic. If we understand what real conversion is, we can look to the early church's example and see what biblical evangelism is.

What the evangelism is *not*:

1. **Salesmanship/marketing**— We are not to sell the benefits of a changed life, particularly if they leads us to make false promises (health, wealth, happiness). *It is particularly **not** manipulating people into praying a prayer.*
2. **Simply setting an example**— As gently as I can: "lifestyle evangelism" is most often a cop out (synonymous with non-evangelism). Good news has "news" and the message of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5) has "a message."

⁸ To compromise man's responsibility is to become a hyper-Calvinist (this term is often mis-applied today to those who really believe in Reformed theology). To compromise God's sovereignty is to be a Pelagian, semi-Pelagian, or Arminian (differing degrees of the same error).

3. ***Only for those with particular gifts or clergy***— All are called to be witnesses/ambassadors. Leadership is called to equip the saints for service (Eph 4:11-12).

What the evangelism is presenting the gospel freely and trusting God to convert people:

"To evangelize is to present Christ Jesus to sinful men in order that through the power of the Holy Spirit, that men shall come to put their trust in God through Him, to accept Him as the Savior, and serve Him as their King in the fellowship of His Church."⁹

--J. I. Packer

^{ESV} **2 Corinthians 4:1** Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.² But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing.⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.⁵ For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.⁶ For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

1. ***Telling the truth*** – (v. 2— ... but by the open statement of the truth) Not to pursue false conversions (people who repeat a prayer or start going to church...)
 - a. The decision to follow Christ is costly (Luke 9:62)
 - b. The decision to follow Christ is urgent (John 3:18,36)
 - c. The decision to follow Christ is wise! (John 10:10)
2. ***Telling the truth patiently*** – (v. 1— we do not lose heart.)
3. ***Telling the truth with integrity*** – (v. 2— renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways... refuse to practice cunning.)
4. ***Telling the truth with fidelity*** – (v. 2— refuse to ... tamper with God's word.)
5. ***Telling the truth to the conscience*** – (v. 2— we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God)
6. ***Telling the truth humbly*** – (v. 5— For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord.)

⁹ *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, J.I. Packer p. 40,37-38

A healthy church will have not only a biblical understanding of evangelism, but also have a heart for it.

Our church members scattered in our homes, offices and neighborhoods will, this very day, see far more non-Christians, for far longer, than they will ever spend with Christians on a Sunday. Each of us has tremendous news of salvation in Christ. Let's not barter it for something else. And let's share it today! George W. Truett, great Christian leader of the past generation and pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas, said:

The supreme indictment that you can bring against a church . . . is that such a church lacks in passion and compassion for human souls. A church is nothing better than an ethical club if its sympathies for lost souls do not overflow, and if it does not go out to seek to point lost souls to the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

A healthy church knows the gospel, and a healthy church shares it.¹⁰

- 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)

¹⁰ Dever, *Nine* – 4th Edition, p. 24