



## Marks of a Healthy Church

### Mark Eight: A Desire for Growth and Discipleship

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Let me start this morning by telling you about “Doug”. Doug came from a home where church attendance was pretty hit and miss—mostly a Christmas and Easter thing. As he got older, it’s not like he was an atheist or anything, he just didn’t see much point to church. When he was in university he hit some pretty rough times. Whether it was really that bad or not, Doug felt like he had reached the end of his rope. That’s when his roommate invited him to a Christian meeting on campus. Doug was pretty desperate and deep down he was thinking that maybe this would help.

After the meeting a couple of other students stayed behind with him and they got to talking. After a couple of hours Doug opened up and shared about his problems. He told them how out of control he felt and that nothing he did seemed to matter. And that’s when he did it. It happened in less than five minutes. One of the girls told him about the wonderful life he could have as a Christian and about the free gift he could have right now of forgiveness for everything he’d ever done wrong and how he could have eternal life with God when he died. It seemed like the best deal Doug had on his plate, plus it was pretty cool that this little group of students would sit there and listen to him and tell him these things.

Doug’s roommate pulled out a little booklet and pointed to a paragraph on the back. It was a prayer. He said, “Repeat after me.” And so Doug repeated each line after his roommate—reading them to God. He was praying. And that was that. The other kids excitedly told him he was a Christian now, because God promised that if anyone confesses his sins, God will forgive him. Doug was saved.

In the years that followed, Doug was a pretty good guy. By the time he was forty some people even thought of him as a pillar of the church. He went to a church where the preaching was exciting. The sermons were short, to the point, with lots of good stories and illustrations. Doug liked to listen—especially to the stories. But he had to

confess that if anyone asked, he really didn’t know the Bible. He’d be lost if you asked him to turn to Psalms or Romans. He couldn’t tell you why the Exodus was important or what Revelation was about. He had his own thoughts about God that he shared with people, but he didn’t get them from the Bible. They were just things he had heard or thought of himself.

He thought of the gospel as a pretty straightforward offer from God—to forgive our sins if we would just own up to them. He knew that Jesus and the cross were important, but he didn’t really have any idea why. Really, he thought of conversion kind of like the decision to buy a new car or house. It was big and even a little scary, but it was just something you had to do—everyone should get around to it sometime, and sooner would be better than later...because, well, you know, you never know.... As far as Doug was concerned, evangelism was something the pastor did. There was *one* time when he chaperoned the youth choir trip his son went on and he had to answer some questions one of the other kids asked about what baptism and church membership meant.

Actually, Doug had never joined the church, but most people probably didn’t know that. He went through times when he was pretty involved and might even be there almost every Sunday for a year or more, but there were other time went he disappeared for months at a time. Honestly, he liked it that way. He liked picking and choosing the things he wanted to do. To him, joining the church seemed kind of like writing a blank cheque. His daughter got really involved a few years earlier and before he knew what happened, she had signed on for a summer foreign missions trip. That was when he cut off all her church involvement and disappeared himself for almost a year. He wasn’t too worried about it. After all, he knew that, you know, “once saved, always saved,” and he knew he was saved because of that prayer he prayed all those years ago. *He* didn’t have anything to worry about.

Besides that was during the time when the church had the new priest he didn’t really like. He figured that priests come and go and he’d just wait this one out. Some of the new things this guy talked about bothered him. He wanted to give more money to missions. His sermons were longer. He encouraged people to study the Bible and thought doctrine was important. He talked about church discipline and to Doug that sounded scary and judgemental. Doug knew that priests don’t always last long, especially when he let it be known that he was avoiding church for a while because of the new priest.

Now would it surprise you if I told you that Doug wasn’t really growing as a Christian? And, more than that, that it didn’t really bother him that he wasn’t growing as a Christian? Now, Doug is someone I made up, but everything I said about Doug is based on something I’ve seen over and over again in people who claim to be Christians. Is Doug a Christian? Maybe...maybe not. It’s actually pretty hard to tell, isn’t it? He doesn’t seem very committed to following Jesus. He isn’t really doing anything to support his church. He’s not presenting a very good visible witness to the church in his community and since he doesn’t really have a clue as to what the gospel is, he certainly isn’t doing any evangelism to grow God’s kingdom. The sad thing is, brothers and sisters, that churches are full of people just like Doug and that’s how Satan wants it. Maybe someone who isn’t a Christian finds his way into a church, but that’s fine with Satan as long as that person is lulled into complacency and given a false assurance. And even if he does somehow find real, saving faith in Christ, it’s still not that big a blow to Satan’s kingdom as long as he doesn’t *grow* in the faith. The real danger is when Christians grow—and keep growing—because then they start doing other things like being salt and light and pretty soon, just like in the early Church, they start reaching out and making more Christians—more disciples who make more disciples who make more disciples. No, if Satan can lull us into complacency—if he can keep us in churches where the Word isn’t preached, where doctrine isn’t important, where evangelism and worship are perverted and man-centred, and where there’s no accountability and discipline—well, that’s just *fine* with him.

But brothers and sisters, it’s not fine with God. God expects us to grow. Consider the first three verses of Psalm 1:

**Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.**

I love that imagery of the tree planted by streams of water. If God is our source of nourishment, we can’t help but grow. If we aren’t growing, we aren’t planted where we should be. Really, if we’re not growing, we have to ask if we’re even alive. Things that are alive grow. If something isn’t growing, it’s usually because it’s dead. And yet it’s

not just personal growth that God expects from us. His kingdom will grow too. The Old Testament prophesied over and over that God's kingdom would grow and Jesus teaches us that it will too. At Christmas every year we're reminded of Isaiah 9:7, in which God promised that the Messiah's kingdom would grow:

**Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.**

Jesus himself tells us how his kingdom will grow in fulfilment of this prophecy. He says it will grow from the smallest seed to the largest plant: "It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches" (Matthew 13:32).

Jesus established his kingdom through his death, resurrection, and ascension and sent his Spirit to empower it. These are some of the things we read about it in Acts:

**Now in these days when the disciples were increasing...And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.** (Acts 6:1,7)

**But the word of God increased and multiplied.** (Acts 12:24)

**And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region.** (Acts 13:49)

**So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.** (Acts 19:20)

But notice that it's not just numerical growth. Just because we have more people in our church than we did a few years ago doesn't necessarily mean we're healthy. In the New Testament growth is more than just people—it's people who are growing up, maturing, and deepening in the faith. Look at Ephesians 4:15-16:

**Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly,**

**makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.**

How does this kind of growth happen? Ultimately, it happens by God's work. We grow as the body of Christ as God causes growth. In Colossians 2:19 we read about Christ "the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God."

It's not the preacher or the Bible study leader or any other person who causes a church to grow. God may use a preacher or a particular ministry, but that's up to him. St. Paul wrote about this to the Corinthians. They were putting certain eloquent preachers on a pedestal, so Paul reminded them saying, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth" (1 Corinthians 3:6-7).

In writing that, Paul was being a good disciple of Jesus. Jesus himself taught that the growth of his kingdom comes from God and doesn't ultimately rest with us. Jesus told the story in Mark 4 about the kingdom of God being like a crop growing in a field, that grows while the farmer sleeps; whether the farmer gets up or not, the crop keeps growing. Jesus' point isn't that we should be lazy, but that the growth of the kingdom doesn't finally depend on us. God himself is committed to making sure his Church grows. "Night and day, whether he [the farmer] sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how" (Mark 4:27). God causes the growth.

This is why when St. Paul writes to the Thessalonians, he doesn't so much congratulate them on their growth but thanks God for it. Growth shouldn't produce pride. Growth should cause humility as we recognise that it's God who has made it happen. Look at 2 Thessalonians 1:3:

**We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing.**

This is why when Paul wants a congregation to grow, one of the things he does is to pray for them. He realises that growth comes from God. Flip back to 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13 and look at what he prays there:

**Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your**

**love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.**

He offers a similar pray in Colossians 1:10:

**And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God.**

Now none of this is to say that we have nothing to do with our growth. In 2 Peter 3:18, St. Peter wraps up his epistle with an exhortation to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." It's an imperative. He says, "Grow!"

We should *want* to grow spiritually, but how do we do it? Look at 2 Peter 1:8:

**For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

Now what are those qualities? Look back at verses 5-7:

**For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

We grow by cultivating these things. In 1 Peter 2:2-5, St. Peter emphasises the importance of knowing God's Word. If you want to grow, he says to do this:

**Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good. As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.**

Over the course of this series I've laid out, up to this point, seven marks of a healthy church and it's as we're faithful to these marks that we should be growing the way God calls us to. If we're committed to the expositional preaching of God's Word we can trust that God's Word will not only create his people, but will bring growth. Sound biblical theology—our understanding of God: who he is, how he operates, and what he expects of us— will keep us on the right track as we grow. A biblical understanding of the Gospel, of conversion, and of evangelism will cause make us disciple-making disciples. And a biblical understanding of church membership and faithfulness in church discipline will offer not only the positive and formative growth we need, but also the accountability and correction we need when we stray off the track.

Scripture lays all these things out for us because our growth is important. It's how we give testimony to God. When people see a church full of people growing in Christlikeness, who gets the credit? Scripture says that "God made it grow." And as St. Peter tells us, "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Peter 2:12 NIV). Working to build Christian discipleship is working to bring glory not to ourselves but to God. Our faithfulness and growth is how God makes himself known in the world. And so a healthy church will have a passionate concern for growth—not just numbers, but growing members. A healthy church knows that the spiritual growth of her members is not an optional extra to add onto salvation. Remember: Growth is a sign of life. Growing things are living things. When something stops growing, it dies.

Jonathan Edwards made some very wise observations in his *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*. He'd seen "awakenings" and "revivals" come and go and noticed that true growth in Christian discipleship isn't finally just excitement, increasing use of religious language, or even a greater knowledge of Scripture. It's not even an evident increase in joy or in love or concern for the church. Even increases in zeal and praise of God and confidence of one's own faith are not sure evidences of real Christian growth. While all these things may be evidence of true growth, the only certain observable sign of true growth is a life of increasing holiness, rooted in Christian self-denial. Brothers and sisters, the church needs to be marked by a vital

concern for this kind of increasingly godliness in the lives of her members.

The wonderful thing is that good influences in a covenanted community of believers can be God's tools for growing his people. As God's people are built up and grow together in holiness and self-giving love, they will improve in their ability to administer discipline and to encourage discipleship. The church has an obligation to be the means by which God grows his people in grace. If instead our church is a place where only the preacher's thoughts are taught, where God is questioned more than he's worshipped and obeyed, where the Gospel is diluted and evangelism perverted, where church membership is made meaningless, we'll hardly be able to expect this to be a growing community that either holds us together or edifies. We certainly won't be glorifying God. St. Peter's final benediction to those early Christians was not just a prayer; it was an imperative: "*Grow* in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen" (2 Peter 3:18).

I think that of all these "marks" this is the place where we see our failures most profoundly. We fail here because we've failed in the other areas, but even when we're faithful in the other areas, discipleship and growth are still a challenge. In every church there are people who hardly ever attend and who aren't involved. There are nice people who live moral lives; but then there are some who seem to especially to love the Lord, and they usually stick out from the rest of us—they're different from the rest of the church. They stick out from people like Doug. Remember Doug? Why hasn't he grown? Maybe he never really was a Christian.

Some might say, "Well, that's harsh. Maybe Doug's one of those "carnal" Christians that St. Paul talks about." Well, Paul does write about the "carnal Christian." In 1 Corinthians 3:1 he writes, "But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh ["carnal" in the King James], as infants in Christ." But who are these people? Is there a sort of middle category of people in the Church? They're Christians by the skin of their teeth? They believe in Jesus as Saviour, but they haven't made him their Lord? That should sound like a pretty messed up idea. On the one hand we have Christians who have Christ as Lord—Jesus on the throne. Then on the other side you have non-Christians. But then some will say, there's this middle group

too, where Christ is really in the person's life but not on the throne. These are the "carnal" or "worldly" or "fleshly" Christians. We could read 1 Corinthians 3:1 that way.

But it's far more natural to understand that what Paul's doing here is shaming the Corinthians by writing about these self-confessed Christians as worldly. In calling them "worldly" or "carnal," Paul is intentionally using an oxymoron—a combination of two words that are mutually contradictory. In that sense, a carnal Christian would be like hot ice. It's not supposed to make any sense. What Paul's really saying is, "Get off the fence! You are living differently than you are professing. Your walk doesn't match your talk. You can't do that. You're trying to ride two horses going in opposite directions—so pick *one!*"

Lots of people have twisted this verse and convinced themselves that they are some kind of truly saved person—some kind of real Christian—even though they've never really repented or believed—even though they've never truly made Jesus their Lord and Master. It's no wonder that the lives of so many self-professing Christians are such a mess.

Brothers and sisters, consider what it means to be a Christian. It's not that your perfect, but that your greatest desire is to seek the Lord—to be obedient to him and to do what you know pleases him. If you are a Christian, it's because God, by his own gracious action in your life has grown a desire in you to live a life that pleases him more and more. That growth is the most telling sign of true spiritual life and is something that we should be wanting to mark our church.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, thank you for establishing faith in the Lord Jesus in the hearts of your children. But Father according to your riches in glory, we ask you to strengthen us with your Spirit as you have promised to do, that Christ would live in our hearts and that being rooted and grounded in his love, we might be always so growing in obedience and holiness and in love for you and for each other that we might make your Gospel known to the whole world. We ask this in his name. Amen.

*(Note: This sermon series has been adapted from Mark Dever's book, "Nine Marks of a Healthy Church, Crossway, 2004.)*