



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

Marks of a Healthy Church Mark Nine: Biblical Discipleship

Fr. William Klock

November 13, 2022

I grew up where white oaks grew everywhere, but here they're relatively uncommon. The Comox Valley is right on the northern edge of their native growth zone. Apparently, in the latter half of the 19th Century the climate here was more ideal for them. Acorns that fell to good soil had a pretty good chance of becoming trees. Now the climate's changed and getting those acorns to turn into trees is much more complicated. Every year—except this year!—the oaks around the church here drop their acorns and time and again I've tried to grow trees from them. I've never had any success. But trying to grow acorns into trees has a lot in common with the subject of discipleship and that's the last mark of a healthy church to be covered. Brothers and Sisters, a healthy church will have a concern for discipleship, for its members to grow in the faith. But back to my attempts to grow oak trees. The first year I was here I gathered several handfuls of acorns on a Sunday morning. I left them on my desk, figuring I'd do something with them later. I was gone for a few days and came back to discover little worms crawling all over the place, building little cocoon-like webs around my lamp and between my books. I tossed them all in the garbage. The next year I did a little research—emphasis, I suppose, on *little*—and put the acorns I'd collected in damp potting soil in the refrigerator. I took them out in the spring only to find the potting soil full of little dead worms and rotten acorns. A few years later I researched how to collect acorns and how to sort out the good ones that the worms hadn't got to yet. I put them in the refrigerator over the winter and in the spring I planted them in little plastic cups to sprout. And sprout they did. But they were outside, there was a late

freeze, and they all died. I had better luck the next year. They sprouted in the little cups, then I transferred them into gallon pots. They grew for a while, then stopped. I did more research and found it was because the little cups and then the gallon pots had caused the roots to curl up into a ball. Oak trees need to start with a long, straight tap root. Instead of using small cups and then gallon pots, I should have planted them in 2' lengths of PVC pipe and then transplanted them into the ground when the roots emerged from the bottom. I did transplant several, but none survived the winter. At that point I decided it was too complicated. But that was, I think, the most success I'd ever had with growing anything from seeds. Usually, I plant seeds at the wrong time of year, or I forget to water them, or I water them too much, or the rabbits come and nibble away the stalks when they emerge. It takes the right conditions for plants to grow. They need sunlight and water and oxygen. They need to be given the proper space to grow. They need the right temperature. And they need to be protected from the critters that eat them. But given those things, they grow, because that's what God made them to do.

God's people aren't all that different. Listen to 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.**

This was written in the context of the old covenant so we might change it a little bit here and there, but it's basically true for the Christian. Plant yourself in God's word—which is itself an act of faith and obedience—and steer clear of wickedness, sin, and the ungodly, and the Spirit will cause you to grow. God

gives us means of grace: his word, his Spirit, his sacraments, his Church, and they are to us what sunlight and water are plants.

We're like plants in other ways, too. Things that are alive grow. We were once dead, but God has grafted us into his Son, he's filled us with his Spirit, and we grow. Jesus says, "I am the vine; you are the branches." Live vines grow, don't they? So should Jesus' people—and not just individually. Together we're this vine called the Church. We grow together, rooted in Jesus, and supporting each other. St. Paul, in Romans 8, describes the growth that God gives his people as being "conformed to the image of his Son". Or, as he writes in 1 Corinthians 3:18:

We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

God has made us alive and living things grow. And growth is essential. Think of our study of Revelation and Jesus' repeated exhortations to his people there to persevere in faith and holiness in the face of persecution and even martyrdom. Brothers and Sisters, that kind of perseverance not only requires life, but it also requires growth. Think of a salmon. It spends its life in the ocean, growing and building strength so that it can return to the river where it was born, wage a vigorous battle upstream, fighting the current all the way, so that it can spawn and reproduce itself, creating the next generation. God's people aren't all that different. The salmon remind me of the well-known quote from Nikolaus von Zinzendorf: "Preach the gospel, die, and be forgotten." We grow strong over time on God's grace by word, by sacrament, by prayer, by fellowship and we persevere, fighting against the currents of the world. We raise our own children to do the same and we proclaim the good news about Jesus, we witness his kingdom, and by that the Spirit raises up the next generation to continue the battle. If we have produced a new generation of disciples, Brothers and Sisters, we have done well. But take

away the means of grace, and we die before the mission is ever accomplished. Some years ago I went to an ecumenical clergy breakfast at the hospital. They had a morning prayer service led by some liberal Presbyterians. Another pastor said to me afterward, “What was that?” They prayed and they sang, but it all felt utterly dead and completely disconnected from God. The feeling was palpable to many of us there and it made sense. It was sad, but it made sense. These were folks who had given up on the authority of God’s word and, like dead salmon, were floating downstream—floating with the world’s currents, wherever they might lead.

And that highlights the importance of discipleship. Our growth as disciples, our growth into Christ’s likeness, our growth in the fruit of the Spirit and in holiness is essential—and a healthy church will have a healthy concern for it. Living things grow. Living things fight the current. Dead things don’t. And so Paul writes to the Ephesians:

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. (Ephesians 4:15-16)

If we will lean on God and immerse ourselves in the means of grace he has given, he will grow us. To quote Paul again, this time as he wrote to the Colossians: Jesus is “the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God” (Colossians 2:19).

Notice: Jesus is the head. We don’t cause the growth. The best preacher or the best Bible study leader in the world cannot grow Christians. Only God’s word and Spirit can do that. Paul again to the Corinthians, “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 Corinthian 3:6-7). Even

when Paul congratulates the Thessalonian Christians on their growth, he gives the thanks to God for it. Look at 2 Thessalonians 1:3:

We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.

And knowing that it is God who grows his people, Paul prayed for them to grow. For the Thessalonians he prayed:

May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else....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. (1 Thessalonians 3:11-13)

He prays similarly for the Colossian Christians:

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. (Colossians 1:10)

Or let’s flip over to 2 Peter and hear what he has to say. Here’s 2 Peter 1:5-8:

For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And if we flip back to Peter’s first epistle, in 2:2-5, he writes this:

Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. As

you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Brothers and Sisters, our growth in the Lord, our growth in faith, our growth in holiness ought to be a priority—for each of us individually, but also collectively as the Church. As the writer of Hebrews tells us, “Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works” (Hebrews 10:24). Christian growth, discipleship, whatever we want to call it, will always be a priority for a healthy church.

Now, in case I haven’t been clear, Christian growth—and, again, by that I mean discipleship or Christian maturity—that is not the same thing as Church growth, by which I mean the numerical growth of the Church in general or of the local church. Our age has developed an obsession with the latter, and while we don’t usually outright ignore discipleship, we often inadvertently sacrifice it for the sake of church growth. We put the cart before the horse. And, sometimes as I’ve said before, we confuse the things that are our responsibility with the things that are God’s. Discipleship—the growth and maturing of God’s people—needs to come first. That doesn’t mean we sideline missions and evangelism until we’re all mature. It just means that we trust God to do his part while we do ours. When we prioritise evangelism and mission, we usually end up compromising the very things that are needed to grow God’s people—like tree-planters who want a huge forest and plant a ton of trees, but don’t properly prepare the soil, or neglect to water them. When we put evangelism or missions first, we often downplay things like expositional preaching, a biblical understanding of the gospel and of conversion, we downplay the need for commitment and discipline—because we want to see bigger numbers and these other things have a tendency to scare people away. If you plant oak

trees, they will make more oak trees if you plant them and care for them properly in the first place. If you just poke a ton of acorns into the ground—at least around here—you’ll end up with very few full-grown trees capable of reproducing themselves. But that’s often how Christians do things these days. Friends, real Christians who truly know the love, the grace, the mercy of God revealed in Jesus will enthusiastically proclaim that good news and, with the help of the Spirit, make new Christians—but we’ll do it God’s way and trusting him to bring the fruit. It’s relatively easy to fill a church with people; it’s a lot more work to fill it with actual disciples, but that’s what we’ve got to do, because only true disciples will go out and make more disciples. This is why understanding these marks of a healthy church is important.

And all these other marks we’ve looked at over the last two months will grow disciples. To briefly recap:

A healthy church will have a commitment to expositional preaching, whether that’s preaching the lectionary or preaching through whole books or parts of books. The point is that such a church’s preaching will be rooted in God’s word. The preacher’s agenda will be God’s agenda. The words and ideas preached will not be the preacher’s, but God’s. There will always be parts of the Bible that Christians would rather avoid, but expositional preaching challenges the preacher and the church to hear those hard things, to wrestle with them, and to be obedient to them. Brothers and Sisters, my thoughts will not give you life. Only God’s word can do that. And that’s what we must preach.

An expositional ministry in the pulpit also establishes where our values lie. A people who value Bible-centred preaching is more likely to be a people who are themselves Bible-centred—who invest time in reading and study and praying the scriptures themselves and who gather together to read, and study, and pray them. And we do this knowing that God’s word give life. It’s the raw material the Spirit works with to grow us in faith, in obedience, and in holiness.

Preaching grounded in the Bible will give a church biblical theology. It will bring us closer to the God who has saved us, because it ever more reveals who he is. Biblical theology also reveals who we are and what God wants for us. Biblical theology tells us the story into which God has called us. Biblical theology causes us to grow in our love for God, our love for each other, it causes us to grow in holiness, and it gives us our mission—to proclaim the good news about Jesus and to make disciples.

Biblical preaching and biblical theology will lead us to a right and biblical understanding of the gospel—of the good news about Jesus, crucified, risen, and ascended. A biblical understanding of the gospel reminds us that human being stand before God as rebellious sinners condemned to death, but it also reveals God’s loving faithfulness at the cross, and as we look on the risen Messiah we are reminded that by faith, that God has redeemed us and made us his own sons and daughters. A biblical understanding of the gospel reveals the sinfulness of sin and the amazing graciousness of grace, it teaches our hearts and minds to love the one who sacrificed himself for our sake, and it drives us out those doors in to the world to proclaim what he has done.

A biblical understanding of the gospel, like these other things, lies at the root of discipleship. Getting the gospel wrong undermines everything else. If, for example, we confuse the gospel with messages of prosperity, we will never understand the meaning of sacrifice. We will never understand God’s discipline. When life is difficult or persecution comes to the Church, the prosperity gospel will turn out to be rocky soil and those planted in it will wither and die, while those who have put roots deep into the soil of the biblical gospel will thrive in the midst of trials. There are many false gospels. Many confuse good works for the gospel, many today are preaching self-love or self-esteem or self-actualisation as the gospel. None of those messages will save and none will make disciples

of Jesus who will persevere hardship and make new disciples of Jesus who will carry on the mission Jesus has given us.

A biblical understanding of the gospel will ensure that we have a biblical understanding of conversion and as we understand conversion, we’ll understand that to be a Christian is to be transformed by God’s word and Spirit. It’s to understand that the change that takes place in our lives is the fruit of God’s grace at work in us. A biblical understanding of conversion will make us a humble people, not proud of our works, but a people ever more reliant on the grace of God. And the more we rest in his grace, the more he will continue to grow us.

A biblical understanding of evangelism ensures we know what a Christian actually is. Mark Dever makes this observation, “The lack of spiritual growth in people who call themselves Christians is often an evidence that they have been wrongly evangelized. We have taught people who are not Christians to think of themselves as though they are...The church is not finally a booster organization. We’re telling people a serious message about their condition before God, and about the tremendous news of the new life God is offering them in Christ. And we’re inviting them to enter into that life by dire and desperate means—repentance and faith.”¹ Too often we throw acorns on the ground and call them trees. We not only ignore the hard work needed to make them grow, but we’re too ready to call them trees when there’s no evidence of transformation and growth. Filling pews isn’t the same as making disciples, but it’s a lot easier to do the former than the latter. In a culture obsessed with numbers-based success, it’s easy to just count noses and pat ourselves on the back. But a biblical understanding of the gospel, of conversion, and of evangelism will ensure we’re *actually* making disciples. It also ought to prompt *us* to be growing as disciples ourselves, because you can’t

¹ *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004), 209.

make disciples if you aren't one yourself.

A biblical understanding of church membership, which is rooted in God's sacraments is also essential to discipleship. The sacraments remind us that we are God's people. We have taken hold of his promise by faith in our baptism and we come each Sunday to the Lord's Table, where we participate again in the death and resurrection of Jesus. God renews his covenant with us. That not only strengthens our faith and renews our hope, but in reminding us that we are his covenant people, it reminds us of God's faithfulness to us and of the obligations covenant membership has for us. Biblical church membership reminds us of our commitment to God—just as it reminds us of his commitment to us. And it commits us to one another, to walk with each other, to exhort and rebuke each other, to experience joy and sorrow with each other, to love and to forgive each other.

Biblical church membership leads to biblical church discipline, without which we have little accountability to grow as disciples of Jesus. God has made us his people that we might give him glory and cause the nations to give him glory as they see our witness. Church discipline holds us accountable to that mission and keeps us faithful witnesses.

And, finally, biblical worship that is centred in word and sacrament brings all these things together as it gathers the people of God together to hear him speak, to be reminded of his covenant grace, and ultimately to give him glory in response. All of these marks send us out into the world to be the people God has called us to be, to do the work he's given us, to be salt and light and to proclaim the good news about Jesus, but all these marks also draw us back together in corporate worship so that we can be refreshed and refilled, so that we can be reminded once again of what God has done for us in Jesus, and—most of all—so that together we can give him glory and have our faith and hope renewed. And then we go back into the

world again to do and to be the people Jesus has made us.

And that's the note I want to end on. A healthy church tells the story of God and his people, draws us in, and makes each of us integral parts of it. A healthy church binds us closely to Jesus and to each other so that we can accomplish the mission he has given us. Let me close with a quote from Tom Wright's little book, *Simply Christian*.

“According to the early Christians, the church doesn't exist in order to provide a place where people can pursue their private spiritual agendas and develop their own spiritual potential. Nor does it exist in order to provide a safe haven in which people can hide from the wicked world and ensure that they themselves arrive safely at an otherworldly destination. Private spiritual growth and ultimate salvation come rather as the byproducts of the main, central, overarching purpose for which God has called and is calling us. This purpose is clearly stated in various places in the New Testament: that through the church God will announce to the wider world that he is indeed its wise, loving, and just creator; that through Jesus he has defeated the powers that corrupt and enslave it; and that by his Spirit he is at work to heal and renew it.

The church exists, in other words, for what we sometimes call 'mission': to announce to the world that Jesus is its Lord. This is the 'good news,' and when it's announced it transforms people and societies. Mission, in its widest as well as its more focused senses, is what the church is there for. God intends to put the world to rights; he has dramatically launched this project through Jesus. Those who belong to Jesus are called, here and now, in the power of the Spirit, to be agents of that putting-to-rights purpose. The word 'mission' comes from the Latin for 'send': 'As the father sent me,' said Jesus after his resurrection, 'so I am sending you' (John 20:21).”²

Let's pray: Almighty Father, when we rebelled against you and corrupted your creation, you could have destroyed us and wiped us from its face, but instead you set forth to make yourself known to a people who had forgotten you and to restore us to your presence. You established a people to be your light in the midst of the darkness, and you gave your own Son to humble himself as he became one of us and lived and died and lived again to give life to this people—to us, to your Church. Keep us faithful to you, to what you have made us, and to the mission you have given us, we pray. Grow us by your word and fill us with your Spirit. Give us the grace to persevere and courage to proclaim your good news. Make us good stewards of your grace and cause our labours to bear fruit and your kingdom to grow so that you are glorified. Through Jesus we pray. Amen.

² *Simply Christian* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), epub edition.