

MARK DEVER

IX
MARKS

**WHAT IS A
HEALTHY CHURCH?**



**WHAT IS A
HEALTHY CHURCH?**

CROSSWAY BOOKS BY MARK DEVER

Nine Marks of a Healthy Church

The Deliberate Church
(with Paul Alexander)

The Gospel and Personal Evangelism
(forthcoming)

*The Message of the Old Testament:
Promises Made*

*The Message of the New Testament:
Promises Kept*

The Church and Her Challenges
(forthcoming)



MARK DEVER

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*In thanks to God
for faithful pastors I have known:*

HAROLD PURDY

WALLY THOMAS

ED HENEGAR

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PREFACE: A PARABLE

God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!”

—1 CORINTHIANS 12:18-21

Nose and Hand were sitting in the church pew talking. The morning service, led by Ear and Mouth, had just ended, and Hand was telling Nose that he and his family had decided to look for a different church.

“Really?” Nose responded to Hand’s news. “Why?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Hand said, looking down. He was usually slower to speak than other members of the church body. “I guess because the church doesn’t have what Mrs. Hand and I are looking for.”

“Well, what are you looking for in a church?” Nose asked. The tone in which he spoke these words was sympathetic. But even as he was speaking them he knew he would dismiss Hand’s answer. If the Hands couldn’t see that Nose and the rest of the leadership were pointing the church body in the right direction, the body could do without them.

Hand had to think before answering. He and Mrs. Hand liked Pastor Mouth and his family. And Minister of Music Ear meant well. “Well, I guess we’re looking for a place where people are more like us,” Hand finally stammered. “We tried spending time with the Legs, but we didn’t connect with them. Next we joined the small group for all the Toes. But they kept talking about socks and shoes and odors. And that didn’t interest us.”

Nose looked at him this time with genuine dismay: “Aren’t you glad they’re concerned with odors?!”

“Sure, sure. But it’s not for us. Then, we attended the Sunday school for all you facial features. Do you remember? We came for several Sundays a couple of months ago?”

“It was great to have you.”

“Thank you. But everyone just wanted to talk, and listen, and smell, and taste. It felt like, well, it felt like you never wanted to get to work and get your hands dirty. Anyway, Mrs. Hand and I were thinking about checking out that new church over on East Side. We hear they do a lot of clapping and hand-raising, which is closer to what we need right now.”

“Hmmm,” Nose replied. “I see what you mean. We’d hate to see you go. But I guess you have to do what’s good for you.”

At that moment, Mrs. Hand, who had been caught up in another conversation, turned back to join her husband and Nose. Hand briefly explained what he and Nose had been talking about, after which Nose repeated his sadness at the prospect of losing the Hands. But he again said that he understood since it sounded like their needs weren’t being met.

Mrs. Hand nodded in agreement. She wanted to be polite,

but, truth be told, she wasn't sad to be leaving. Her husband had made just enough critical remarks about the church over the years that her heart had begun to reflect his. No, he had never burst into an open tirade against the body. In fact, he usually apologized for "being so negative," as he put it. But the little complaints that he let slip out here and there had had an effect. The small groups *were* a little cliquish. The music *was* a little out of date. The programs *did* seem a little silly. The teaching *wasn't* entirely to their liking. In the end, it was hard for the two of them to put their fingers on it, but they finally decided that the church wasn't for them.

In addition to all that, Mrs. Hand knew that their daughter Pinkie was not comfortable with the youth group. Everyone was so different from her, she felt out of joint.

Mrs. Hand then said something about how much she appreciated Nose and the leadership. But the conversation had already run on too long for Nose. Besides, her perfume made him want to sneeze. He thanked Mrs. Hand for her encouragement, repeated that he was sorry to hear of their departure, then turned and walked away. Who needed the Hands? Apparently, they didn't need him.

INTRODUCTION: WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR IN A CHURCH?

So what are you looking for in a church? You might not have thought about that question lately. But take a moment now to ask yourself, what does the ideal church look like? “The ideal church is a place with . . .”

Beautiful music—music that shows training and practice. You don’t want guitars and drums. You want a choir and violin players. Beautiful music glorifies God. Or maybe you do want guitars and drums, something contemporary and up-to-date. That’s what people listen to on the radio, so meet them where they are.

Maybe the music is not as important to you as the preaching. You want a church where the sermons are good—meaningful, but not heavy-handed, biblical, but not boring, practical, but not picky and legalistic. Of course, the kind of man the preacher is plays into what his sermons are like, and there are all kinds of preachers out there: the intense scholar who loves doctrine and never smiles, the funny guy with a million stories, the family counselor who has “been there.” Yes, I’m just caricaturing, but most of us do have some expectations of what a pastor should be like, don’t we?

Or perhaps you're looking for a church where the people are at the same place in life as you are. You can connect with them. They understand what you're going through because they're going through the same. They're just out of college like you. They have young children like you. They are nearing retirement like you. They know what it's like to shop at thrift stores like you, or designer boutiques like you. They are from the inner city like you, or maybe it's the country.

Then again, maybe the most important thing for you about a church is whether or not there are opportunities to get involved—places to serve, places to do good. Is the church big on evangelism? Is it big on missions? Is it big on helping the poor? Does it provide opportunities for you and your son to meet with other fathers and sons? What about opportunities for you to help out in the children's ministry? Does it have programs that hold the attention of your kids or teens?

I expect that some people are looking for a church that is “alive to the Spirit.” The Spirit is the one who guides us, so you want a church where people are quick to listen to his voice, quick to watch for his work, quick to believe the remarkable things he can do. You're tired of being around Spirit-quenchers and tradition-lovers. The Spirit's doing new things! He's giving us new songs!

Or maybe you're just looking for a church that feels a certain way. Not that you've ever put it like that. But if you are used to a church that feels kind of like a mall, or an old chapel, or a coffee house, it makes sense that your ideal church feels the same. That's to be expected. Didn't many of us, when we moved away from our parents' home, occasionally find

ourselves nostalgic for certain sights, smells, or sounds of the way mom or dad did things?

A lot of these things can be good, or at least neutral. Really, I just want you to start thinking about what you value most in a church.

What are you looking for? A place that's welcoming? Passionate? Authentic? Big? Intimate? Trendy? Exciting? Hard core?

What should a church be?

A Topic for All Christians

Before we consider what the Bible says churches should be, which we will do in the first few chapters, I want you to consider why I would pose this question to *you*, especially if you are not a pastor. After all, isn't a book on the topic of healthy churches a book for pastors and church leaders?

It is for pastors, yes, but it's also for every Christian. Remember: *that's who the authors of the New Testament address*. When the churches in Galatia began listening to false teachers, Paul wrote to them and said, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ" (Gal. 1:6). Who was the "you" that Paul called to account for the false teaching in their churches? Not the pastors alone but the church bodies themselves. You'd expect him to write to the churches' leaders and say, "Stop teaching that heresy!" But he doesn't. He calls the whole church to account.

Likewise, when the church in the city of Corinth allowed for an adulterous relationship to continue unchecked in their midst, Paul again directly addressed the church (1 Corinthians 5). He

didn't tell the pastors or the staff to take care of the problem. He told the church to take care of it.

So it is with the majority of letters in the New Testament.

I trust the pastors of those first-century churches were listening as Paul and Peter, James and John, addressed their congregations. And I trust the pastors initiated and led the way in responding to whatever instructions the apostles gave in their letters. Yet by following the apostles' example and addressing *you*, pastor and members alike, I believe I'm placing responsibility where, humanly, it ultimately belongs. *You* and all the members of your church, Christian, are finally responsible before God for what your church becomes, not your pastors and other leaders—*you*.

Your pastors will stand before God and give an account for how they have led your congregation (Heb. 13:17). But every single one of us who is a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ will give an account for whether or not we have *gathered* together regularly with the church, *spurred* the church on to love and good deeds, and *fought* to maintain a right teaching of the hope of the gospel (Heb. 10:23–25).

Friend, if you call yourself a Christian but you think a book about healthy churches is a book for church leaders or maybe for those “theological types,” while you would rather read books about the Christian life, it may be time to stop and consider again exactly what the Bible says a Christian is. We'll think more about that in chapter 1.

Following that, we'll consider what the church is (chapter 2), what God's ultimate purpose for churches is (chapter 3), and why the Bible must guide our churches (chapter 4).

If you already agree that the Bible should guide our

churches for the display of God's glory, you may want to jump straight to chapter 5, where I begin listing nine marks of a healthy church. May he use our meditations together to prepare his bride for the day of his coming (Eph. 5:25–32).