

The great strength of this short book is the rare combination of theological reflection with practical advice. There are many books that offer one or the other; rare is the volume that thinks deeply about Scripture and theology, yet works out the “cash value” in the “how to” dimensions of ministry.

—D. A. CARSON

Research Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Mark Dever is deeply concerned about the health of the church. His life and ministry have been devoted to the task of leading a healthy congregation for the glory of God. In *The Deliberate Church* Dr. Dever and Paul Alexander lead us into the practical application of the biblical principles Mark Dever has advocated for years. Read this book to discover the biblical basis of and key approaches to leading your congregation to become the church God intended her to be.

—THOM S. RAINER

Dean, The Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism, and Church Growth, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Here is a novel idea: use the Bible as a handbook to gather and guide the church! And *The Deliberate Church* is a novel volume indeed, standing amid the spate of “church-as-corporation, pastor-as-CEO” manuals which glut church life. Here is a book which wafts a radical, refreshing breeze from the pages of Scripture which will breathe life into the church. A crucial read.

—R. KENT HUGHES

Senior Pastor, College Church in Wheaton (IL)

Mark Dever is a faithful, wise, biblical pastor who for years now has been helping other pastors to be more faithful to the Bible in the pattern of local church life and ministry. *The Deliberate Church* is yet another gift from his ministry to all of us who want the local church to be reformed according to Scripture. This book is the perfect example of what a truly practical book on church health and growth should be—it gives concrete guidance for and examples of biblical principles being put into practice in the life and ministry of the local congregation. In this era of massive cultural changes the church’s witness hangs in the balance. It will be those congregations most different from the world and most shaped by the Word that will be most strategic as beacons of Gospel truth in the coming post-Christendom era. This book will help the leaders of the local church vigorously rethink what we do and why we do it, in light of the Bible’s teaching.

—J. LIGON DUNCAN III

Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi
President, Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals

As both a long-time pastor and current seminary president, I want to say simply and clearly: I love this book! I want to give it to all the pastors-in-training in our Masters of Divinity program, all our graduates now serving around the world, all the church workers in our denomination, and all my friends who love and serve the Church.

This is the most biblically directed and practically helpful discussion of “applied ecclesiology” that I have read. *The Deliberate Church* has a bit of the feel of Luther’s *Tischreden* (*Table Talks*); i.e., it is a young pastor-scholar (Alexander) listening to an experienced pastor-scholar (Dever) about the church and recording that conversation. This talk begins where it simply must begin for those committed to the authority of Scripture: namely, God telling us what He intended His church to be. Only when we have listened to that do we learn from Dever and Alexander about what the church should do. (Prayerfully, what our churches do will be directed by what our Father says we are!) And only then do we arrive where so many evangelical churches want to begin—thinking about how we organize our activity. Dever and Alexander guide us in a very practical way through the implications of the truths of God’s Word about the daily workings of a local church.

My reading of *The Deliberate Church* has fanned into a greater flame my ongoing love for the church. The book has rekindled my passion to serve a church in which the Gospel is central. It has recreated a longing for “a church that is an increasingly clear display of God’s wisdom and glory to the heavenly powers and to the surrounding community.”

—GREG WAYBRIGHT

President, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

By the grace of God, Mark Dever is working tirelessly to build a thriving, God-centered, Bible-teaching, Gospel-driven church on Capitol Hill. *The Deliberate Church* shares many of the ministry lessons that Dr. Dever and his colleagues have learned from Scripture and sought to implement in the life of their church community. This book is for anyone who wants to get serious about following the biblical pattern for the church and is looking for down-to-earth practical help.

—PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN

Senior Minister, Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia
Council Member, Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals

Rare indeed are books on the church that begin with the Gospel. Rarer still are books that derive methodology for building the church from the Gospel. This excellent book does both. And both are evident in the personal example and pastoral ministry of Mark Dever. This book is a gift to all pastors and is must reading for all pastors.

—C. J. MAHANEY

Sovereign Grace Ministries

Mark Dever has given as much intentional, disciplined, biblical thought to the issues confronting the church in the twenty-first century as any of her caretakers. This present work is the latest of a series of publications in which he has established a thoughtfully tested theological matrix for ecclesiology. He prompts the reader through well-placed questions to consider the authority for church structure, the character of the church, its form, its worship, its ordinances, its proclamation, its officers and their qualifications, the manner in which it conducts its proper business, and its outreach. His approach guides us to practical implementation of those things necessary for lively, God-honoring, Christ-centered, biblically faithful church life.

—TOM J. NETTLES

Professor of Church History, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

The strength of *The Deliberate Church* lies in its combination of biblical fidelity and unapologetic practicality. We can be appropriately wary of all the how-to manuals out there, but practical help *is* needed and this book delivers it—biblically derived, carefully considered, faithfully tested *practical* help. It provides this help through both thorough coverage of the essentials of building a healthy church and the introduction of very useful categories—things like *evangelistic* exposition and *reverse* membership interviews. Ours *is* a haphazard age and as a result there is a crying need in the local church for a solidly biblical intentionality. *The Deliberate Church* will be a great help in meeting that need.

—MIKE BULLMORE

Senior Pastor, Crossway Community Church, Kenosha, WI

The church of Jesus Christ is now confronted with a confusing array of consultants, advisors, and analysts—all ready to dispense the latest managerial advice. How is the church to regain its bearings in the midst of such clutter? Along comes Mark Dever with *The Deliberate Church*—and it's about time! Here is one of the most faithful and insightful pastors of our time, addressing the most crucial issues of church life. Mark Dever refuses to separate theology and congregational life, combining pastoral insight with clear biblical teaching. This book is a powerful antidote to the merely pragmatic approaches of our day—and a refutation to those who argue that theology just isn't practical.

—R. ALBERT MOHLER, JR.

President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

MARK DEVER AND PAUL ALEXANDER



**THE
DELIBERATE
CHURCH →**

BUILDING YOUR MINISTRY ON THE GOSPEL

CROSSWAY BOOKS

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FOREWORD

by D. A. Carson

One of the strangest dichotomies in contemporary evangelicalism pits theology against practical savvy. Many practitioners boast how little theology they know and amply demonstrate the warrant for their boast, while forcefully advocating a wide array of practical steps to foster church growth and discipleship. In response, many pastors and theologians bemoan the weightlessness of so much contemporary evangelicalism and advocate a sober return to Scripture and a broad grasp of biblical theology. The former group often leaves the Bible behind, except for remarkably superficial ways: nothing challenges the hegemony of their methods. But the latter group, whose theology may be as orthodox as that of the apostle Paul, sometimes gives the impression that once you know a lot of the Bible and have read a lot of theology, everything will work out smilingly—as if there were no need for the practical advice of pastors who are no less committed to theology than they, but who are equally reflective on steps that must be taken, priorities, pastoral strategies, and the like.

A few years ago, Mark Dever gave us *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (now in its second edition). Despite the feel of the title, this book was far removed from the kind of pop sociological analysis and managerial assessment with which we are often barraged. It was a book deeply embedded in biblical theology. Many pastors and churches have benefited from the faithfulness of its probing reflection. But suppose you live and serve in a local church that is far removed from the healthy profile developed in *Nine Marks*: what then? How do we get from here to there? Talking about the *Nine Marks*, and thinking through the biblical

texts that warrant them, surely constitute part of the response. Nevertheless, the book you hold in your hands goes beyond that simplification to help pastors and other leaders lead a church toward spiritual health and growth. Once again, this book, jointly written by Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, is steeped in Scripture—but it is also chock-full of wisdom, years of pastoral experience, and godly insight. No pastor who is struggling “to get from here to there” should overlook this slender but invaluable volume.

MARK'S PREFACE

Paul Alexander really wrote this book. We talked about the project for a while, and then, after some weeks, a few chapters turned up on my desk. Wow! I've not had quite this experience before. "Paul's written a book," I thought. "Why is my name on it?"

Then I started reading it, and I thought, "Hey, I've said that! That's how I put it! That's my story." And I realized what Paul had done. Paul took things that I've taught and written, things he's heard me say many times and questions he's heard me answer from visiting pastors, and he added his gifts of time, organization, clear writing and thinking ability—along with some of his own ministry experiences—and he produced the first draft of this book.

Paul and I had talked about all the things that should go in a book like this. We made sure that every question about the church that I seem to hear again and again was addressed—at least every question that we had anything helpful to say about. We worked together on the outline, and the issues to be covered.

This book was actually my wife's idea. And it came about from her hearing the same questions asked again and again by visiting pastors, and me giving the same answers. I can't say that any wisdom represented in this book is particularly profound, but, by God's grace, it does seem to have been helpful to a number of ministers.

We were initially thinking about calling this book *Bodybuilding*, but there were simply too many debates among the staff about who would be on the cover! So we've settled for the title *The Deliberate Church*. We try to be intentional and thoughtful about what we do, because we realize that we are involved in the greatest task on earth—the building up of the body of Christ for His honor and glory.

If you've read other books that I've published about the church,

you'll realize that this is the practical conclusion of a trilogy. The initial book, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*,¹ is my simple diagnosis of what ails great tracts of American evangelical churches today, along with the suggested biblical treatments. It is the most general and basic book. The middle phase of the project was the publication of *Polity*,² followed by some of its practical conclusions for modern churches in the booklet *A Display of God's Glory*.³ In these works I explored further issues of membership, discipline, and polity and gave some practical applications. But it's in this present volume that Paul and I try to lay out some bottom-shelf "best practices" or "tips" for living out the ecclesiology represented in these other books. A theological synthesis can be found in my chapter on the doctrine of the church in Danny Akin and David Dockery's *A Theology for the Church*.⁴

Special thanks go to my wife for suggesting this book, to Paul Alexander for putting so many hours in writing and cheerfully rewriting it, and to the good supporters of 9Marks Ministries for helping to make it possible. Paul is a talented and gifted writer. Michael Lawrence and the other elders and staff here at the Capitol Hill Baptist Church have been wonderful teachers to me of much that we have shared with you in this book.

This book is meant to encourage you. We know we don't do everything correctly, and that some of our friends may be persuaded differently by Scripture on a few of the matters we're thinking about in this book, particularly church polity and the ordinances. On these matters, we simply invite you to consider the Word afresh with us and to be convinced in your own mind. We're always trying to learn from others as well. So by the time you read this, we may have already changed or modified some of the practices you see here. But we've found them helpful in living out the Bible's teaching about the church, and we hope that you may find them so as well. We hope we can instruct you, and even where we fail to instruct, we pray that we can provoke you so that you, too, will see your way to helping your church to live out the Gospel more faithfully together.

It is to that end that all of us have labored, and it is to that end that I pray you will read and act.

PAUL'S PREFACE

Mark Dever really wrote this book. The words are mine, but they're mostly Mark's ideas; I've just put them on paper.

I first heard about Mark while I was doing graduate work at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, to prepare for the pastorate. I read his book, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, for a pastoral duties class, and a professor of mine there, Mike Bullmore, encouraged me to take advantage of the internship program at Mark's church. I decided to think about his suggestion for a few weeks. When I had the rare occasion to call Dr. Bullmore at his home to clarify a detail, he asked me if I had gotten my application in for the internship at Capitol Hill Baptist. I said, "No, not quite yet." He responded with words I'll never forget. "Paul, pursue that with vigor." He didn't have to tell me twice. I turned in the application by the end of that week.

I met Mark for the first time in September of 2002 when I visited Capitol Hill Baptist on a *9Marks Weekender*—a long weekend at the church that he serves in D.C. designed to give pastors and seminary students a behind-the-scenes look at how a healthy church is led.¹ It only confirmed my desire to come and learn more. So I finished my class work at Trinity that same semester and in January of 2003 started the internship program at CHBC.

It was more like an internship on steroids. My program at Trinity required 400 hours of internship experience; the CHBC internship was 1,100 plus! I sat in on every elders' meeting; attended every corporate gathering of the church; read ten books on the church and wrote five response papers every week; met with Mark once a week for three hours with five other interns to discuss issues that touch the theology, leadership, and corporate life of the church; accompanied the pastors to almost every meeting they attended; and observed a model of evangelistic

expository preaching that I had never seen. Those six months changed my life; they changed my understanding of what it means to be a pastor and to shepherd a church faithfully. It felt as if I had been catapulted twenty years ahead in my understanding of how biblical theology governs the life and leadership of the local church.

In God's kind providence, those months changed my life in another way, too: I met my lovely wife during those days—not surprisingly, a member of the church.

I stayed on with 9Marks Ministries as a contributing editor and continued attending the church, and God allowed me to soak even more deeply in the principles and practices that cultivate health and holiness in the local church. He also gave me the privilege of working shoulder to shoulder with a few good men, including Mark, the most faithful pastor I have ever met; and Matt Schmucker, director of 9Marks Ministries, the greatest boss and church administrator the world will ever know!

I'm deeply grateful to be a part of this project, and even more grateful for the opportunity to work with these brothers. They have been God's instruments in the continued formation of my personal character and pastoral understanding, and I know I would not be the man I am today without their patient instruction and faithful friendship.

The ideas represented in this book have reshaped my own understanding of what it means to be a faithful pastor. I pray they'll do the same for you, and that your church will become increasingly healthy as a result. *Soli Deo gloria.*

FOREWORD

Why did you take this book off the shelf? What caught your attention? Come on, be honest. Were you intrigued by the cover design? Did you read the endorsements on the back? Wonder what it meant to be a “deliberate” church? Maybe you just picked it up because you like to stay current with the latest stuff out there on church growth and ministry models.

Or maybe the reason was deeper. Maybe you’re a pastor who’s been at it for a long time and you’re discouraged by the lack of growth in your church. “What am I missing? Why am I not being as effective as the pastor down the road?” Maybe you picked it up because you’re tired of not being “successful” in ministry—the fish aren’t biting, so why not change the bait?

On the other hand, you might be a young-buck church planter who’s looking to make an impact for the kingdom. Maybe you’re tired of looking at a new world through old glasses and want to push the envelope—innovate, get creative, experiment with some new methods, try some crazy ideas, find out what really makes people tick in a post-everything generation.

Then again, maybe you’ve invested the last five years of your life trying to implement the latest church growth model and it didn’t work. Maybe you’re reading because you’re disillusioned with the failure of a model that seemed promising and produced amazing results elsewhere. So now you’re on to the next thing—the *deliberate* church.

Maybe your interest was piqued by the possibility of a new way of doing church that might breathe fresh life into your congregation. Maybe you’re reading it because it might be the next big wave in church ministry that could spark explosive growth in your church and light a fire in your community. Or perhaps you’ve just found yourself feeling a

little outdated—a light blue leisure suit in a Bloomingdale’s world—so you’ve come into the Christian bookstore to update the ministry wardrobe. Search your heart—why did you open this book? What are you looking for?

Before you start reading in earnest, let us clarify what *The Deliberate Church* is not, just for truth in advertising. First, *it’s not new*. It’s old . . . *really* old. We’re not claiming that any of this stuff is original with us; it’s not a “fresh take” or a “unique approach”—it’s not innovative. In fact, we don’t even *want* to be innovative (there, we said it!). Second, *it’s not a program*. It’s not something you can just plug into your church and press PLAY. It’s not dependent on technique; we don’t have a set plan for spiritual maturity, or systematic steps for building a church; there’s no flashy lingo or professional diagrams or cool metaphors. Third, *it’s not a quick fix*. In other words, don’t expect to read this book, implement its suggestions, and see immediate, observable results. Healthy growth takes time, prayer, hard work, patience, and perseverance.

“Well, if it’s not a new program, then what is it?” Simply put, it’s the Word building the church.

It’s easy to agree with our culture that newer is invariably better. New clothes are better than old hand-me-downs; a new car is better than Dad’s old beater. There is just something about new things that is almost irresistibly fascinating to us. They have this gravity that pulls us in with their glimmering shine, their new-car smell, their modern look, their promise of increased efficiency and effectiveness. We know it’s dumb, but somehow they make us feel new with them—almost like we’re renewed in their image.

When it comes to ideas on how to build the church, it’s tempting to allow our fascination with the new to drive our thinking and determine our methods. This temptation is all the more seductive in the context of an emerging evangelical culture that increasingly distances itself from the clear proclamation of doctrinal certainties grounded in scriptural truth and handed down to us by the historic Christian creeds and confessions. As we are uprooted from our rich doctrinal and historical heritage, the innovative and creative begin to appear more plausible than the tried and true, in part because we are immersed in a culture that stridently embraces its own superiority to whatever is past. Pragmatism then nat-

urally prevails. Without even realizing or reflecting on it, we quickly become excited about the most recent creative model that promises the most immediately observable results, usually measured by sanctified statistics.

At the root of all this, often unwittingly, is the rapid erosion of our faith in the sufficiency of Scripture for our effectiveness in ministry. Paul instructs Timothy to devote himself to preaching the Word (2 Tim. 4:2) precisely because that Word makes the man of God “adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:17). Timothy didn’t need the latest rhetorical techniques, business practices, or creative ministry models based on captivating metaphors. He simply needed to be guided, governed, and geared by the Word of God.

Deliberate, of course, means well thought through or careful. What we are trying to be careful about as church leaders, then, is building the church on and around the Gospel of Christ. More specifically, we are trying to be careful about building our church according to the pattern that God has given us in Scripture. At its best, the deliberate church is careful to trust the Word of God, wielded by Jesus Christ, to do the work of building the local church. It is an attempt to put our money where our mouth is when we say that we believe in the sufficiency of Scripture for the life, health, and growth of the local church. Our goal isn’t to see how innovative we can be. Our goal is to see how faithful we can be.

What follows, then, *could* be called a model of ministry. But it’s really just an attempt to be deliberate about treating the biblical Gospel as that which feeds the church’s growth, drives its progress, and governs every aspect of the church’s corporate life and leadership. In whatever we do, we want to be careful about allowing God’s Word to set our trajectory, power our progress, and govern our methods. From our preaching and evangelism, to the way we take in new members; from our discipleship and discipline practices, to our leadership models; from the structure of our Sunday morning services, all the way down to the agenda at the elders’ meeting, we want our procedures to reflect reliance on the biblical Gospel, submission to its claims, and awareness of its implications for our corporate life together.

The words of God in Scripture are the building blocks of the church. As pastors and church leaders, then, our first priority is to make sure that the Gospel enjoys functional centrality in the church. That is,

we must make sure that the Gospel governs the way the church functions. When the Gospel enjoys functional centrality, the church gains traction in the culture, because the Gospel is the power of God for salvation (Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:17-18). The Gospel is what gives people new spiritual birth (James 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23). The Gospel fights the church's enemies, such as doctrinal error and moral wickedness (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20). In short, God's Word, encapsulated in the Gospel, builds the church.¹

Preserving this functional centrality of the Gospel is the reason we don't want to promote programs, steps, and innovative metaphors in *The Deliberate Church*. To preserve functional centrality for the Gospel, human method has to remain plain, or else it will naturally supplant the Gospel's rightful role. In this way, our method in building the church will function in much the same way as a preacher's style of communication. A preacher can be so flamboyant and animated that his own personality becomes more noticeable and affecting than the message he's trying to preach. Similarly, the methods of pastors and church leaders in building the local church can become so prominent that they begin to siphon for themselves the glory for the church's growth that rightly belongs to the Gospel alone. Our goal as preachers and leaders is to keep our methods basic and plain so that the Gospel is cast in bold relief against the backdrop of our own admitted weakness.

THINK TANK

1. Does the Gospel enjoy functional centrality in your church? Why or why not? Are there ways in which your current model of ministry might siphon off the glory of the Gospel for itself? How so?

We have called this book *The Deliberate Church* because we wanted a title that might serve to throw us into the fray of the church methodology debates. American evangelicalism is now dripping with various kinds of churches: *The Emerging Church*, *The Purpose Driven Church*, *The Connecting Church*, *The Disciple-Making Church*, a critical assessment called *The Market Driven Church*, and almost any other kind of church you could possibly want. We thought keeping the format of "The

_____ Church” for a title might get our foot in the door of the debate. “Deliberate” is the best word we could find to succinctly describe what we’re talking about. But it’s mainly a title that (hopefully) will get us in on the conversation so that we can hold up a way of doing things that actually has been recovered from centuries past—a church driven and governed by the Gospel. Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., has been the laboratory for testing these ideas over the last ten years. What follows, then, are applications of these principles that have proven fruitful and encouraging in our context. They are not intended to be taken as either exhaustive or exclusive, but simply as an attempt to revive a warm conversation about how we feed, lead, and protect the flock of God.

And now the million-dollar question: Is it replicable? Can you do this with your church? Of course—but not because it’s a plug and play program, and certainly not because of any brilliance of our own in coming up with a transferable model. It’s replicable because it is scriptural and plain. No matter what size your church is, or where you’re located, or what kind of people you’re ministering to, you can always be deliberate about being Gospel driven and Gospel governed in everything you do. It’s not dependent on discovering the spiritual and cultural preferences of a target audience. You don’t have to implement a synthetic curriculum, or be an incredibly creative thinker, or even be the most charismatic leader. You just have to trust that Jesus will build His church by the agency of His Spirit and by the power of His Gospel without buying the newest program or following the most popular trend.

But let us be clear. We’re not promising immediate, observable results. *God* is sovereign. *He* determines our times and places, the length of our days, and the fruit of our labors. God the Father and the risen Son sovereignly decide when to pour out the Spirit in greater measure.² Your work in Christ’s vineyard won’t be fruitful simply because you read this book or even apply this model. We do think, because it displays a measure of faithfulness and obedience to God’s normative Word, that you will be more likely to see lasting fruit. But no one comes to Christ unless the Father draws him, and no one obeys the Gospel unless the Spirit gives him the gifts of understanding, repentance, and belief—and only God makes things grow.³

Many church leaders today are saying that the church will be cata-

pulted into the future only when her methods catch up with the times. We're saying the exact opposite. In a sense, our goal is to take the church into the future by reminding her of who she was originally intended to be. We think the church will be catapulted into the future only when the most noticeable thing about her corporate life is that it is carefully governed and powerfully driven by God's age-old, time-tested Word.

Still interested? We hope so. After all, the function of the Gospel in the life of the church should be at the very center of our lives as Christians, let alone as pastors and church leaders. If you get through the last chapter and reject the whole "model," at least be deliberate about it—know *why* you're rejecting it. But if you read through the whole thing and agree with it, then you have a stewardship on your hands. Don't just leave it to collect dust—be deliberate about applying it. Talk it through over meals with your fellow church leaders. Look around at your church meetings and leadership structures to see what would need to change in order for them to become more carefully governed and driven by the Gospel. Teach people the biblical principles behind the practical methods, and intentionally cultivate unity around that teaching. Then take corporate action and lead for change together in a wise, patient, and winsome way.

INTRODUCTION

What Are We Building?

It would be patently stupid to start construction on a building without first knowing what kind of building we plan to construct. An apartment complex is different from an office complex, which is different still from a restaurant. They all have different blueprints, different kinds of rooms, different materials, uses, and shapes. So the process of building will be different, depending on what kind of structure we're planning to build.

The same goes for building a church. A church is not a Fortune 500 company. It's not simply another nonprofit organization, nor is it a social club. In fact, a healthy church is unlike any organization that man has ever devised, because man didn't devise it.

It only makes sense, then, for us to revisit God's Word to figure out what exactly He wants us to be building. Only then will we understand how to go about building it. Negligence here will result in both temporal and eternal futility. Temporally, a church is a spiritually heavy thing to build, and it is designed for heavy relational use. It requires the strongest materials, and those materials must be placed in the correct, load-bearing positions specified on the biblical blueprint so that structural integrity is built in. No matter how beautiful the facade, our structure will crumble if we build on a sandy foundation or with shoddy materials.

Eternally, our work will withstand the fire of the last day only if we build with the "gold, silver, precious stones" specified on the biblical blueprint (1 Cor. 3:12). Building without that blueprint will virtually guarantee that we will build with the cheaper and more abundant resources of "wood, hay, straw," all of which will burn in the end (vv. 13-15). Ignoring God's plan for the church and replacing it with your own will ensure the eternal futility of your work. Here at the outset,

then, it is critical to reflect biblically on this foundational question: What is a local church?

Fundamentally, God intends the local church to be a corporate display of His glory and wisdom, both to unbelievers and to unseen spiritual powers (John 13:34-35; Eph. 3:10-11). More specifically, we are a corporate dwelling place for God's Spirit (Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Cor. 3:16-17), the organic body of Christ in which He magnifies His glory (Acts 9:4; 1 Corinthians 12). The Greek word for church is *ekklēsia*, a gathering or congregating of people. The church is God's vehicle for displaying His glory to His creation.

The uniqueness of the church is her message—the Gospel. The church is the only institution entrusted by God with the message of repentance of sins and belief in Jesus Christ for forgiveness. That Gospel is visualized in the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, both instituted by Christ. The distinguishing marks of the church, then, are the right preaching of this Gospel and the right administration of the biblical ordinances that dramatize it.

The structure we're building, then, is fundamentally God-centered—it is a Godward structure, designed to display the glories of God's character and the truth of His Gospel. It is also an outward-looking structure; but even in its outwardness it is God-centered, since we look outward for the purpose of spreading God's character and Gospel through all the nations—to gather more worshipers for Him and thus magnify His glory.

Ours is a ministry of magnification—making God's glory appear to the eyes of the world as big as it really is by bringing it into closer view and sharper focus in the form of the local church. What we are building, then, is not simply another nonprofit organization or Christian company. We are building a corporate, organic structure that will accurately magnify God's glory and faithfully communicate His Gospel.

Jesus is the One who is ultimately building His church (Matt. 16:18). But He has graciously allowed us to participate in the construction process, and it is therefore according to His biblical blueprint that we must build the structure and life of the church. What are *you* trying to build?

How Should We Build It?

How then do you go about building such a healthy church? Countless answers have been offered from different quarters of evangelicalism.

Some think it takes knowing your target audience and attracting them by meeting their needs.¹ Others propose that the key is to have a vibrant network of small groups, where “real community” can happen. Many advise that we need to jettison the “old” methods that worked fifty years ago and embrace new ones that work in our postmodern context.² Some advocate a return to religious symbols in worship to give people the sacred experience and connection with the past that they’re looking for at church.³ Others say the way forward is to sell our church buildings and start developing house churches.⁴ Still others say we are free to do whatever works in our own local context, as long as it is ethical.

So how do we navigate the modern method maze? Is there a compass we can use that will lead us out? Is there a way to rise above the underbrush of synthetic ministry models so that we can get a bird’s-eye view of the way forward?

What these and many other ministry models assume is that method isn’t really all that important to God. “If it brings people to church or helps them feel like they’ve really worshiped on Sunday, it must be a good thing, right?”

When it comes to building a people for His own name and glory, God cares how we go about participating in His redemptive purposes. As we’ll see in chapter 1, the Gospel itself is God’s constructive power for building the body of Christ (Isa. 55:10-11; Rom. 1:16; 1 Pet. 1:23-25). The Word builds the Church. Our power is not in having small groups, or meeting the felt needs of our target audience, or using the right evangelism program, or having funny skits, or providing plenteous parking, or targeting our ministries to postmoderns. Our power is in our unique message—the Gospel (Greek, *euangelion*)—not in our innovations. As such, our primary method must be to clearly communicate that message as widely as possible. Biblically, that means that we must faithfully preach it (Greek, *euangelizō*), fearlessly calling for repentance and belief as the only saving responses (Mark 1:14-15).

So before we start talking about the nuts and bolts of building the church responsibly, let us be clear on the relationship between the Gospel of Christ and the method of its ministers.

(1) *Theology drives method.* Whether we realize it or not, our thinking on the Gospel will shape the way we share it. Our theology of the Good News will be brought to bear on how we build the church.

(2) *God's methods determine ours.* The methods we use to plant and water in God's vineyard must be subservient to and in complete harmony with the working of God's growth method—the Gospel, as faithfully preached by His servants. Working contrary to God's processes often means working contrary to His purposes.⁵

(3) *The Gospel both enables and informs our participation in God's purposes.* We are not even able to enter the Kingdom of God, much less minister in it, unless His Gospel first does its work in us; nor do we know how to minister in His kingdom unless His Gospel first provides the parameters for doing so. As such, the Gospel alone must both shape and evaluate any ministry method we use.

(4) *Faithfulness to the Gospel must be our measure of success, not results.* The power of God for spiritual life and genuine holiness is in the Gospel. So fidelity is paramount, not innovation, and not immediately observable results. Simon the Magician drew a crowd—he even had them calling him the Power of God; but his power, motive, and message were fraudulent (Acts 8:9-11). Our call is to fidelity as messengers. Only God causes real growth (1 Cor. 3:6-7), and He does so by the Gospel (Rom. 10:14-17; Gal. 3:1-5).

This Gospel, then, is that God is our holy Creator and righteous Judge. He created us to glorify Him and enjoy Him forever, but we have all sinned, both in Adam as our representative head, and in our own individual actions (Rom. 5:12; 3:23). We therefore deserve death—spiritual separation from God in hell (Rom. 6:23; Eph. 2:3)—and are in fact already spiritually stillborn, helpless in our sins (Ps. 51:5; Rom. 5:6-8; Eph. 2:1) and in need of God to impart spiritual life to us (Ezek. 37:1-14; John 3:3). But God sent His Son Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man (Phil. 2:5-11), to die the death that we deserved, and He raised Him up for our justification, proving that He was God's Son (Rom. 5:1; 1:4). If we would have Christ's perfect righteousness credited to us, and the penalty for our sins accounted to Him, we must repent of our sins and believe in Jesus Christ for salvation (2 Cor. 5:21; Mark 1:14-15).

This Gospel alone (Gal. 1:6-9) is the one we are commanded to preach (2 Tim. 4:2). This Gospel alone contains the theology that must drive our ministry methods. This Gospel alone is the one God uses to create a people for Himself. This Gospel alone both enables and informs

our participation in God's redemptive purposes. Consequently, this Gospel alone deserves to shape and evaluate both our methods and our ministries.

THINK TANK

1. What's driving your church—the content of the message, or the uniqueness of the presentation?
2. Is your ministry method driven by biblical theology, or by what works?
3. Do you measure success by results, or by faithfulness to God's Word?

NOTES

Mark's Preface

1. Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004, 2000; original edition Founders Press, 1997).
2. Mark Dever, ed., *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001).
3. Mark Dever, *A Display of God's Glory* (Washington, D.C.: 9Marks Ministries, 2001).
4. Mark Dever, in Danny Akin, ed., *A Theology for the Church* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006).

Paul's Preface

1. To sign up for a 9Marks Weekender, visit www.9marks.org, hit the “Events” tab, and scroll to “Weekenders.”

Foreword

1. “Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32, NIV).
2. Luke 11:13; Eph. 1:17; 3:16; Rev. 3:1. See Iain Murray, *Pentecost—Today?* (Cape Coral, Fla.: Founders Press, 1998), 20-21.
3. John 6:44; Acts 11:18; 1 Corinthians 2:14-16; 3:7; Ephesians 2:8-9; 2 Peter 1:1.

Introduction

1. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1995).
2. James White, *Rethinking the Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2003).
3. Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2003).
4. Wolfgang Simson, *Houses That Change the World* (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster, 2001).
5. This is not to claim we have proof-texts for all our practices. The new member interview is not found in the Bible. Yet it is a methodological expression of our understanding of the content and primacy of the Gospel, and the importance of the purity of the membership of the local church and her Gospel witness in the surrounding community.

Chapter 1: The Four P's

1. Throughout the rest of the book, first-person pronouns with reference to the authors refer to Mark Dever, not Paul Alexander.
2. For a simple scriptural defense of the interchangeability of the expressions “the gospel” and “God’s word,” see Paul’s interchangeable use of the terms in 1 Thessalonians 2:9, 13. He says in 2:9 that what he “proclaimed” to them was “the gospel of God”; yet in 2:13 he says that what they “received” and “heard” from him was “the word of God.”
3. For more on how to preach the content and intent of a Scripture passage, see John

This book has only become more important and more true in the few years since it came out. Ronson's interviews with and focus on people who have screwed up and found themselves in the midst of massive online controversies—shame storms, a recent article calls them—are equally provocative and insightful. A defiant combination of Atlas and Sisyphus and David, wrestling a Goliath-sized mass of doubters and demons. Churchill is often portrayed in that way. (You might also like this short essay about Anne Frank and the obligation we have to stand up to evil.) *Memoirs of Hadrian* by Marguerite Yourcenar. There's the great line from Bismarck: "Any fool can learn from experience."