

## Book Review: What is a Healthy Church?

by Carrie Cavanaugh

By the first page of the introduction to What is a Healthy Church?, I was convicted. Having recently moved to an area that offered a number of church options, the issue of what a church should be was very relevant to me as my husband and I weighed our options. But I believe it is equally relevant for someone who is at a church they've been attending for ten years and is plagued by little (or big) areas of frustration. It is also relevant for anyone involved in church leadership as it serves as a reminder of what God has called a church to be.

The author of What is a Healthy Church? is Mark Dever. Dever is the head pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington D.C. As this book reveals, Dever has been convicted about the issue of what makes a healthy church and in addition to this book and numerous other publications, he is also the executive director of 9Marks ministry. 9Marks, which derives its name from the nine qualities he identifies as part of a healthy church, is an organization that aims at helping churches develop the characteristics that God desires of them through publications,

seminars, and a website.

As I mentioned, the introduction presented an allegory that hit home with me. Basically it is the typical

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story of a couple's discontent with their church and decision to leave to find a church that better reflects their personal passions. By telling the story in allegorical form, however, Dever was able to drive home that this isn't a biblical way of doing things at all. You see, the characters are named according to body parts which reflect their passions. In doing this we are reminded of the way the church is described in the Bible as one body

with many parts. We are all different, but we not only complement each other when we are united in a church body, but actually we need each other! In other words, if I am frustrated because I'm in a church that doesn't emphasize evangelism as much as I think the Bible says it should, rather than leave to go to a church that does a better job of evangelism, I need to help my current church grow in this area. This of course is a much harder road to take, but I agree with Dever that it is what God has intended.

The book is divided into three parts: "What is a Healthy Church?", "Essential Marks of a Healthy Church," and "Important Marks of a Healthy Church." In the first section, Dever makes it clear that he is in touch with the pulse of the modern evangelical church in America. In the second and third section, he proves that he is just as aware of what the Bible has to say about the church. I appreciate that he holds no punches, but he still presents the biblical standards in a gracious way that invites one to obey, rather than legalistically scaring one off. Indeed, Dever paints a picture of

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how glorious are God's intentions for the church.

The nine marks of a healthy church include three essentials—expository preaching, biblical theology and a biblical understanding of the Good News—and six important marks—a biblical understanding of conversion, a biblical understanding of evangelism, a biblical understanding of membership, biblical church discipline, biblical discipleship and growth and biblical church leadership. Dever also includes a chapter on how to find a good church, which poses some great questions, such as: “what picture of Christianity will my children see in this church” and “would the church's physical proximity to your home encourage or discourage frequent involvement and service”.

One of the chapters that stood out to me was the chapter on church discipline. For many reasons, most modern churches have shied away from this role of the church, but Dever reminds his readers that this is something clearly called for in the Bible and it is essential for maintaining a healthy church, as

difficult as it may seem at first.

Another theme that stood out to me was that of learning to live with the imperfection of the church. God is still redeeming His bride, the church. Furthermore, churches are made up of sinners. And as frustrating and disheartening as that may be, this is part of God's plan. For we need to extend forgiveness and grace to our brothers and sisters just as we have been forgiven and accepted by our savior.

What is a Healthy Church? is a short book, but one that has a lot of truth in it. I would encourage everyone to read it – be they pastor or layman. We both need to know what we must insist on in our church and also what heart attitude to adopt in the midst of its failures.