

MARK DEVER

# CHURCH ESSENTIALS

WHAT IS A HEALTHY CHURCH?



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Curriculum developed by Bobby Jamieson

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He has served as a trustee of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, a member of the council of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, and a board member of The Gospel Coalition. From 1995 until 2001, he served on the steering committee for Founders Ministries. As Guest Senate Chaplain for two weeks in 1995, Mark opened the daily sessions of the United States Senate in prayer. He is a member of the American Society of Church History and the Tyndale Fellowship, and he held the J.B. Lightfoot Scholarship at Cambridge University from 1989 to 1991.

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- *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (orig. 2001; 4 editions; 9 translations)
- *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life* (2001), editor
- *The Deliberate Church: Building Your Ministry on the Gospel* (2005), coauthored with Paul Alexander
- *Message of the New Testament: Promises Kept* (2006)
- *Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made* (2007)
- *What is a Healthy Church?* (2007)
- *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism* (2008)
- *In My Place Condemned He Stood* (2008), coauthored with J.I. Packer
- *Twelve Challenges Churches Face* (2009)
- *What Does God Want of Us Anyway?* (2010)
- *It Is Well* (2010), coauthored with Michael Lawrence

Additionally, Mark has been a contributing editor to the Cambridge Papers, and his works have been published in the Journal of Ecclesiastical History, Christian Arena magazine, the Founders Journal, Leadership Journal, Regeneration Quarterly, Modern Reformation, The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology, Tabletalk,

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# 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?*

Is the music the most important aspect to you? Is the deciding factor in choosing a church what types of instruments they play or the kinds of songs they sing? Worship is obviously an important part of what happens in a church.

But maybe music isn't 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. No doubt the preaching is important, too.

Or perhaps you're looking for a church where you can easily relate to the people because they're in the same stage of life as you. You want other young families, retirees, or unmarried people so you have a built in point of connection. God wants us to live in community with each other, right?

Maybe the ministries of the church are important to you. You want a place that has a vibrant children's ministry, a consistent outreach to the community, a chance to be involved in helping the poor, or lots of activities for youth. Surely these are good opportunities for a church to provide.

Or maybe you're just looking for a church that feels a certain way. You can't put your finger on it, but you know it when you're there. It's an environment where you feel both challenged and encouraged, convicted and uplifted. It's a home for you and others.

These are all fine attributes, but are they essential? Are they the most vital parts of church life that add up to a healthy church? That's the question of this study. In the following pages, you'll find the answer to the question of what makes a healthy church.

Note, however, that the question is about *health*. It's not about preference, enjoyment, style, or trend. These are the marks that make a church healthy from a biblical standpoint, the attributes ingrained in every part of church life. It is our prayer that this study will be very useful in helping you be an active part of such a church—one that models and reflects the character and desire of God.



## Here's How the Study Works:

This study includes opportunities for both individual and group study. Engaging in the individual daily devotions and then participating in a Bible study group, which includes video teaching and discussion, is the best way to gain the fullest understanding of *Church Essentials*.

At the beginning of each session, you will find the guide for the Bible study group portion of the study. Each meeting should follow this general outline:

**Getting Started:** Begin each week with a set of questions designed to help you and your group get to know each other better and process what the Lord has been teaching you over the previous week (20 min.).

**View DVD Segment:** Your group will watch a video segment from the DVD while filling in the listening guide provided in this book (30 min.).

**Group Response:** After the video segment, your group will discuss the truths you've seen presented in the group experience. Then you will close with prayer.

The video segment and group response will propel you forward, as an individual, into your study throughout the week. Each day, you'll continue looking at the Scriptures and ideas presented in your group by completing the five personal devotions. The next week, you will come back to your group ready to begin another discussion based on the individual work you've done.

Throughout these six sessions, you'll begin to catch a vision for what the church is meant to be. By God's grace, you'll fall in love all over again with the wonders of what God is building in His people, and be empowered to be a member of a healthy church.



# 1

## A Vision for Healthy Churches:

### *Expositional Preaching*



# Getting Started

Welcome to the first small-group discussion of *Church Essentials*.

1 Introduce yourself to the group by sharing:

- Your name and brief information about your family;
- Where you spend most of your time during the week (home, school, business, etc.);
- And why you chose to participate in this study.

2 What do you think makes a church healthy?

3 Share with the group one experience you've had at church that you would consider to be "healthy." How did it impact your life?

4 Imagine that you just moved to a new town and you're looking for a new church. What's at the top of your list of the most important things you look for in a church?

## View DVD Segment

**Watch the segment from the DVD using the viewer guide below.**

Both the service and the congregation are important in \_\_\_\_\_ the significance of the church.

As Christians what we can be confident of is the \_\_\_\_\_ of the gospel.

God is showing the fullness of His character through the local \_\_\_\_\_.

There has been a \_\_\_\_\_ of church to just evangelism.

A personal relationship with Jesus Christ can never be \_\_\_\_\_.

The most important aspect of a church is whether it \_\_\_\_\_ the gospel.

A healthy church \_\_\_\_\_ what God is like.

Expositional preaching is \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ God's Word to God's people.

God's Word has always \_\_\_\_\_ God's people.

A church that realizes that God has spoken will make preaching \_\_\_\_\_.

Church members should come \_\_\_\_\_.

**Video sessions are available for purchase at [lifeway.com/9marks](http://lifeway.com/9marks)**

# Group Response

**Discuss the segment with your group using the questions below.**

- 1 Why do you come to church? How does that affect what you put into church—and get out of it?
- 2 Do you think that church should play an important role in your life as a Christian? Why or why not?
- 3 In the interview Mark Dever said that a healthy church is one that reflects the character of God, and the way a church becomes more healthy is by listening to and obeying God's Word. What do you think about that definition of a healthy church?
- 4 How has the preaching in your church impacted your life?
- 5 Think back to the question we discussed before watching the video: "What are the most important things you would look for in a church?" Has your answer to that question changed because of this discussion? If so, how?
- 6 What do you think is standing in the way of your church becoming more biblically healthy? What can you do to help overcome those obstacles?

**Close with prayer.**



## Session One

## **A Vision for Healthy Churches**

Many Christians today 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 those same Christians often 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.

Despite popular opinion, an ongoing and participatory relationship to the church is not optional for a Christian. Healthy churches teach this. Healthy church members understand and love it. To begin to have that understanding, though, we must begin to see what the church really is ... and is not.

# 1

## Church Matters

For some Christians, participating in church compares pretty closely with cleaning the bathroom. It's boring and mildly unpleasant. Sometimes it's even a little painful with all that bending and scrubbing. But it's one of those things you just have to do.

For other Christians, church is one among dozens of dishes in the "Christian Growth Buffet." Along with Bible study groups, retreats, and sermon podcasts, church is one of many other options for how they might seek to grow in their walks with the Lord. And like the cheese grits at the breakfast buffet, one might decide to partake one week and skip it the next depending on what else is available.

For the former group, church doesn't seem to do that much good. For the latter, it has its purposes, but it's not that big a deal if you drop in and out at will since there are plenty of other options to choose from.

Would you say that you fit into either of these groups? If not—and they're certainly not the only ones—how would you say that you approach church participation?

How important is the church for your life as a Christian?

What difference do you think it makes whether or not a Christian actively participates in church?

According to Scripture, church matters. Participating in it shouldn't feel like drudgery, and it shouldn't simply be a side dish we skip when we've already got a full plate. Rather, the church should be central in our lives for two reasons: because God has made it central in His plan of salvation and because He has made it the central location for our growth as Christians.



## **Church: At the Center of God's Saving Plan**

From the beginning of creation, God has been about creating a people for Himself. He didn't just create Adam, but Adam and Eve, who would then bring forth more people (Gen. 1:27-28). When He called Abraham, He promised to multiply him into a great nation (Gen. 12:1-3). Hundreds of years later, He led the entire people of Israel out of Egypt and into the land he promised them, taking them for His treasured possession (Ex. 19:5-6).

When Jesus came, He didn't just speak to individuals, but called twelve to be His disciples (Mark. 3:14). And after He died, rose again, and ascended into heaven, Jesus sent His disciples into all the earth not only to preach the gospel to individuals, but to gather them into churches (see the whole book of Acts!).

Read Ephesians 3:10-11. According to this passage, what is God's purpose for the church?

Who is God's wisdom put on display for, according to this passage?

Do you tend to think of your Christianity as something just between you and God? In what specific ways does Paul's teaching in this passage challenge that?

If the church is so central to God's saving plan, how might your life reflect that priority as well?

The church should be at the center of our lives as Christians because it's at the center God's saving plan.

## **Church: At the Center of Christian Growth**

The church should also be at the center of our lives because it's central for Christian growth.

Read Ephesians 4:11-16. For what purpose has God given pastors and teachers (vv. 11-12)? How do Christians grow up into Christ (vv. 15-16)?

In this passage Paul teaches that the church is central to how we grow as Christians. God gave pastors and teachers to build up the body of Christ (vv. 11-12) so that all of us would help each other grow in faith and knowledge (v. 13) until we all grow up to maturity in Christ (vv. 13-16). The primary means by which we grow in Christ is the ministry of pastors, teachers, and all of our fellow believers in the local church.

What are some specific ways you have grown in godliness through your local church?

On a scale of 1 to 10, how involved would you say you are in your local church? How do you think this has impacted your growth as a Christian?

Think of one concrete step you can take to grow in Christ through your church and to help someone else in your church grow in Christ. Pray that God would enable you to take these steps this week.

Church matters because it is at the center of God's saving plan and the center of Christian growth. As a believer in Christ, what will you do this week to put the church closer to the center of your life?

## 2

### Image is Everything

Most of the time, telling sickness from health is pretty easy. If you've got a 102.7 degree fever, chills, and can't even sit up straight in bed, you know you're pretty sick.

On the other hand, if you bounce out of bed in the morning, run ten miles before breakfast, work at full speed all day, and then spend two hours in the gym in the evening, you're probably on the healthier end of the spectrum.

But what about the health and sickness of local churches? How can you tell a healthy church from a not-so-healthy one?

How would you identify a healthy church? What are some of the characteristics it would have?

What about a not-so-healthy church? What are some signs of sickness in a local church?

### Image Is Everything

When we turn to Scripture to see what makes a church healthy, we find that image is everything. Not image as in the church's physical appearance, or what people wear, but the imaging of *God*.

God created man in His image to represent His character and rule (Gen. 1:26-28). That's what it means to be created in God's image; humans were intended to reflect the glory of God into all creation. But our first parents rebelled against Him, and all of us have rebelled against God ever since. However, Christ came

into the world as the true image of God (Col. 1:15). He imaged God perfectly by carrying out God's will, including bearing the penalty for our failure to image God as we ought. Now he calls us, as individual believers and local churches, to reflect His glorious character to the world.

In yesterday's study we considered Paul's statement that through the church, God's wisdom is made known even to heavenly beings (Eph. 3:10-11). How do we make God's wisdom known? By reflecting his character.

Consider 2 Corinthians 3:18:

***We all, with unveiled faces, are looking as in a mirror at the glory of the Lord and are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory; this is from the Lord who is the Spirit.***

To grow as an individual Christian is to grow in reflecting the glory of the character of the Lord. The same thing is true for churches.

### **A Healthy Church Is ...**

In light of all this, here's how we could define a healthy church: *A healthy church is a congregation that increasingly reflects God's character as His character has been revealed in His Word.*

Name several different aspects of God's character. How could those character traits be concretely displayed in your church?

What are some ways that others in your church have ministered to you recently? How did their actions reflect God's character?

List three common problems in churches. Is your church facing any of these right now? How would a focus on reflecting God's character impact these issues?

1

2

3

### **... One that Increasingly Reflects God's Character ...**

Remember that a healthy church is one that *increasingly* reflects God's character. No church is perfectly holy, so no church perfectly reflects God's character. But a healthy church is one in which the individual members, and the church as a whole, are consistently growing in Christ-likeness.

As we saw in 2 Corinthians 3:18, we "are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory." This happens bit by bit, degree by degree.

Think about the church activities you participate in on a weekly basis. How many of them help you and others increasingly reflect the character of God? How?

Can you think of a fellow church member who is consistently growing in Christ-likeness? How could you learn from that person's life?

### **... as His Character has been Revealed in His Word.**

Where do we go to learn about God's character? We go to God's Word. From beginning to end, Scripture reveals God's character to us.

Read Isaiah 6:1-7. What does this passage reveal about God's character?

How does Isaiah respond to this revelation of God's character? Can you identify with that response?

Holiness is the quality of being set apart from sin and totally devoted to God. How should holiness be displayed in the church? What does it look like in action?

Think of three concrete ways you can help your church grow in imaging the holiness of God, and write them below. Pray that God would enable you to take some of these steps this week.

1

2

3

As we've seen, a healthy church is a congregation that increasingly reflects God's character as His character has been revealed in His Word. Whatever else a church might be, it should be a mirror that displays the splendor of God's character.

# 3

## The Two-Step Plan to a Healthier Church

Most people have a pretty good idea about what to do to improve their physical health:

- Sleep: Get your eight hours.
- Diet: More fruits and veggies, fewer fats and sweets.
- Exercise: Get your heart rate up for over half an hour several times per week.

Becoming healthier sounds simple enough, although of course it's easier said than done. If sleep, diet, and exercise are how we can improve our physical health, what about our churches' health?

How do you think a church can become healthier?

Would you say that your church is growing healthier? Why or why not?

In yesterday's study we learned that a healthy church is a congregation that increasingly reflects God's character as His character has been revealed in His Word. How then does a church grow in reflecting God's character?

The answer is simple: By listening to and following God's Word. At the most basic level, the plan for a healthier church has only two steps: listen and follow.

A working mirror reflects the image in front of it because it takes it in and presents it back just as it really appears. So also our churches need to take in God's Word and then re-present it in our lives together.

### Step One: Listen

We need to listen to God's Word because God's Word is the very source of the church's life.

Read Romans 10:17. According to this passage, how does faith come?

Read 1 Peter 1:23. What is it that has given us new birth?

According to Romans 10, we're saved through faith, and that faith only comes through hearing the Word of God. Or again, Peter reminds us we were born again, "not of perishable seed but of imperishable—through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Pet. 1:23).

The church's life comes through the Word of God. Further, we need to listen to God's Word because it is the source of the church's growth.

Read Acts 20:32. What, according to Paul, is the message of God's grace able to do? How should this impact how we try to grow as Christians?

In light of these passages, why is it important that churches devote themselves to listening to God's Word?

What do you think would happen to a church that failed to diligently and regularly listen to God's Word? Have you ever known a church like this?

What are some ways in which you regularly listen to God's Word? What impact does that listening have on you?

## **Step Two: Follow**

The point of listening to God's Word is not simply to hear it, but to do it. James says that a man who listens to God's Word but doesn't put it into practice is like



a man who looks at his face in the mirror and then immediately goes away and forgets what he looks like (Jas. 1:22-25). The point is not simply to listen, but to obey.

Read Matthew 7:24-27. What are the two options Jesus puts before us? What distinguishes the wise man from the foolish man?

How does Jesus' teaching in this passage relate to James 1:22-25?

In this stark word picture Jesus puts opposite alternatives before us: Either we build our lives on His words, or we don't. Jesus is teaching that mere hearing is not enough. The person who weathers the storm is the one who hears Jesus' words *and does them*.

What are some ways churches might be tempted to listen to God's Word but not follow it?

What are some things that might distract a church from devoting itself to listening to and following God's Word?

How can you help others in your church to listen to and follow God's Word?

Want a healthy church? Make sure you give it a steady diet of God's Word and a regular exercise regimen of living it out.

## 4

# The Most Important Thing About a Church

Sometimes it seems like everyone has an opinion about what's most important in church, and no two of those opinions are the same:

- For some people, it's having a good Sunday School class.
- For others, it's the youth group.
- For others, it's the missions emphasis week.
- For others, it's the food pantry.
- For still others, it's making sure the church sings the “right” style of music.

What do you think is most important in church? Why?

In the past few days, we've considered that a healthy church is a congregation that increasingly reflects God's character as His character has been revealed in His Word. And we've seen that in order to grow healthier, churches must listen to and follow God's Word.

Therefore, the most important thing a church must do is expose its people to God's Word every week, and the most effective way that the Word of God is “rerevealed” to God's people is through expositional preaching.

### What is Expositional Preaching?

Expositional preaching is simply preaching that *exposes* God's Word. It's preaching that rereveals God's Word to God's people. It takes a passage of Scripture, explains it, and then applies the meaning of the passage to the life of the congregation. More specifically, expositional preaching makes the main point of the biblical text the *main point* of the sermon.

An expositional sermon is *not*:

- Simply a running commentary on a passage;
- A sermon which focuses on a secondary topic in a given passage;
- Any sermon which appeals to Scripture for support.

Rather, an expositional sermon asks, “Why exactly did God inspire the author to write this? What exactly does it say? And how does it apply to the life of the church?” And it makes the answer to those questions the substance of the sermon.

Expositional preaching isn’t the only kind of preaching a pastor may do, but it should be the church’s main diet.

Read 2 Timothy 3:16-17. What does this passage teach about the nature and power of Scripture?

Read 2 Timothy 4:1-5. What challenges will Timothy face in his preaching ministry? How might these same things tempt preachers not to preach expositorially today?

Because all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for growing the church in godliness (2 Tim. 3:16-17), pastors are called to preach the Word as their highest priority in ministry (2 Tim. 4:2). In view of these Scriptures, how would you respond to someone who says that preaching isn’t important for the church and that we shouldn’t bother with it anymore?

### **Why Expositional Preaching is of First Importance**

Maybe you’re reading along and thinking, *I see why preaching matters, but the most important thing? Really? Aren’t there dozens of other things that are just as important, if not more important?*

To understand why preaching God’s Word is the most important thing about a church, try to imagine growing crops with no sunlight. You might have thousands of dollars worth of equipment. You might spend countless hours planning, plowing, and sowing seed. You might diligently water your crops every day. But with no sunlight, they simply won’t grow. There won’t be any life created. You’ll have a lot of effort, but no fruit—or vegetables.

Without God's Word rerevealed through preaching, the church would be the same. The preached Word is what brings faith (Rom. 10:17). It's what calls sinners from death to life (1 Pet. 1:23). It's what builds up the church in love and holiness.

The preached Word is the match that lights the church's fire of good deeds. It's the electricity which powers a thousand other godly activities.

Everything else in a church's life flows from its preaching. If Sunday after Sunday God's revelation is rerevealed, His people will be conformed to His character. They will grow to love what He loves and hate what He hates. They will, increasingly, act the way He does. And that will spill over into countless practical efforts to carry out the teachings of God's Word. Preaching is what drives, directs, enables, empowers, and motivates those efforts.

How do you usually measure how good a sermon is?

Think of a good sermon you've heard recently. How did your life change because of it?

Pause and pray for your pastor. Thank God for his preaching. Pray that his preaching every week would be a faithful rerevelation of God's Word.

Expositional preaching is the most important thing a church can do, because it's as we listen to and obey God's Word that we grow in reflecting God's character.

## 5

### Listen Up!

Most of us probably haven't given much thought to how we listen to sermons.

You probably don't give much thought to how you brush your teeth or park your car either. They're just things you do on a regular basis. For many of us, listening to sermons is similar: we show up, sit in the pews, maybe daydream, maybe take notes, go home, and don't give it a second thought.

How do you listen to sermons? Do you have any regular habits or strategies for getting the most out of it?

What are some challenges to listening well to sermons? List as many as you can think of below.

How we listen to sermons matters. The way we listen reveals something about what we believe about God's Word and the preaching of it. God expects us to listen to and obey his Word. And one of the primary ways we receive that Word is through the preaching we hear in church every week.

So in this study we're going to consider how we should listen to sermons.

#### Consider What You Want to Hear

Read 2 Timothy 4:3-4. What were these people listening for? What did they want to hear?

What do you want to hear when you listen to a sermon?

The people Paul wrote of in 2 Timothy 4 had gone astray because they didn't want to hear God's Word, but rather whatever fit their own passions. They didn't want to hear the truth God had revealed, but instead the smooth stories that justified the way they wanted to live. So consider carefully what you want to hear.

Evaluate how you usually listen to sermons right now. What does the way you listen reveal about what you are hoping to hear?

### **Consider Scripture's Authority—and Receive the Preached Word Eagerly**

Read Acts 17:10-11. In which two ways did Luke commend the Bereans?

1

2

Give some practical examples of what it looks like to receive the Word with all eagerness. How could you tell if someone was receiving a sermon eagerly?

The Bereans were commended for searching the Scripture to test whether the apostles' teaching lined up with it. What are some practical ways you can imitate this as you listen to your pastor's preaching?

The Bereans had a balanced attitude toward the teaching they heard. On the one hand, they received the apostles' teaching eagerly—they didn't listen with suspicion and skepticism. On the other hand, they diligently studied the Scriptures on their own to confirm that the teaching they heard was true. So consider Scripture's authority—and receive the preached Word eagerly.

### **Listen in Order to Do**

One of the greatest temptations we face in listening to sermons is to hear without doing. As we considered a few days ago, James warns us that a man who listens to the word but doesn't do it is like a man who looks in the mirror and then immediately forgets what he looks like (Jas. 1:22-25). What's the point of looking in the mirror if you pay so little attention that you immediately forget what you saw? Similarly, what's the point of listening to a sermon if you don't do what the Word tells you to do?

Jesus emphasized that what matters is hearing and *obeying* God's Word. In John 13:17 he says, "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them." And in Luke 11:28, in response to someone blessing his mother, Jesus said,

***"Those who hear the word of God and keep it are blessed!"***

Are you tempted to hear the Word but not obey it? How so? Give specific examples.

What are some habits you can cultivate to help you hear the Word and obey it? Suggestion: Ask a godly, mature fellow church member how they try to live out what they hear. See if you might be able to imitate some of what they do.

As we've seen in our studies throughout this week, hearing the Word of God and living it out are the church's most fundamental callings. So consider how you listen to sermons. Listen eagerly. Consider the authority of Scripture. Consider what you want to hear—and whether what you want to hear is what God has to say. And listen, by God's grace, in order to *do*.

# WHAT DO YOU LOOK FOR IN A CHURCH?

The answers vary from person to person. It might be a particular style of music, preaching, or philosophy. It might be a particular ministry, focus, or value. Though these aspects might be different in different churches, there are some key marks that every healthy church embodies.

*Church Essentials* identifies these key characteristics of church health and helps every church member, from the pastor to the pew sitter, come to a greater understanding of why they are so important.

Discover these timeless truths and practical principles in order to fulfill your God-given role in the body of Christ.

## ALSO AVAILABLE

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