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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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What Is a Healthy Church?

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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).

PART 1

WHAT IS A HEALTHY CHURCH?

CHAPTER ONE

YOUR CHRISTIANITY AND YOUR CHURCH

Sometimes college campus ministries will ask me to speak to their students. I've been known, on several occasions, to begin my remarks this way: "If you call yourself a Christian but you are not a member of the church you regularly attend, I worry that you might be going to hell."

You could say that it gets their attention.

Now, am I just going for shock value? I don't think so. Am I trying to scare them into church membership? Not really. Am I saying that joining a church makes someone a Christian? Certainly not! Throw any book (or speaker) out the window that says as much.

So why would I begin with this kind of warning? It's because I want them to see something of the urgency of the need for a healthy local church in the Christian's life and to begin sharing the passion for the church that characterizes both Christ and his followers.

Many Christians in the West today (and elsewhere?) tend to view their Christianity as a personal relationship with God

and not much else. They generally know that this “personal relationship” has some implications for how they should live. But I’m concerned that many Christians don’t realize how this most important relationship with God necessitates a number of secondary personal relationships—the relationships that Christ establishes between us and his body, the Church. God doesn’t mean for these to be relationships that we pick and choose at our whim among the many Christians “out there.” He means to establish us in relationship with an actual flesh-and-blood, step-on-your-toes body of people.

Why do I worry that if you call yourself a Christian but you are not a member in good standing of the local church you attend, you might be going to hell? Think with me for a moment about what a Christian is.

What a Christian Is

A Christian is someone who, first and foremost, has been forgiven of his sin and been reconciled to God the Father through Jesus Christ. This happens when a person repents of his sins and puts his faith in the perfect life, substitutionary death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

In other words, a Christian is someone who has reached the end of himself and his own moral resources. He has recognized that he, in defiance of God’s plainly revealed law, has given his life over to worshiping and loving things other than God—things like career, family, the stuff money can buy, the opinions of other people, the honor of his family and community, the favor of the so-called gods of other religions, the spirits of this world, or even the good things a person can do. He has also recognized that these “idols” are doubly damning

masters. Their appetites are never satisfied in *this life*. And they provoke God's just wrath over *the next life*, a death and a judgment the Christian has already tasted a bit of (mercifully) in this world's miseries.

A Christian, therefore, knows that if he were to die tonight and stand before God, and if God were to say, "Why should I let you into my presence?" the Christian would say, "You shouldn't let me in. I have sinned and owe you a debt that I cannot pay back." But he wouldn't stop there. He would continue, "Yet, because of your great promises and mercy, I depend on the blood of Jesus Christ shed as a substitute for me, paying my moral debt, satisfying your holy and righteous requirements, and removing your wrath against sin!"

Upon that plea to be declared righteous in Christ, the Christian is someone who has discovered the beginning of freedom from sin's enslavement. Where the idols and other gods could never be satisfied, their stomachs never full, God's satisfaction in the work of Christ means that the person purchased out of condemnation by Christ's work is now free! For the first time ever, the Christian is free to turn his back on sin, not just to replace it slavishly with yet another sin but with the Holy Spirit-given desire for Jesus Christ himself and for Christ's rule in his life. Where Adam tried to push God off the throne and make himself god, the Christian rejoices that Christ is upon the throne. He considers Jesus' life of perfect submission to the will and words of the Father and seeks to be like his Savior.

So a Christian is someone who, first of all, has been reconciled to God in Christ. Christ has assuaged the wrath of

God, and the Christian is now declared righteous before God, called to a life of righteousness, and lives in the hope of one day appearing before his majesty in heaven.

Yet that's not all! Second, a Christian is someone who, by virtue of his reconciliation with God, has been reconciled to God's people. Do you remember the first story in the Bible after Adam and Eve's fall and banishment from the garden? It's the story of one human being murdering another—Cain killing Abel. If the act of trying to shove God off the throne is, by its very nature, an act of trying to place ourselves upon it, we're not about to let some other human being take it from us. Not a chance. Adam's act of breaking fellowship with God resulted in an immediate break in fellowship among all human beings. It's every man for himself.

It should be no surprise, then, that Jesus said that “all the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments”: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind *and* love your neighbor as yourself (see Matt. 22:34–40). The two commandments go together. The first produces the second, and the second proves the first.

Through Christ, then, being reconciled to God means being reconciled to everyone else who is reconciled to God. After describing in the first half of Ephesians 2 the great salvation that God has given us in Christ Jesus, Paul turns, in the second half of Ephesians 2, to describing what this means for the relationship between Jews and Gentiles and, by extension, between all those who are in Christ. He writes:

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. . . . His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two,

thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. (Eph. 2:14–16)

Now, all those who belong to God are “fellow citizens” and “members of God’s household” (v. 19). We are “joined together” with Christ into one “holy temple” (v. 21)—so many rich analogies to choose from!

Perhaps meditating on the analogy of a household will help us see that being reconciled to God also means being reconciled to his people. If you’re an orphan, you don’t adopt parents; they adopt you. If your adoptive parents are named Smith, you now attend the Smith family dinners with the parents and all the children. You share a bedroom at night with the Smith siblings. When the teacher at school calls out attendance and says, “Smith?” you raise your hand like your older brother did before you and your younger sister will do after you. And you do this not because you decided to play the role of “Smith,” but because someone went to the orphanage and said, “You will be a Smith.” On that day, you became the child of someone and the sibling of others.

Only your name’s not Smith. It’s *Christian*, named after the one through whom you were adopted, Christ (Eph. 1:5). Now you’re part of the whole family of God. “The one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family” (Heb. 2:11).

And this is no dysfunctional family, with family members estranged from one another. It’s a fellowship. When God “called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor. 1:9), he also called you into “fellowship” with the whole family (1 Cor. 5:2).

And this is no polite and formal fellowship. It's a body, bound together by our individual decisions but also bound together by far more than human decision—the person and work of Christ. You would be as foolish to say, “I'm not a part of the family,” as you would be to cut off your own hand or nose. As Paul said to the Corinthians, “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 Cor. 12:21).

In short, it's impossible to answer the question *what is a Christian?* without ending up in a conversation about the church; at least, in the Bible it is. Not only that, it's hard to stick with just one metaphor for the church because the New Testament uses so many of them: a family and a fellowship, a body and a bride, a people and a temple, a lady and her children. And never does the New Testament conceive of the Christian existing on a prolonged basis *outside* the fellowship of the church. The church is not really a place. It's a people—God's people in Christ.

When a person becomes a Christian, he doesn't just join a local church because it's a good habit for growing in spiritual maturity. He joins a local church because it's the expression of what Christ has *made him*—a member of the body of Christ. Being united to Christ means being united to every Christian. But that universal union must be given a living, breathing existence in a local church.

Sometimes theologians refer to a distinction between the universal church (all Christians everywhere throughout history) and the local church (those people who meet down the street from you to hear the Word preached and to practice baptism and the Lord's Supper). Other than a few references

to the universal church (such as Matt. 16:18 and the bulk of Ephesians), most references to the church in the New Testament are to local churches, as when Paul writes, “To the church of God in Corinth” or “To the churches in Galatia.”

Now what follows is a little intense, but it’s important. The relationship between our *membership in the universal church* and our *membership in the local church* is a lot like the relationship between *the righteousness God gives us through faith* and the *actual practice of righteousness in our daily lives*. When we become Christians by faith, God declares us righteous. Yet we are still called to actively *be* righteous. A person who happily goes on living in unrighteousness calls into question whether he ever possessed Christ’s righteousness in the first place (see Rom. 6:1–18; 8:5–14; James 2:14–15). So, too, it is with those who refuse to commit themselves to a local church. Committing to a local body is the natural outcome—it confirms what Christ has done. If you have no interest in actually committing yourself to an actual group of gospel-believing, Bible-teaching Christians, you might question whether you belong to the body of Christ at all! Listen to the author of Hebrews carefully:

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. (Heb. 10:23–27)

Our state before God, if authentic, will translate into our daily decisions, even if the process is slow and full of missteps. God really does change his people. Isn't that good news? So please, friend, don't grow complacent through some vague idea that you possess the righteousness of Christ if you're not pursuing a life of righteousness. Likewise, please do not be deceived by a vague conception of the universal church to which you belong if you're not pursuing that life together with an actual church.

Except for the rarest of circumstances, a true Christian builds his life into the lives of other believers through the concrete fellowship of a local church. He knows he has not yet "arrived." He's still fallen and needs the accountability and instruction of that local body of people called the church. And they need him.

As we gather to worship God and exercise love and good deeds toward one another, we demonstrate in real life, you might say, the fact that God has reconciled us to himself and to one another. We demonstrate to the world that we have been *changed*, not primarily because we memorize Bible verses, pray before meals, tithe a portion of our income, and listen to Christian radio stations, but because we increasingly show a willingness to put up with, to forgive, and even to love a bunch of fellow sinners.

You and I cannot demonstrate love or joy or peace or patience or kindness sitting all by ourselves on an island. No, we demonstrate it when the people we have committed to loving give us good reasons *not* to love them, but we do anyway.

Do you see it? It's right there—right in the midst of a group

of sinners who have committed to loving one another—that the gospel is displayed. The church gives a visual presentation of the gospel when we forgive one another as Christ has forgiven us, when we commit to one another as Christ has committed to us, and when we lay down our lives for one another as Christ laid down his life for us.

Together we can display the gospel of Jesus Christ in a way we just can't by ourselves.

I often hear Christians talking about their different spiritual gifts. Yet I wonder how often people consider the fact that God has given so many gifts precisely so that those gifts might be used in response to the sin of other Christians in the church. My sins give you a chance to exercise your gifts.

So gather up a group of men and women, young and old, black and white, Asian and African, rich and poor, uneducated and educated, with all their diverse talents and gifts and offerings. Just make sure *all of them* know they're sick, sinful, and saved by grace alone. What do you have? You have the makings for a church!

If your goal is to love *all* Christians, let me suggest working toward it by first committing to a concrete group of *real* Christians with all their foibles and follies. Commit to them through thick and thin for eighty years. Then come back and we'll talk about your progress in loving all Christians everywhere.

So who's responsible for thinking about what the gathering of people called the church should be like? Is it pastors and church leaders? Definitely. How about every other Christian? Absolutely. Being a Christian means caring about the life and health of the body of Christ, the church. It means caring about

what the church is and what the church should be because you belong to the church, Christian.

Indeed, we care for the church because it's the very body of our Savior. Have you noticed the words that Jesus used with the Christian-persecuting Saul—soon to be called Paul—when he confronted Saul on the road to Damascus? “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*?” (Acts 9:4). Jesus identifies so closely with his church that he refers to it as himself! Christian, do you identify yourself with those whom your Savior identifies himself? Does your heart share the passions of his heart?

A letter was forwarded to me not long ago from a pastor who expressed in the letter his desire for the members of his church to know what a church should be. This humble man wants a church that would help hold him accountable as he leads them toward grace and godliness. This pastor understands the New Testament pattern. He understands that one day, God will call him to account for how he has shepherded his congregation. And, like a faithful shepherd, he wants every sheep in his flock to know that, one day, they too will be called one by one to account for how they have loved one another and him.

God will ask each member of the body, “Did you rejoice with the other members of the body when they rejoiced? Did you mourn with those who mourned? Did you treat the weaker parts as indispensable, and did you treat the parts that most think less honorable with special honor? Did you give double honor to those that led and taught you?” (see 1 Cor. 12:22–26 and 1 Tim. 5:17).

Christian, are you ready for the day on which God will call you to account for how you have loved and served the

church family, including your church leaders? Do you know what God says the church should be?

And pastor, have you been preparing your flock for their account-giving by teaching them what the church should be? Have you taught them that they will be held accountable for whether or not you hold fast to the gospel?