

“What Is a Healthy Church Member? fills an enormous gap in the literature of practical Christian living. The book is extremely valuable as a straightforward, easy-to-read user’s guide to the church. It is also a profound and thoroughly biblical digest of practical ecclesiology, written with a compelling sense of passion and urgency. As such, it is a valuable resource for every church member—from the beginner to the seasoned pastor alike. In an era when Christians in general seem confused about what kind of community the church ought to be, here’s a helpful handbook outlining the church’s true biblical priorities, especially as they apply to individual church members.”

—JOHN MACARTHUR, President, Grace to You

“Thabiti Anyabwile has filled a great void in contemporary Christian literature. Books on how to be a faithful pastor or church leader are common, but it is rare to find a book that speaks so directly about being a faithful church member. With a wealth of biblical insight and practical instruction, Anyabwile calls Christians to do more than just attend church, but to be the kind of faithful, engaged church members that God intends them to be. Given the state of so many of our churches today, this book arrives not a moment too soon.”

—R. ALBERT MOHLER JR., President,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Some books are so simple they are scarcely worth skimming; others are so complex that, unless their subject matter is extraordinarily important, they are not worth the time they demand. But sometimes one finds a book that is simultaneously simple and profound—and this is one of them. In a generation when many people are talking about the importance of Christians living “in community,” few have unpacked, in biblically faithful and personally penetrating ways, just what that means. Thabiti Anyabwile closes the gap. Read it, think about it, pray over it—and distribute it generously around your congregation.”

—D. A. CARSON, Research Professor of New Testament,
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“This book provides an excellent and much-needed focus on the individual church member. We can all benefit from this insightful book.”

—R. C. SPROUL, Chairman and President,
Ligonier Ministries; Senior Minister of Preaching and
Teaching, Saint Andrews Chapel, Sanford, Florida

“A faithful pastor is also a good church member. Thabiti is evidence of this truth and thus has written with pastoral insight and personal experience on what it means to be a healthy church member. Any church desiring to strengthen its membership would do well to get this book into the hands of its members. Being a faithful church member in an age of overindulgence and selfish impulses is not easy. Yet, Thabiti not only reminds us it is possible, but he also challenges us with the biblical reality that it is necessary. I continue to thank God for the mind and heart of Thabiti Anyabwile.”

—ANTHONY J. CARTER, pastor; author; editor,
*Experiencing the Truth: Bringing the Reformation
to the African-American Church*

“Thabiti Anyabwile’s *What Is a Healthy Church Member?* asks the right questions about the offer of church membership, calling each local body of believers to cultivate and sustain practices of an assembly formed by the gospel. It is a most practical manual, yet it is free from the religious utilitarianism that often marks seeker-oriented works in this genre. Any leadership and laity that would elect to read this book together and embrace its exhortations would find their life as the family of God increasing in its wisdom, power, love, and witness in the world. What a balm we all will find in the words of this book!

—ERIC C. REDMOND, Senior Pastor, Hillcrest Baptist
Church, Temple Hills, Maryland

WHAT IS A 
Healthy
CHURCH MEMBER?

Thabiti M. Anyabwile

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SERIES PREFACE

The 9Marks series of books is premised on two basic ideas. First, the local church is far more important to the Christian life than many Christians today perhaps realize. A book called *What Is a Healthy Church Member?* might also be called *What Is a Healthy Christian?* We at 9Marks believe that a healthy Christian *is* a healthy church member.

Second, local churches grow in life and vitality as they organize their lives around God’s Word. God speaks. Churches should listen and follow. It’s that simple. When a church listens and follows, it begins to look like the One it is following. It reflects his love and holiness. It displays his glory. A church will look like him as it listens to him.

By this token, the reader might notice that all “9 marks,” taken from Mark Dever’s 2001 book, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Crossway Books), begin with the Bible:

- expositional preaching;
- biblical theology;
- a biblical understanding of the gospel;
- a biblical understanding of conversion;
- a biblical understanding of evangelism;
- a biblical understanding of church membership;
- a biblical understanding of church discipline;

- a biblical understanding of discipleship and growth; and
- a biblical understanding of church leadership.

More can be said about what churches should do in order to be healthy, such as pray. But these nine practices are the ones that we believe are most often overlooked today (unlike prayer). So our basic message to churches is, don't look to the best business practices or the latest styles; look to God. Start by listening to God's Word again.

Out of this overall project comes the 9Marks series of books. These volumes intend to examine the nine marks more closely and from different angles. Some target pastors. Some target church members. Hopefully all will combine careful biblical examination, theological reflection, cultural consideration, corporate application, and even a bit of individual exhortation. The best Christian books are always both theological and practical.

It's our prayer that God will use this volume and the others to help prepare his bride, the church, with radiance and splendor for the day of his coming.

FOREWORD

“Beloved.” On Sunday mornings, that was the way Thabiti always greeted the congregation that we pastored together. And he meant it. He loved them, and they loved him. Some of the older members couldn’t pronounce his name (*thuh-BEE-tee*), but they knew that Thabiti meant it when he called them “Beloved.”

“Good morning, Beloved.” I can still hear it.

That’s also the word that the apostle John used again and again in his letters to some of the earliest churches. In God’s providence, John’s letters, together with the rest of the New Testament, tell us a lot about what it means to be Christians together. They tell us what it means to be a church member, which is what this little book is about, too.

Thabiti knows from experience that living the Christian life is not something that we’re supposed to do alone. Being a Christian is a personal matter, not a private one. When you are born again, you are born into a family. And that family is not only the great extended family of Christians throughout the world, but also the particular nuclear family of a local congregation.

As a fellow church member for a number of years, I had the joy of knowing Thabiti and his wife, Kristie. I remember the first Sunday I met Thabiti. I was struck by how interest-

ing (he worked at a “think tank”), how distinguished (he just looks the part), and how thoughtful (he was measured with his words) he was. But he wasn’t simply a fascinating brain. The brother has a heart! He quickly began involving himself in the lives of other people in the church. Within a few weeks Thabiti was already helping to pastor the congregation. Though it would be several years before he was recognized as an elder, he was *eldering*.

All of this shows that Thabiti understands the idea that sheep are to be in a sheepfold, and I have seen him be both a great member of the sheepfold and an outstanding under-shepherd.

I’ve spent enough of your time now. This is supposed to be a short book. Now I invite you to jump into it and profit. But take a moment to pray before you do. Pray that God might use Thabiti in your life, as he has used him in so many other lives. Pray that God would use this book to help you know and love your local church in a way you never have before. And pray that, as you come to know and love your church, you would increasingly come to know and show God’s love.

God bless and happy reading, Beloved.

Mark Dever,
Washington DC
September 2007

INTRODUCTION

Jenny surprised me when she started crying during our membership interview. The first twenty minutes of the interview were fairly routine. She recounted her childhood growing up in a Christian home, her high school years filled with fear, and a period of living as a prodigal during college. Then she recalled with some joy her conversion experience in a hometown local church.

So I did not expect her to sob at the question, “How was that church for you spiritually? Did you grow there?”

After pausing for a moment, she explained, “I expected that after my conversion someone would have helped me to grow as a Christian.” She continued with a distinct trace of confusion and anger: “But it was as if people put me in a corner somewhere, as if they expected me to figure things out on my own. It was a terrible and lonely time.”

How many Jennys have you met in your lifetime? Perhaps you are a Jenny. Perhaps you have spent considerable time in a local church, or several churches. And perhaps your Christian life is not too dissimilar from Jenny’s. You came to the faith bright eyed and bushy tailed, bouncing with energy and zeal to do great things for the Lord. But soon you found yourself wondering, “What exactly am I supposed to be doing as a member of this local church?”

If so, this book is written for you. And if not, this book is written for you, too.

Whether your Christian life began yesterday or thirty years ago, the Lord's intent is that you play an active and vital part in his body, the local church. He intends for you to experience the local church as a home more profoundly wonderful and meaningful than any other place on earth. He intends for his churches to be healthy places and for the members of those churches to be healthy as well.

This little book is written in the hope that you might discover or rediscover what it means to be a healthy member of a local church, and what it means to contribute to the overall health of the church.

In 2007, Crossway Books published Mark Dever's *What Is a Healthy Church?* That book offered one definition of what a healthy church looks like biblically and historically and, along with his prior work *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, has shaped the thinking of many pastors and church leaders in the years since it was first published.

This book takes its cue from *What Is a Healthy Church?* though it attempts to answer a slightly different question: "What does a healthy church *member* look like in the light of Scripture?" While *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* primarily addressed pastors in the task of church reform, this book seeks to address the people that pastors lead and to encourage those people to play their part in helping the local church to increasingly reflect the glory of God.

How can you, an individual member of a local church, contribute to the positive health of your church?

A lady named Mrs. Burns cornered me after the church

service one Sunday morning. She was a little hot and bothered about some of the things that were changing in the church as well as some of the things that were remaining the same. I tried to greet others as they were leaving while at the same time nodding politely to Mrs. Burns as she complained of her dissatisfaction.

When she paused in her litany, my first thought was to ask her, “So what exactly would you have me to do about these things?” But in a rare moment of insight I thought better of asking that question. Instead I asked her, “So what are *you* going to do about the state of the church? How will *you* become a better member and contribute to the health of God’s family in this place?”

Those questions belong to every Christian, not just the ones who complain like Mrs. Burns. The health of the local church depends on the willingness of its members to inspect their hearts, correct their thinking, and apply their hands to the work of the ministry.

The chapters that follow present one proposal for becoming a healthier member of your local church. The chapters assume that you’re already a member of a local congregation and that perhaps you just need a little nudge or the opportunity to think through a few key issues.¹

Chapter 1 encourages “expositional listening” to the Word of God. Healthy church members are those who listen in a particular way to the Word of God as it is preached and studied—they let God set the agenda by seeking always to hear the true meaning of the text so that they can apply it to their lives.

In chapter 2, church members are encouraged to dedicate

themselves to learning the overarching themes of the Bible. In other words, they are asked to become “biblical theologians” in an effort to protect themselves and the church from false and unsound teaching.

Chapter 3 invites church members to be saturated in the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the gospel that saves us (Rom. 1:16), and it is the gospel that will sustain and motivate us in our daily Christian lives.

There is no way to listen expositively to the Scripture, to master its overarching narrative and themes, and to live a gospel-saturated life without also desiring and endeavoring to become a biblical evangelist. Chapters 4 and 5 offer some suggestions for thinking about conversion and evangelism in a biblically healthy way.

Chapter 6 is a call to make a serious and active commitment to membership in the local church. Then chapter 7 provides one reason why committed church membership is important: the local church is where Christians experience the shaping and correcting discipline of the Lord.

Chapter 8 examines spiritual growth from a biblical perspective, while chapter 9 includes some recommendations for effectively supporting the leadership of your local church.

Chapter 10 is a call to consider prayer an essential aspect of becoming and being a healthy church member. A brief discussion of the biblical basis of prayer is offered along with some suggested things for healthy church members to include in their prayer lives.

Each chapter also includes some recommended readings for further study. These are not the only things that make for a healthy church member; other things are important as well.

But I hope these stir us all to love and good deeds for the glory of Christ and the beauty of his bride.

O Sovereign Lord, we beseech you to bless your people with an unusual humility, unity, joy, peace, and care for one another. We pray that you would increasingly make all of your people spiritually healthy and fruitful, not only as individuals but as one body, one new man, laboring together to grow up into Christ, even the fullness of his stature. Bless the reading, hearing, and study of your word for the glory of your name. And, O Lord, be pleased to use even this little book in some way to advance your kingdom and beautify your bride. Father, we ask these things knowing that nothing is too hard for you, with the full assurance of faith, in Jesus' name. Amen.

A HEALTHY CHURCH MEMBER IS AN EXPOSITIONAL LISTENER

What is “expositional listening”? Before answering that question, we need to define “expositional preaching.” The first and most important mark of a healthy church is expositional preaching. “Expositional preaching is not simply producing a verbal commentary on some passage of Scripture. Rather, expositional preaching is that preaching which takes for the main point of a sermon the point of a particular passage of Scripture.”¹ If churches are to be healthy, then pastors and teachers must be committed to discovering the meaning of Scripture and allowing that meaning to drive the agenda with their congregations.

There is an important corollary for every member of a local church. Just as the pastor’s preaching agenda should be determined by the meaning of Scripture, so too should the Christian’s listening agenda be driven by the meaning of Scripture. When we listen to the preaching of the Word, we should not listen primarily for “practical how-to advice,” though Scripture teaches us much about everyday matters. Nor should we listen for messages that bolster our self-esteem or that rouse us to political and social causes. Rather, as mem-

bers of Christian churches we should listen primarily for the voice and message of God as revealed in his Word. We should listen to hear what he has written, in his omniscient love, for his glory and for our blessing.

So what exactly do I mean by “expositional listening”? Expositional listening is listening for the meaning of a passage of Scripture and accepting that meaning as the main idea to be grasped for our personal and corporate lives as Christians.

What Are the Benefits of Expositional Listening?

Expositional listening benefits us, first, by *cultivating a hunger for God’s Word*. As we tune our ears to the kind of preaching that makes the primary point of the sermon the primary point of a particular passage of Scripture, **we grow accustomed to listening to God.** We become fluent in the language of Zion and conversant with its themes. His Word, **his voice**, becomes sweet to us (Ps. 119:103–4); and as it does, we are better able to push to the background the many voices that rival God’s voice for control over our lives. Expositional listening gives us a clear ear with which to hear God.

The second benefit follows from the first. Expositional listening *helps us to focus on God’s will and to follow him*. Our agenda becomes secondary. The preacher’s agenda becomes secondary. God’s agenda for his people takes center stage, reorders our priorities, and directs us in the course that most honors him. The Lord himself proclaimed, “My sheep listen to my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). Listening to the voice of Jesus as it is heard in his Word is critical to following him.

Third, expository listening *protects the gospel and our lives from corruption*. The Scripture tells us “the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” (2 Tim. 4:3–4). The failure to listen expositively has disastrous effects. False teachers enter the church and hinder the gospel. Ultimately, the truth is displaced by myths and falsehoods. Where members cultivate the habit of expository listening they guard themselves against “itching ears” and protect the gospel from corruption.

The fourth benefit, then, is that expository listening *encourages faithful pastors*. Those men who serve faithfully in the ministry of the Word are worthy of double honor (1 Tim. 5:17). Few things are more discouraging or dishonoring to such men than a congregation inattentive to the Word of God. Faithful men flourish at the fertile reception of the preached Word. They’re made all the more bold when their people give ear to the Lord’s voice and give evidence of being shaped by it. As church members, we can care for our pastors and teachers and help to prevent unnecessary discouragement and fatigue by cultivating the habit of expository listening.

Fifth, expository listening *benefits the gathered congregation*. Repeatedly, the New Testament writers exhort local churches to be unified—to be of one mind. Paul writes to one local church, “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there may be no divisions among you, but that you may be united in the same mind and the same judgment” (1 Cor. 1:10; see also

Rom. 12:16; 2 Cor. 13:11; 1 Pet. 3:8). As we gather together in our local churches and give ourselves to hearing the voice of God through his preached Word, we're shaped into one body. We are united in understanding and purpose. And that unity testifies to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ (John 17:21). But if we listen with our own interests and agendas in mind, if we develop "private interpretations" and idiosyncratic views, we risk shattering that unity, provoking disputes over doubtful matters, and weakening our corporate gospel witness.

How Can Church Members Cultivate the Habit of Expositional Listening?

Well, if expositional listening is so vital to the health of individual church members and the church as a whole, how does a person form such a habit? At least six practical ideas can foster more attentive listening to God's word.

1) MEDITATE ON THE SERMON PASSAGE DURING YOUR QUIET TIME

Several days before the sermon is preached, ask the pastor what passage of Scripture he plans to preach the following Sunday. Encourage him by letting him know that you'll be praying for his preparation and preparing to listen to the sermon. Outline the text in your own daily devotions and use it to inform your prayer life. Learning to outline Scripture is a wonderful way of digging out and exposing the meaning of a passage. You can then use your outline as a listening aid; compare it to the preacher's outline for new insights you missed in your own study.

2) INVEST IN A GOOD SET OF COMMENTARIES

Add to your quiet times some of the greatest minds in Christian history. Study the Bible with John Calvin or Martin Lloyd-Jones by purchasing commentaries on books of the Bible as you read and study through them. If your pastor is preaching through John's Gospel, pick up D. A. Carson's or James Montgomery Boice's commentary on John. Let these scholars and pastors help you hear God's Word with a clear ear and discover its rich meaning. *The Bible Speaks Today* commentary series is an excellent starting place for those wanting to build a library of good commentaries. Also, you might want to purchase an Old Testament and New Testament commentary survey to help you sort through the range of commentary options available. Tremper Longman's *Old Testament Commentary Survey* and D. A. Carson's *New Testament Commentary Survey* are excellent resources.

3) TALK AND PRAY WITH FRIENDS ABOUT THE SERMON AFTER CHURCH

Instead of rushing off after the service is over, or talking about the latest news, develop the habit of talking about the sermon with people after church. Start spiritual conversations by asking, "How did the Scripture challenge or speak to you today?" Or, "What about God's character most surprised or encouraged you?" Encourage others by sharing things you learned about God and his Word during the sermon. Make particular note of how your thinking has changed because of the meaning of Scripture itself. And pray with others that God would keep the congregation from becoming "dull of hearing" and that he would bless the congregation with an

increasingly strong desire for the “solid food” of his Word (Isa. 6:9–10; Heb. 5:11–14).

4) LISTEN TO AND ACT ON THE SERMON THROUGHOUT THE WEEK

We can cultivate the habit of expositional listening by listening to the sermon throughout the week and then acting upon it. Don't let the Sunday sermon become a one-time event that fades from memory as soon as it is over (James 1:22–25). Choose one or two particular applications from the Scripture and prayerfully put them into practice over the coming week. If your church has an audio ministry or a website that posts recent summaries, take advantage of these opportunities to feed your soul with the click of a mouse. With your pastor's support, establish small groups that review and apply the sermons. Or, use the sermons and your notes as a resource in one-on-one discipleship relationships. I know of several families that have a regular sermon-review time as their Sunday evening family devotional. There are a hundred ways to keep the sermon alive in your spiritual life by reviewing God's Word throughout the week. Be creative. It's well worth the planning.

5) DEVELOP THE HABIT OF ADDRESSING ANY QUESTIONS ABOUT THE TEXT ITSELF

Jonathan Edwards resolved that he would never let a day end before he had answered any questions that troubled him or sprang to mind while he was studying the Scripture.² How healthy would our churches be if members dedicated themselves to studying the Scripture with that kind of intentional effort and resolve? One way to begin is to follow up with your

pastor, elders, or other teachers in the church about questions triggered by the text. Moreover, don't be passive in your private study; seek answers by searching the Scripture yourself and by talking with accountability partners or small groups. But don't forget that the pastor has likely spent more time than most in thinking about that passage and is there to feed you God's Word. Follow up the sermon with questions and comments that would be an encouragement to your pastor and a blessing to your soul.

6) CULTIVATE HUMILITY

As you dig into God's Word, listening for his voice, you will no doubt begin to grow and discover many wonderful treasures. But as you grow, do not become a "professional sermon listener" who is always hearing but never learning. Beware of false knowledge that "puffs up" (1 Cor. 1:8; Col. 2:18) and tends to cause strife and dissension. Mortify any tendencies toward pride, the condemnation of others, and critical nit-picking. Instead, seek to meet Jesus each time you come to the Scripture; gather from the Word fuel for all-of-life worship. Instead of exalting ourselves, let us remember the apostle Peter's words: "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time" (1 Pet. 5:6).

Conclusion

It is hearing the message and the Word of God that leads to saving faith (Rom.10:17). Church members are healthy when they give themselves to hearing this message as a regular discipline. Expository listening promotes such health for individual members and entire churches.

For Further Reflection

1. How would you rate your ability to listen for the meaning of the Word during private devotions? During sermons?
2. How do you plan to strengthen your listening ability?

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. If you're a Christian and you're *not* a member of a church, let me invite you to pick up a fabulous book written to help you think through why you should be a member. The book is called *Stop Dating the Church* by Joshua Harris (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004).

MARK 1: A HEALTHY CHRISTIAN IS AN EXPOSITIONAL LISTENER

1. Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 40.
2. Around age 19, Edwards penned the following resolution: "Resolved, When I think of any theorem in divinity to be solved, immediately to do what I can towards solving it, if circumstances do not hinder me." *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 1* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson), lxii.

MARK 2: A HEALTHY CHRISTIAN IS A BIBLICAL THEOLOGIAN

1. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 20th Anniversary Edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 12.
2. Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004). See chap. 2.
3. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 26–30.
4. *The New Dictionary of Biblical Theology: Exploring the Unity & Diversity of Scripture*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D. A. Carson, Graeme Goldsworthy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000).
5. Vaughn Roberts, *God's Big Picture: Tracing the Storyline of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003); Mark Strom, *The Symphony of Scripture: Making Sense of the Bible's Many Themes* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001); Peter Jensen, *At the Heart of the Universe: What Christians Believe* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003); Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002); Graeme Goldsworthy, *The Goldsworthy Trilogy: Gospel and Kingdom, Gospel and Wisdom, and The Gospel in Revelation* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster), 2001.