MIDWESTERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

NINE MARKS OF A HEALTHY CHURCH

A BOOK REVIEW

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***NINE MARKS OF A HEALTHY CHURCH***

Introduction

The book ‘Nine Marks of a Healthy Church’, 3rd edition Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000. ISBN: 1-58134-163-6. 306 pages, is authored by Mark Dever. The writer Mark Dever is a pastor at Capitol Hill Baptist Church, which is a Southern Congregation of Baptists. He is also recognized as the president of the Christian Ministry he founded, which aims to buildand encourage biblically loyal churches in the United States. He is also popularly known as the ‘Calvinist preacher'. Mark Dever is a believer in the leadership of the church under the elders and congregational ruled church. He emphasizes that the congregation of the church shall be led by a plurality of elderly as compared to sole leadership of an elder.

**Synopsis**

 In the book ‘Nine Marks of A Healthy Church', Mark relays thatthere are certain features which distinguish between healthy churches, i.e. those which follow the Bible thoroughly, from those which are unhealthy and vice versa. The book is a comprehensive account of how the church should be rather than what a church do in order to stay healthy. The books seek to rediscover the foundations of the Church in accordance with the Bible and Protestant practices through its purity. Dever creates a rationale of the authenticity of his words and interest of the reader by beginning and ending the book with strong references from the Bible. The biblical wisdom, as interpreted by Dever,suggests that the Church shall focus more on being a healthy example above the notions of culture and other social, economic and political factors. The book a positive prescription of the church by providing nine marks which uphold the level of healthy growth of the church in contrast to the complex problems the contemporary churches hold today. The overview of these nine pillars is as follows;

1. Expositional preaching:

Dever suggests that the right way to preach is to stay loyal and faithful to the teachings of God as He is the ultimate sustainer of the affairs of man’s life[[1]](#footnote-2). Dever holds that the word of God should be central to the congregations. He opposes the topical style of preaching applied by many contemporary churches. This technique only unites the Biblical scriptures to support certain pre-existing notions which are contrary to the basic teachings.

1. Biblical Theology:

The second mark is that a true sense of theology can be achieved through careful exposition of the passages of the Bible and by believing in what we are taught before preaching it. This involves an in-depth understanding of the character of God, most importantly that He is the Creator, is loving and sovereign[[2]](#footnote-3). The idea is to have a strong exposition in order to achieve a strong theology.

1. Biblical Understanding of the Gospel:

The complete understanding of the Gospel is one of the essentials of a healthy church. Dever focuses on the necessary understanding of the Gospel. He states that many contemporary churches preach passages which deviate from the Gospels. Healthy churches recognize the importance of the Gospels and the teachings of faith and repentance.The Gospel relays that we are sinners who shall seek repentance. The unhealthy churches de-emphasize sin and punishment which is against the teachings of the Gospel.

1. Biblical Understanding of Conversion:

Dever states that a new believer rightfully requires a comprehensive understanding of the gospel in order to better understand the ideals of faith and repentance. The Bible causes radical changes in the believer. The reliance on Christ instilled by the church creates a stronger faith and incurs God’s favor. The conversion is noted as a change in the nature of the individual.

1. Biblical Understanding of Evangelism:

Dever supports evangelism through not only professionals and experts but by the whole community associated with the church. Dever states that advocacy of the Gospel shall not be used to win against others but to spread a positive image by the church and for the love of God and peace within the community[[3]](#footnote-4). The idea is to undertake the truths along with expelling false conversions that corrupt the nature of evangelism. The need of the church is to incorporate the true nature of the Gospel with both the good and the bad news.

1. Biblical Understanding of Membership:

The writer is determined to restrict the membership of church to only those who take it as a responsibility and as a privilege bestowed upon them; hence raising the bar for it. Dedication is an essential element in making a member of the church. This requires a commitment to prayer, service, attendance in church and giving[[4]](#footnote-5). He states that church membership is not something that saves an individual but a way of salvation from sin. Therefore Dever marks that membership without sufficient knowledge of the Bible or sentimental value negatively affects the spirit of the church.

1. Biblical Church Discipline:

This concept refers to the practice of discipline amongst the members of the church. Discipline in the church is practiced in order to avert individuals from the membership. If in any case member is found in unrepentant-sin. The resolve is to be sought through disciplinary actions such as reconciliation, repentance or exclusion from membership. A healthy church is responsible to promote[[5]](#footnote-6) an environment of healthy theological practice and to warn the believers of the dangers of sinning. The idea is to fully indulge in the servitude of God.

1. Promotion of Christian discipleship and growth

Dever gives comprehensive attention to the definition of a healthy church. He suggests that the ideals of the membership of [[6]](#footnote-7)a healthy church involve living lives of holiness and practice gospel in their daily life. This shall be done to uphold the sentiments of the disciples of Jesus rather than mere members of the church.

1. Biblical understanding of church leadership

Baptist features are highlighted by Dever in the ninth mark of healthy churches. He illustrates the role of the leadership which shall be delegated to the elders in the church so that they may lead by example and serve congregations better and equip the church for ministry. He states that authority is God gifted and therefore shall stay in the hands of those who can truly serve the cause, through sound theological practice.

**Critical evaluation**

The book is a comprehensive read on the features which shall dominate the working of the healthy church, the author is appreciated for not approaching the ideals of the healthy working of the church and its contributions to the community by attracting reader or convincing them to as he preaches. He leaves it upon the reader to review the authenticity of his work. Dever provides an insightful assertion on the contemporary churches and how ill reflective are they of the true spirit of the gospel. He identifies that certain features of the church can be repelling to people. The offering makes the church look greedy and prolonged sermons are boring to people. The book states that persistence on following a particular path is seen as intolerant and enforced by many[[7]](#footnote-8). By giving references from the Bible, Denver relays that distinction shall be made through truthful teaching to create awareness amongst people regarding the true word of God[[8]](#footnote-9). The rationale behind Denver’s writing can be viewed as not the promotion of newness in the religion but truthfulness and purity, through Gods word. The Book carries immense importance due to its uniqueness and for reviving principles that have been lost in the previous years.

However, where the book has acclaimed positive views, it is also criticized for laying down marks for a healthy church which are far from reality and difficult to achieve.Many argue that although it is a sound doctrine, the devil is in the details. There are many questions raised at the disciplinary techniques of the church imposed upon the members. Although the marks are supported by essential passages from the Gospel, the true meaning of the preaching, gospel, and evangelism is far being explained in their real sense. The liberals argue that a substantial way of preaching is suffocating and limit the members to an only certain way of life. Moreover, there is an exclusion of women preachers from the book, many scholars identify this factor as a gender biased approach towards the church excluding genders from its working. Despite the books vivid criticism, it is notable that Mark Dever has taken upon himself to illustrate the deviations many churches practice. Dever suggests the rightful way of expanding the healthy way of church life by fearlessly demonstrating the fundamentals of beliefs and practices that are central to biblical theology[[9]](#footnote-10).

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