

HOW TO BUILD A HEALTHY CHURCH

*A Practical Guide for
Deliberate Leadership*



MARK DEVER & PAUL ALEXANDER

Foreword by D. A. Carson

“In the year 2000, I attended a weekender at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC. During our time there, Mark Dever allowed us to observe how they did church and invited us to ask questions. Everything the elders and the church did was intentional, and everything we observed was rooted in biblical convictions about what a church is and does. The Lord used that weekend to shape my understanding of what a healthy, biblical church might look like. What you hold in your hands is very much like a ‘weekender’ in book form. But make no mistake. This is not a ‘how-to’ book in the ordinary sense of that term. Instead, it is a ‘why-to’ book. In it, Dever and Paul Alexander argue that because the church is God’s idea, we must order it according to his word. Our God determined church health, and he has revealed in his word how to pursue it. So read this book, consider what a church is, then deliberately lead your church toward that end for the glory of God.”

Juan Sanchez, Assistant Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“*How to Build a Healthy Church* is as simple as it is biblical. At the heart of the message is the presupposition that the Christian life is to be deliberately lived out in the community of a church family under the oversight of elders. Dever and Alexander provide no quick fixes, no new revelations; they simply call us to ordinary and consistent biblical Christianity.”

Chopo Mwanza, Pastor, Faith Baptist Church Riverside, Kitwe, Zambia

“Here is one of the most faithful and insightful pastors of our time addressing the most crucial issues of church life. Mark Dever refuses to separate theology and congregational life, combining pastoral insight with clear biblical teaching. This book is a powerful antidote to the merely pragmatic approaches of our day—and a refutation to those who argue that theology just isn’t practical.”

R. Albert Mohler Jr., President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“This book is the perfect example of what a truly practical book on church health and growth should be: it gives concrete guidance for and examples of biblical principles being put into practice in the life and ministry of the local congregation.”

J. Ligon Duncan III, Chancellor and CEO, Reformed Theological Seminary

“*How to Build a Healthy Church* shares many of the ministry lessons that Dever and his colleagues have learned from Scripture and sought to implement in the life of their church community. This book is for anyone who wants to get serious about following the biblical pattern for the church and is looking for down-to-earth practical help.”

Philip Graham Ryken, President, Wheaton College

“Here is a novel idea: use the Bible as a handbook to gather and guide the church! And *How to Build a Healthy Church* is a novel volume indeed, standing amid the spate of ‘church-as-corporation, pastor-as-CEO’ manuals that glut church life. Here is a book that wafts a radical, refreshing breeze from the pages of Scripture that will breathe life into the church. A crucial read.”

R. Kent Hughes, Senior Pastor Emeritus, College Church, Wheaton, Illinois

How to Build a Healthy Church

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How to Build a Healthy Church

A Practical Guide for Deliberate Leadership

Mark Dever and Paul Alexander

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To Connie and Laurie
Our partners in life, love, and ministry

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Foreword

ONE OF THE STRANGEST DICHOTOMIES in contemporary evangelicalism contrasts theology with practical savvy. Many practitioners boast how little theology they know and amply demonstrate the warrant for their boast, while forcefully advocating a wide array of practical steps to foster church growth and discipleship. In response, many pastors and theologians bemoan the weightlessness of so much of contemporary evangelicalism and advocate a sober return to Scripture and a broad grasp of biblical theology. The former group often leaves the Bible behind, except in remarkably superficial ways: nothing challenges the hegemony of their methods. But the latter group, whose theology may be as orthodox as that of the apostle Paul, sometimes gives the impression that once you know a lot of the Bible and have read a lot of theology, everything will work out smilingly—as if there were no need for the practical advice of pastors who are no less committed to theology than they, but who are equally reflective on steps that must be taken, priorities, pastoral strategies, and the like.

A few years ago, Mark Dever gave us *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (soon to be in its fourth edition). Despite the feel of the title, this book was far removed from the kind of pop sociological analysis and managerial assessment with which we are often barraged. It was a book deeply embedded in biblical theology. Many pastors and churches have benefited from the faithfulness of its probing reflection. But suppose

you live and serve in a local church that is far removed from the healthy profile developed in *Nine Marks*: What then? How do we get from here to there? Talking about those nine marks, and thinking through the biblical texts that warrant them, surely constitute part of the response. Nevertheless, the book you hold in your hands goes beyond that simplification to help pastors and other leaders guide a church toward spiritual health and growth. Once again, this book, jointly written by Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, is steeped in Scripture—but it is also chock-full of wisdom, years of pastoral experience, and godly insight. No pastor who is struggling “to get from here to there” should overlook this slender but invaluable volume.

D. A. Carson
Emeritus Professor of New Testament
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Mark's Preface

PAUL ALEXANDER REALLY WROTE THIS BOOK. We talked about the project for a while, and then, after some weeks, a few chapters turned up on my desk. Wow! I've not had quite this experience before. "Paul's written a book," I thought. "Why is my name on it?"

Then I started reading it, and I thought, "Hey, I've said that! That's how I put it! That's my story." And I realized what Paul had done. Paul took things that I've taught and written, things he's heard me say many times and questions he's heard me answer from visiting pastors, and he added his gifts of time, organization, clear writing and thinking ability—along with some of his own ministry experiences—and he produced the first draft of this book.

Paul and I had talked about all the things that should go in a book like this. We made sure that every question about the church that I seem to hear again and again was addressed—at least every question that we had anything helpful to say about. We worked together on the outline and the issues to be covered.

This book was actually my wife's idea. And it came about from her hearing the same questions asked again and again by visiting pastors, and me giving the same answers. I can't say that any wisdom represented in this book is particularly profound, but, by God's grace, it does seem to have been helpful to a number of ministers.

For the first edition of this book, we were initially thinking about calling it *Bodybuilding*, but there were simply too many debates among

the staff members about who would be on the cover! So we settled for the title *The Deliberate Church*. We try to be intentional and thoughtful about what we do, because we realize that we are involved in the greatest task on earth—the building up of the body of Christ for his honor and glory. For this second edition, the publishers suggested a change in the title to make it more obviously related to *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, so we changed it to *How to Build a Healthy Church*.

If you've read other books that I've published about the church, you'll realize that this is the practical conclusion of a trilogy. The initial book, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*,¹ is my simple diagnosis of what ails great tracts of American evangelical churches today, along with the suggested biblical treatments. It is the most general and basic book. The middle phase of the project was the publication of *Polity*,² followed by some of its practical conclusions for modern churches in my book *Understanding Church Leadership*.³ In these works I explored further issues of membership, discipline, and polity, and gave some practical applications. But it's in this present volume that Paul and I try to lay out some bottom-shelf "best practices" or "tips" for living out the ecclesiology represented in these other books. A theological synthesis can be found in my book *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible*.⁴

Special thanks go to my wife for suggesting this book, to Paul Alexander for putting so many hours in writing and cheerfully rewriting it, and to the good supporters of 9Marks for helping to make it possible. Paul is a talented and gifted writer. The elders and staff members here at the Capitol Hill Baptist Church have been wonderful teachers to me of much that we have shared with you in this book.

This book is meant to encourage you. We know we don't do everything correctly, and that some of our friends may be persuaded differently by Scripture on a few of the matters we're thinking about in this book, particularly church polity and the ordinances. On these matters, we simply invite you to consider the Word afresh with us and to be convinced in your own mind. We're always trying to learn from others

as well. So by the time you read this, we may have already changed or modified some of the practices you see here. But we've found them helpful in living out the Bible's teaching about the church, and we hope that you may find them so as well. We hope we can instruct you, and even where we fail to instruct, we pray that we can provoke you so that you, too, will see your way to helping your church to live out the gospel more faithfully together.

It is to that end that all of us have labored, and it is to that end that I pray you will read and act.

Paul's Preface

MARK DEVER REALLY WROTE THIS BOOK. The words are mine, but they're mostly Mark's ideas; I've just put them on paper.

I first heard about Mark while I was doing graduate work at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, to prepare for the pastorate. I read his book, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, for a pastoral duties class, and a professor of mine there, Mike Bullmore, encouraged me to take advantage of the internship program at Mark's church. I decided to think about his suggestion for a few weeks. When I had the rare occasion to call Dr. Bullmore at his home to clarify a detail, he asked me if I had gotten my application in for the internship at Capitol Hill Baptist. I said, "No, not quite yet." He responded with words I'll never forget: "Paul, pursue that with vigor." He didn't have to tell me twice. I turned in the application by the end of that week.

I met Mark for the first time in September of 2002 when I visited Capitol Hill Baptist on a 9Marks Weekender—a long weekend at the church that he serves in Washington, DC, designed to give pastors and seminary students a behind-the-scenes look at how a healthy church is led.¹ It only confirmed my desire to come and learn more. So I finished my classwork at Trinity that same semester and in January of 2003 started the internship program at CHBC.

It was more like an internship on steroids. My program at Trinity required four hundred hours of internship experience; the CHBC

internship was eleven hundred-plus! I sat in on every elders' meeting; attended every corporate gathering of the church; read ten books on the church and wrote five response papers every week; met with Mark once a week for three hours with five other interns to discuss issues that touch the theology, leadership, and corporate life of the church; accompanied the pastors to almost every meeting they attended; and observed a model of evangelistic expository preaching that I had never seen. Those six months changed my life; they changed my understanding of what it means to be a pastor and to shepherd a church faithfully. It felt as if I had been catapulted twenty years ahead in my understanding of how biblical theology governs the life and leadership of the local church.

In God's kind providence, those months changed my life in another way, too: I met my lovely wife during those days—not surprisingly, a member of the church.

I stayed on with 9Marks as a contributing editor and continued attending the church, and God allowed me to soak even more deeply in the principles and practices that cultivate health and holiness in the local church. He also gave me the privilege of working shoulder to shoulder with a few good men, including Mark, the most faithful pastor I have ever met; and Matt Schmucker, the then director of 9Marks and the greatest boss and church administrator the world will ever know!

I'm deeply grateful to be a part of this project, and even more grateful for the opportunity to work with these brothers. They have been God's instruments in the continued formation of my personal character and pastoral understanding, and I know I would not be the man I am today without their patient instruction and faithful friendship.

The ideas represented in this book have reshaped my own understanding of what it means to be a faithful pastor. I pray they'll do the same for you, and that your church will become increasingly healthy as a result. *Soli Deo gloria.*

A Note to the Reader

WHY DID YOU TAKE THIS BOOK off the shelf? What caught your attention? Come on, be honest. Were you intrigued by the cover design? Did you read the endorsements on the back? Maybe you just picked it up because you like to stay current with the latest stuff out there on church growth and ministry models.

Or maybe the reason was deeper. Maybe you're a pastor who's been at it for a long time and you're discouraged by the lack of growth in your church. "What am I missing? Why am I not being as effective as the pastor down the road?" Maybe you picked it up because you're tired of not being "successful" in ministry—the fish aren't biting, so why not change the bait?

On the other hand, you might be a young-buck church planter who's looking to make an impact for the kingdom. Maybe you're tired of looking at a new world through old glasses and want to push the envelope—innovate, get creative, experiment with some new methods, try some crazy ideas, find out what really makes people tick in a post-everything generation.

Then again, maybe you've invested the last five years of your life trying to implement the latest church growth model and it didn't work. Maybe you're reading because you're disillusioned with the failure of a model that seemed promising and produced amazing results elsewhere. So now you're on to the next thing—what we call the *deliberate* church.

Maybe your interest was piqued by the possibility of a new way of doing church that might breathe fresh life into your congregation. Maybe you're reading it because it might be the next big wave in church ministry that could spark explosive growth in your church and light a fire in your community. Or perhaps you've just found yourself feeling a little outdated—a light blue leisure suit in a Bloomingdale's world—so you've come into the Christian bookstore to update the ministry wardrobe. Search your heart—why did you open this book? What are you looking for?

Before you start reading in earnest, let us clarify what this book is not, just for truth in advertising. First, *it's not new*. It's old—*really* old. We're not claiming that any of this stuff is original with us; it's not a “fresh take” or a “unique approach”—it's not innovative. In fact, we don't even *want* to be innovative (there, we said it!). Second, *it's not a program*. It's not something you can just plug into your church and press “Play.” It's not dependent on technique; we don't have a set plan for spiritual maturity, or systematic steps for building a church; there's no flashy lingo or professional diagrams or cool metaphors. Third, *it's not a quick fix*. In other words, don't expect to read this book, implement its suggestions, and see immediate, observable results. Healthy growth takes time, prayer, hard work, patience, and perseverance.

“Well, if it's not a new program, then what is it?” Simply put, it's the Word building the church.

It's easy to agree with our culture that newer is invariably better. New clothes are better than old hand-me-downs; a new car is better than Dad's old beater. There is just something about new things that is almost irresistibly fascinating to us. They have this gravity that pulls us in with their glimmering shine, their new-car smell, their modern look, their promise of increased efficiency and effectiveness. We know it's dumb, but somehow they make us feel new with them—almost like we're renewed in their image.

When it comes to ideas on how to build the church, it's tempting to allow our fascination with the new to drive our thinking and determine our methods. This temptation is all the more seductive in the context of an emerging evangelical culture that increasingly distances itself from the clear proclamation of doctrinal certainties grounded in scriptural truth and handed down to us by the historic Christian creeds and confessions. As we are uprooted from our rich doctrinal and historical heritage, the innovative and creative begin to appear more plausible than the tried and true, in part because we are immersed in a culture that stridently embraces its own superiority to whatever is past. Pragmatism then naturally prevails. Without even realizing or reflecting on it, we quickly become excited about the most recent creative model that promises the most immediately observable results, usually measured by sanctified statistics.

At the root of all this, often unwittingly, is the rapid erosion of our faith in the sufficiency of Scripture for our effectiveness in ministry. Paul instructs Timothy to devote himself to preaching the Word (2 Tim. 4:2) precisely because that Word makes the man of God "adequate, equipped for every good work" (3:17). Timothy didn't need the latest rhetorical techniques, business practices, or creative ministry models based on captivating metaphors. He simply needed to be guided, governed, and geared by the Word of God.

Deliberate, of course, means well thought through or careful. What we are trying to be careful about as church leaders, then, is building the church on and around the gospel of Christ. More specifically, we are trying to be careful about building our church according to the pattern that God has given us in Scripture. At its best, the deliberate church is careful to trust the Word of God, wielded by Jesus Christ, to do the work of building the local church. It is an attempt to put our money where our mouth is when we say that we believe in the sufficiency of Scripture for the life, health, and growth of the local church. Our goal isn't to see how innovative we can be. Our goal is to see how faithful we can be.

What follows, then, *could* be called a model of ministry. But it's really just an attempt to be deliberate about treating the biblical gospel as that which feeds the church's growth, drives its progress, and governs every aspect of the church's corporate life and leadership. In whatever we do, we want to be careful about allowing God's Word to set our trajectory, power our progress, and govern our methods. From our preaching and evangelism, to the way we take in new members; from our discipleship and discipline practices, to our leadership models; from the structure of our Sunday morning services, all the way down to the agenda at the elders' meeting, we want our procedures to reflect reliance on the biblical gospel, submission to its claims, and awareness of its implications for our corporate life together.

The words of God in Scripture are the building blocks of the church. As pastors and church leaders, then, our first priority is to make sure that the gospel enjoys functional centrality in the church. That is, we must make sure that the gospel governs the way the church functions. When the gospel enjoys functional centrality, the church gains traction in the culture, because the gospel is the power of God for salvation (Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:17–18). The gospel is what gives people new spiritual birth (James 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23). The gospel fights the church's enemies, such as doctrinal error and moral wickedness (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20). In short, God's Word, encapsulated in the gospel, builds the church.¹

Preserving this functional centrality of the gospel is the reason we don't want to promote programs, steps, and innovative metaphors in this book. To preserve functional centrality for the gospel, human method has to remain plain, or else it will naturally supplant the gospel's rightful role. In this way, our method in building the church will function in much the same way as a preacher's style of communication. A preacher can be so flamboyant and animated that his own personality becomes more noticeable and affecting than the message he's trying to preach. Similarly, the methods of pastors and church leaders in building

the local church can become so prominent that they begin to siphon for themselves the glory for the church's growth that rightly belongs to the gospel alone. Our goal as preachers and leaders is to keep our methods basic and plain so that the gospel is cast in bold relief against the backdrop of our own admitted weakness.

THINK TANK

1. Does the gospel enjoy functional centrality in your church? Why or why not? Are there ways in which your current model of ministry might siphon off the glory of the gospel for itself? How so?

We called the first edition of this book *The Deliberate Church* because we wanted a title that might serve to throw us into the fray of the church methodology debates. American evangelicalism is now dripping with various kinds of churches: *the Emerging Church*, *the Purpose-Driven Church*, *the Connecting Church*, *the Disciple-Making Church*, a critical assessment called *the Market-Driven Church*, and almost any other kind of church you could possibly want. We thought keeping the format of “the ____ Church” for a title might get our foot in the door of the debate. *Deliberate* was the best word we could find to succinctly describe what we're talking about. But it's mainly a term that (hopefully) will get us in on the conversation so that we can hold up a way of doing things that actually has been recovered from centuries past—a church driven and governed by the gospel. Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC, has been the laboratory for testing these ideas over the last ten years. What follows, then, are applications of these principles that have proven fruitful and encouraging in our context. They are not intended to be taken as either exhaustive or exclusive, but simply as an attempt to revive a warm conversation about how we feed, lead, and protect the flock of God.

And now the million-dollar question: Is it replicable? Can you do this with your church? Of course—but not because it's a plug-and-play

program, and certainly not because of any brilliance of our own in coming up with a transferable model. It's replicable because it is scriptural and plain. No matter what size your church is, where you're located, or what kind of people you're ministering to, you can always be deliberate about being gospel driven and gospel governed in everything you do. It's not dependent on discovering the spiritual and cultural preferences of a target audience. You don't have to implement a synthetic curriculum, be an incredibly creative thinker, or even be the most charismatic leader. You just have to trust that Jesus will build his church by the agency of his Spirit and by the power of his gospel without buying the newest program or following the most popular trend.

But let us be clear. We're not promising immediate, observable results. *God* is sovereign. *He* determines our times and places, the length of our days, and the fruit of our labors. God the Father and the risen Son sovereignly decide when to pour out the Spirit in greater measure.² Your work in Christ's vineyard won't be fruitful simply because you read this book or even apply this model. We do think, because it displays a measure of faithfulness and obedience to God's normative Word, that you will be more likely to see lasting fruit. But no one comes to Christ unless the Father draws him, and no one obeys the gospel unless the Spirit gives him the gifts of understanding, repentance, and belief—and only God makes things grow.³

Many church leaders today are saying that the church will be catapulted into the future only when her methods catch up with the times. We're saying the exact opposite. In a sense, our goal is to take the church into the future by reminding her of who she was originally intended to be. We think the church will be catapulted into the future only when the most noticeable thing about her corporate life is that it is carefully governed and powerfully driven by God's age-old, time-tested Word.

Still interested? We hope so. After all, the function of the gospel in the life of the church should be at the very center of our lives as Christians, let alone as pastors and church leaders. If you get through the

last chapter and reject the whole “model,” at least be deliberate about it—know *why* you’re rejecting it. But if you read through the whole thing and agree with it, then you have a stewardship on your hands. Don’t just leave it to collect dust—be deliberate about applying it. Talk it through over meals with your fellow church leaders. Look around at your church meetings and leadership structures to see what would need to change in order for them to become more carefully governed and driven by the gospel. Teach people the biblical principles behind the practical methods, and intentionally cultivate unity around that teaching. Then take corporate action and lead for change together in a wise, patient, and winsome way.

Introduction

What Are We Building?

It would be patently stupid to start construction on a building without first knowing what kind of building we plan to construct. An apartment complex is different from an office complex, which is different still from a restaurant. They all have different blueprints, different kinds of rooms, different materials, uses, and shapes. So the process of building will be different, depending on what kind of structure we're planning to build.

The same goes for building a church. A church is not a Fortune 500 company. It's not simply another nonprofit organization, nor is it a social club. In fact, a healthy church is unlike any organization that man has ever devised, because man didn't devise it.

It only makes sense, then, for us to revisit God's Word to figure out what exactly he wants us to be building. Only then will we understand how to go about building it. Negligence here will result in both temporal and eternal futility. Temporally, a church is a spiritually heavy thing to build, and it is designed for heavy relational use. It requires the strongest materials, and those materials must be placed in the correct, load-bearing positions specified on the biblical blueprint so that structural integrity is built in. No matter how beautiful the facade, our structure will crumble if we build on a sandy foundation or with shoddy materials.

Eternally, our work will withstand the fire of the last day only if we build with the “gold, silver, precious stones” specified on the biblical blueprint (1 Cor. 3:12). Building without that blueprint will virtually guarantee that we will build with the cheaper and more abundant resources of “wood, hay, straw,” all of which will burn in the end (vv. 13–15). Ignoring God’s plan for the church and replacing it with your own will ensure the eternal futility of your work. Here at the outset, then, it is critical to reflect biblically on this foundational question: What is a local church?

Fundamentally, God intends the local church to be a corporate display of his glory and wisdom, both to unbelievers and to unseen spiritual powers (John 13:34–35; Eph. 3:10–11). More specifically, we are a corporate dwelling place for God’s Spirit (Eph. 2:19–22; 1 Cor. 3:16–17), the organic body of Christ in which he magnifies his glory (Acts 9:4; 1 Cor. 12). The Greek word for church is *ekklēsia*, a gathering or congregating of people. The church is God’s vehicle for displaying his glory to his creation.

The uniqueness of the church is her message—the gospel. The church is the only institution entrusted by God with the message of repentance of sins and belief in Jesus Christ for forgiveness. That gospel is visualized in the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, both instituted by Christ. The distinguishing marks of the church, then, are the right preaching of this gospel and the right administration of the biblical ordinances that dramatize it.

The structure we’re building, then, is fundamentally God centered—it is a Godward structure, designed to display the glories of God’s character and the truth of his gospel. It is also an outward-looking structure; but even in its outwardness it is God centered, since we look outward for the purpose of spreading God’s character and gospel through all the nations—to gather more worshipers for him and thus magnify his glory.

Ours is a ministry of magnification—making God’s glory appear to the eyes of the world as big as it really is by bringing it into closer

view and sharper focus in the form of the local church. What we are building, then, is not simply another nonprofit organization or Christian company. We are building a corporate, organic structure that will accurately magnify God's glory and faithfully communicate his gospel.

Jesus is the one who is ultimately building his church (Matt. 16:18). But he has graciously allowed us to participate in the construction process, and it is therefore according to his biblical blueprint that we must build the structure and life of the church. What are *you* trying to build?

How Should We Build It?

How then do you go about building a healthy church? Countless answers have been offered from different quarters of evangelicalism. Some think it takes knowing your target audience and attracting them by meeting their needs.¹ Others propose that the key is to have a vibrant network of small groups, where "real community" can happen. Many advise that we need to jettison the "old" methods that worked fifty years ago and embrace new ones that work in our postmodern context.² Some advocate a return to religious symbols in worship to give people the sacred experience and connection with the past that they're looking for at church.³ Others say the way forward is to sell our church buildings and start developing house churches.⁴ Still others say we are free to do whatever works in our own local context, as long as it is ethical.

So how do we navigate the modern-method maze? Is there a compass we can use that will lead us out? Is there a way to rise above the underbrush of synthetic ministry models so that we can get a bird's-eye view of the way forward?

What these and many other ministry models assume is that method isn't really all that important to God. "If it brings people to church or helps them feel like they've really worshiped on Sunday, it must be a good thing, right?"

When it comes to building a people for his own name and glory, God cares how we go about participating in his redemptive purposes. As we'll

see in chapter 1, the gospel itself is God's constructive power for building the body of Christ (Isa. 55:10–11; Rom. 1:16; 1 Pet. 1:23–25). The Word builds the church. Our power is not in having small groups, meeting the felt needs of our target audience, using the right evangelism program, having funny skits, providing plenteous parking, or targeting our ministries to postmoderns. Our power is in our unique message—the gospel (Greek, *euangelion*)—not in our innovations. As such, our primary method must be to clearly communicate that message as widely as possible. Biblically, that means that we must faithfully preach it (Greek, *euangelizō*), fearlessly calling for repentance and belief as the only saving responses (Mark 1:14–15).

So before we start talking about the nuts and bolts of building the church responsibly, let us be clear on the relationship between the gospel of Christ and the method of its ministers.

1. *Theology drives method.* Whether we realize it or not, our thinking on the gospel will shape the way we share it. Our theology of the good news will be brought to bear on how we build the church.

2. *God's methods determine ours.* The methods we use to plant and water in God's vineyard must be subservient to and in complete harmony with the working of God's growth method—the gospel, as faithfully preached by his servants. Working contrary to God's processes often means working contrary to his purposes.⁵

3. *The gospel both enables and informs our participation in God's purposes.* We are not even able to enter the kingdom of God, much less minister in it, unless his gospel first does its work in us; nor do we know how to minister in his kingdom unless his gospel first provides the parameters for doing so. As such, the gospel alone must both shape and evaluate any ministry method we use.

4. *Faithfulness to the gospel must be our measure of success, not results.* The power of God for spiritual life and genuine holiness is in the gospel. So fidelity is paramount, not innovation, and not immediately observable results. Simon the Magician drew a crowd—he even had them calling him the Power of God; but his power, motive, and message

were fraudulent (Acts 8:9–11). Our call is to fidelity as messengers. Only God causes real growth (1 Cor. 3:6–7), and he does so by the gospel (Rom. 10:14–17; Gal. 3:1–5).

This gospel, then, is that God is our holy Creator and righteous Judge. He created us to glorify him and enjoy him forever, but we have all sinned, both in Adam as our representative head and in our own individual actions (Rom. 5:12; 3:23). We therefore deserve death—spiritual separation from God in hell (6:23; Eph. 2:3)—and are in fact already spiritually stillborn, helpless in our sins (Ps. 51:5; Rom. 5:6–8; Eph. 2:1) and in need of God to impart spiritual life to us (Ezek. 37:1–14; John 3:3). But God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man (Phil. 2:5–11), to die the death that we deserved, and he raised him up for our justification, proving that he was God’s Son (Rom. 5:1; 1:4). If we would have Christ’s perfect righteousness credited to us, and the penalty for our sins accounted to him, we must repent of our sins and believe in Jesus Christ for salvation (2 Cor. 5:21; Mark 1:14–15).

This gospel alone (Gal. 1:6–9) is the one we are commanded to preach (2 Tim. 4:2). This gospel alone contains the theology that must drive our ministry methods. This gospel alone is the one God uses to create a people for himself. This gospel alone both enables and informs our participation in God’s redemptive purposes. Consequently, this gospel alone deserves to shape and evaluate both our methods and our ministries.

What Will It Cost to Build Like This?

It’s easy to be faithful when you’re seeing success; after all, success is what silences the skeptics. You might be motivated to imitate a ministry model like this one not just because it’s biblical but because it has produced success elsewhere. Yet we’ve just said that visible results cannot be the metric by which we measure our ministries, which raises a disturbing question: What if the immediate results are not what you envisioned? What if, in a dark turn of God’s providence, your faithfulness starts looking like

what the world would call failure? What if, for all your faithfulness and patience, your leadership is still ignored, people are still leaving, the church still isn't adding new converts to its numbers, or the gospel is still generating more conflict in the church than you expected? What if that same problematic leader is still threatening and plotting to get you fired, precisely because you're following the counsel in this book?

Of course, even faithful leaders have room to grow, so there will probably be some soul searching. No pastor is without his sins. Even so, if numerical growth, or even gospel progress, remains elusive, don't get jaded and don't give up. The gospel is still the power of God to salvation, and it is still doing its work in you and in those around you. Jesus is still your High Priest, and he knows what it's like to be sinlessly faithful and yet end his earthly life with little to show for it. Jesus's best twelve guys—the dynamic dozen!—all abandoned him when the rubber met the road. One of them outright betrayed him, another repeatedly denied ever knowing him, and one actually ran away naked (Mark 14:50–52). Jesus died the death of a damned criminal.

Small wonder we overhear the suffering servant praying, “I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my right is with the LORD, and my recompense with my God” (Isa. 49:4 ESV). Jesus felt that, thought that, prayed that—and if you serve him, then maybe you will, too. In a similar way, the apostle Paul was treated as an enemy by some of the very churches he planted (Gal. 4:16), and at his first public defense, none of his converts showed up to support him—not one (2 Tim. 4:16). Yet none of us thinks of Jesus or Paul as failures, do we?

Now, don't get us wrong. We don't want you to lead in a way that initiates unnecessary conflict. Be wise as a serpent and gentle as a dove. Know your context and your congregation, and adapt accordingly. There's no virtue in suffering simply because you spoke before you listened (Prov. 18:13). Patience is a pastor's preservative. Still, just because you take all the counsel in this book doesn't necessarily mean you'll end up pastoring a thousand-member church in the heart of a

cool city. That doesn't mean it's not working or that your ministry has failed! God uses all kinds of pastors in all kinds of places in churches of all sizes. Moreover, not every pastorate, and not even every local church, succeeds in the way we might want or expect. God never promises his servants a celebrity spotlight or what the world salutes as success.

Remember what God said to Baruch in Jeremiah 45:5? "Do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not" (ESV). Baruch wanted to be known as the scribe who served the prophet who turned the moral tide in Israel so that the people would avoid the exile, return to God, and see the renewal of the kingdom—you can imagine worse ambitions—yet it wasn't to be. Similarly, Elijah thought his own showdown with the prophets of Baal might just be the great turning point for God's people, yet he was sorely disappointed in their response to his ministry.

Don't misunderstand—we're gospel optimists, and we want you to expect great things from God, too. Be strong and courageous! But the book in your hand is not a fast track to explosive numbers or evangelical stardom. Nor can it exempt you from the costs of the cross. If you commit to building a healthy church on the foundation of the gospel, then prepare yourself for a cross-shaped life and ministry, because the gospel is the gospel of the cross. You are taking up your cross and following Jesus. He who saves his life will lose it, but he who loses his life for Christ's sake and the gospel will find it. A call to ministry is a call to die—to self, to sin, to selfish ambition, to idolizing your own success, and to enhancing your own image. If you've never died like this in ministry, then chances are you're not doing it right.

But it is worth the cost, because here's the hope: the call to ministry is a call to the kind of death that always issues in resurrection—maybe not immediately, but eventually. There is no glory in the Christian life or ministry without suffering first—not even for Jesus himself (Phil. 2:5–11). But if we do suffer with him, then we will be glorified with him (Rom. 8:17). No one who dies with Christ and for his sake will ever be left in the grave. He always raises his people.

Take it on the word of an old apostle: there's a depth of fellowship with Christ even in the midst of the suffering, not to mention in the power of his resurrection (Phil. 3:10–11). To suffer with Christ is one of the great privileges of Christian ministry—it is indispensable to Christ-likeness, and it is one of the great keys to our own fruitfulness (John 12:24–26). Our death to self in ministry is part of what God uses to create life in others. We are “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you” (2 Cor. 4:10–12 ESV).

Christian, expect a cross, even multiple crosses, in Christian ministry. And then expect God to raise you from the dead, time and again. “Indeed we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead” (2 Cor. 1:9 ESV). Jesus reproduces his sufferings in us, to reproduce his resurrection in us, so that when others see us, they see the power of Christ crucified—and risen. This is what Peter was preparing the churches for in his first epistle—suffering, and only afterward, glory. Jesus died in shame to rise in glory (1 Pet. 1:18–21) so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. And he suffered, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps” (2:22–24). Those steps lead through the cross; but praise God, they don't end there.

THINK TANK

1. What's driving your church—the content of the message or the uniqueness of the presentation?
2. Is your ministry method driven by biblical theology or by what works?
3. Do you measure success by results or by faithfulness to God's Word?

SECTION 1

GATHERING THE CHURCH

The Four P's

WHEN I¹ WAS INTERVIEWING WITH Capitol Hill Baptist Church before they called me to be their pastor, someone asked me if I had a program or plan to implement for growth. Perhaps to this person's surprise (and perhaps to yours, too!), I responded that I didn't really have any great plans or programs to implement. I was just armed with four P's—I would preach, pray, develop personal discipling relationships, and be patient.

Preaching

Maybe even more surprising to some, I said that I was happy to see every aspect of my public ministry fail if it needed to—except for the preaching of God's Word. Now what kind of a thing is that for a pastoral candidate to say to a church? What I wanted to get across was that there's only one thing that's biblically necessary for building the church, and that's the preached Word of God. Others could do every other duty, but only I was responsible and set apart by the congregation for the public teaching of God's Word. This would be the fountain of our spiritual life, both as individuals and as a congregation.

God's Word has always been his chosen instrument to create, convict, convert, and conform his people. From his very first announcement of

the gospel in Genesis 3:15, to his initial word of promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3, to his regulation of that promise by his Word in the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20), God gives life and health and holiness to his people through the agency of his Word. From the reforms under Josiah in 2 Kings 22–23, to the revival of God’s work under Nehemiah and Ezra in Nehemiah 8–9, to that great vision of the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37:1–14, where God breathes the life of his Spirit into his dead people through the preaching of his Word, God always sends his Word when he wants to renew life in his people and assemble them for his glory. God works through the agency of his Word. He even says as much in Isaiah 55:10–11:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth and making it bear and sprout, and furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it will not return to Me empty, without *accomplishing* what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.

The New Testament witness to the primacy of God’s Word in his method is just as conspicuous. “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). The Word sustains us. “In the beginning was the Word, and . . . in Him was life. . . . And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:1, 4, 14). Jesus, the Word made flesh, is ultimate life incarnate. “The word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing” (Acts 19:20; cf. 6:7; 12:20–24). The Word grows and fights. “And now I commend you to . . . the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (20:32). The Word is what builds us up and preserves us. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16; cf. 1 Cor. 1:18). The gospel, God’s clearest expres-

sion of his Word, is his effective power for salvation.² “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). God’s Word is that which creates faith. “[W]hen you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe” (1 Thess. 2:13). The Word performs God’s work in believers. “For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12). God’s Word convicts. “In the exercise of His will he brought us forth by the word of truth” (James 1:18). God’s Word gives us new birth. James advises a little later, “in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls” (v. 21). The Word saves us. Peter also claims regenerating power for God’s Word: “You have been born again not of seed which is perishable, but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God. . . . And this is the word which was preached to you” (1 Pet. 1:23, 25).

There is creating, conforming, life-giving power in God’s Word! The gospel is God’s way of giving life to dead sinners—and to dead churches (Ezek. 37:1–14). He doesn’t have another way. If we want to work for renewed life and health and holiness in our churches, then we must work for it according to God’s revealed mode of operation. Otherwise we risk running in vain. God’s Word is his supernatural power for accomplishing his supernatural work. That’s why our eloquence, innovations, and programs are so much less important than we think; that’s why we as pastors must give ourselves to preaching, not programs; and that’s why we need to be teaching our congregations to value God’s Word over programs. Preaching the content and intent of God’s Word is what unleashes the power of God on the people of God, because God’s power for building his people is in his Word, particularly as we find it in the gospel (Rom. 1:16). God’s Word builds his church. So preaching his gospel is primary.³

Praying

Many men, especially in the global West, are addicted to work. It's understandable— productivity offers a cleaner high than any drug, and without the hangover. This can be equally (even especially) true for pastors, because we are rightly careful about not being lazy or unfruitful in ministry. We want to prove ourselves hard workers in the Lord's vineyard, so that we hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Prayer, though, doesn't always feel as productive to us as chaining ourselves to the computer, leading a board meeting, counseling a troubled member, reading a good book with an aspiring pastor, or getting out there and doing the work of an evangelist.

The overcorrection, then, is to neglect or shortchange supplication because we wrongly assume that prayer is somehow akin to procrastination—putting off the work. The truth is, prayer is a necessary part of the work. Prayer shows our dependence on God. It honors him as the source of all blessing, and it reminds us that converting individuals and growing churches are his works, not ours (1 Cor. 2:14–16; 3:6–7). Jesus reassures us that if we abide in him, and his words abide in us, we can ask anything according to his will and know that he will give it to us (John 15:10, 16). What a promise! I fear it is so familiar to many of us that we are in danger of hearing it as trite. Yet we must hear it as that which rouses us from our sleepy prayerlessness and drives us joyfully to our knees.

What then should we pray for as we begin to work for the health and holiness of the church? (1) What more appropriate prayers could a pastor pray for the church he serves than the prayers of Paul for the churches he planted (Eph. 1:15–23; 3:16–21; Phil. 1:9–11; Col. 1:9–12; 2 Thess. 1:11–12)? Allow these prayers to be a starting point for praying Scripture more broadly and consistently.⁴ This is another way you can unleash the transforming power of the gospel on the lives of church members. (2) Pray that your preaching of the gospel would

be faithful, accurate, and clear. (3) Pray for the increasing maturity of the congregation, that your local church would grow in corporate love, holiness, and sound doctrine, such that the testimony of the church in the community would be distinctively pure and attractive to unbelievers. (4) Pray for sinners to be converted and the church to be built up through your preaching of the gospel. (5) Pray for opportunities for yourself and other church members to do personal evangelism.

One of the most practical things you can do for your own personal prayer life, and for the prayer lives of other church members, is to assemble a church membership directory (with pictures, if possible) so that everyone in the church can be praying through it a page a day. Our church's membership directory has about twenty-seven people on a normal page. We also have sections for members in the area who are unable to attend and for members out of the area; one page for elders, deacons, deaconesses, officers, staff members, and interns; and sections that record the children of church members, supported seminarians, supported workers (like missionaries), and former staff members and interns. We usually encourage people to pray through the page number that corresponds to the current day of the month (e.g., June 1, page 1; June 2, page 2; etc.).

Model for your congregation faithfulness in praying through the directory in your own devotional times, and publicly encourage them to make praying through the directory a daily habit. Your prayers for people don't have to be long—just biblical. Perhaps choose one or two phrases from Scripture to pray for them, and then pray a meaningful sentence or two from what you know is going on in their lives at present. Get to know the sheep in your flock well so that you can pray for them more particularly. And for those you don't yet know well, simply pray for them what you see in your daily Bible reading. Modeling this kind of prayer for others, and encouraging the congregation to join you, can be a powerful influence for growth in the church. It encourages

selflessness in people's individual prayer lives, and one of the most important benefits is that it helps to cultivate a corporate culture of prayer that will gradually come to characterize your church as people faithfully pray.

THINK TANK

1. Why is the preaching of the gospel so important for the life of the church?
2. What three Bible passages will you memorize for the purpose of praying for your church?

Personal Discipling Relationships

One of the most biblical and valuable uses of your time as a pastor will be to cultivate personal discipling relationships, in which you regularly meet with a few people one-on-one to do them good spiritually. One idea is to invite people after the Sunday service to call you in order to set up a lunch appointment. Those who express interest by calling and having lunch will often be open to getting together again. As you get to know them, you might suggest a book for the two of you to read together and discuss on a weekly, every-other-week, or as-often-as-you-can basis. This often opens up other areas of the person's life for conversation, encouragement, correction, accountability, and prayer. Whether or not you tell these people that you are "discipling" them is immaterial. The goal is to get to know them and to love them in a distinctively Christian way by doing them good spiritually. Initiate personal care and concern for others.

This practice of personal discipling is helpful on a number of fronts. It is obviously a good thing for the person being disciplined, because he is getting biblical encouragement and advice from someone who may be a little farther along, both in terms of life stages and in terms of his walk

with God. So in this way, discipling can function as another channel through which the Word can flow into the hearts of the members and be worked out in the context of a personal fellowship. It's good for the one who discipled as well, whether you are a paid pastor or a nonstaff member, because it encourages you to think about discipling not as something that only super-Christians do, but as something that is part and parcel of your own discipleship to Christ. This is in large part why you as the pastor will be wise to publicly encourage members to get together for a meal during the week with older or younger members and have spiritual conversations over books on Christian theology and living. Members need to know that spiritual maturity is not simply about their quiet times, but about their love for other believers, and their concrete expressions of that love. A healthy by-product of nonstaff members discipling other members is that it promotes a growing culture of distinctively Christian community, in which people are loving one another not simply as the world loves, but as followers of Christ who are together seeking to understand and live out the implications of his Word for their lives. These kinds of relationships are conducive to both spiritual and numerical growth.

As a pastor, a healthy by-product of your personal discipling of other members is that it helps break down defensive resistance to your pastoral leadership. Change will always meet resistance. But as you open up your life to others, and as they begin to see that you are genuinely concerned for their spiritual welfare (1 Thess. 2:1–12), they will be more likely to see you as a caring friend, spiritual mentor, and godly leader, and less likely to misunderstand your gradual initiatives for biblical change as personal power grabs, self-centered ego trips, or overly critical negativism. Developing these kinds of relationships establishes their personal knowledge of you, which is helpful in nurturing personal trust of your character and motives, and in growing an appropriate level of confidence in your leadership among the congregation. It gradually breaks down the “we vs. him” barrier that sadly but often subtly stands

between a wounded congregation and a new pastor, and is helpful in paving the way for biblical growth and change.

Patience

When I arrived at Capitol Hill Baptist, I waited three months before preaching my first Sunday morning sermon. I simply attended. I had asked for this time in conversations that were held before I arrived. When I explained my reasons, the church leaders agreed. It showed respect for the congregation, it gave me time to learn what the people were accustomed to, and it showed them that I wasn't in a hurry to change everything. I realize not all of us have the luxury of waiting three months to preach after our arrival; but if it's possible, I'd recommend it.

The best way to lose your place of influence as a pastor is to be in a hurry, forcing radical (even if biblical) change before people are ready to follow you and own it. It would be wise for many of us to lower our expectations and extend our time horizons. Accomplishing healthy change in churches for the glory of God and the clarity of the gospel does not happen in the first year after the new pastor arrives. God is working for eternity, and he has been working *from* eternity. He's not in a hurry, and we shouldn't be either. So it is wise to show care for the congregation and concern for the unity of the church by not running so far ahead of them that people start falling behind. Run at a pace that the congregation can keep.

Of course, there are some things you might need to change rather quickly. But as much as possible, do these things quietly and with an encouraging smile, not loudly and with a disapproving frown. We are indeed to "reprove, rebuke, exhort." But we are to do it "with great patience and instruction" (2 Tim. 4:2). Make sure the changes you want to implement are biblical (or at least prudent!); then patiently teach people about them from God's Word before you expect them to embrace the changes you're encouraging. This patient instruction is the biblical way to sow broad agreement with a biblical agenda among

the flock of God. Once this broad agreement is sown, change is less likely to be divisive, and unity less prone to fracture. As you work for change, work also to extend genuine, Christian goodwill toward people. “The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim. 2:24–25). Make haste slowly—and kindly.

The key to displaying and actually having this kind of patience is to have a right perspective on time, eternity, and success.

1. *Time.* Most of us think only about five or ten years down the road (if that). But patience in the pastorate requires thinking in terms of twenty, thirty, forty, or even fifty years of ministry. This puts all our difficulties into perspective. In an interview with 9Marks, John MacArthur looked back over forty years of pastoral faithfulness in the same church, Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California.⁵ His fifth year of ministry saw tumult and division among the leadership. But he persevered over the long haul and now says he’s seeing what happens when a pastor stays thirty-five years longer than he should have from a human perspective: exponential fruitfulness, and a culture of godly graciousness and joy. Are you in it with your congregation for the long haul—twenty, thirty, forty years—or are you figuring on “moving up the ladder” by taking a bigger church in five or ten years? Are you building a congregation or a career? Stay with them. Keep teaching. Keep modeling. Keep leading. Keep loving.

If you’re a young, aspiring pastor who has yet to receive from a church an external call to preach, choose wisely. No one can predict the future or see all possible outcomes. But it may be less than wise to accept a call from a church or location that you couldn’t imagine staying with longer than a few years. Go where you can envision contentedly putting down roots for the rest of your life, and commit.

2. *Eternity.* As pastors, one day we will all be held accountable by God for the way we led and fed his lambs (Heb. 13:17; James 3:1). All our ways are before him. He will know if we used the congregation simply to build a career. He will know if we left them prematurely for our own convenience and benefit. He will know if we drove his sheep too hard. Shepherd the flock in a way that you won't be ashamed of on the Day of Accounting. "Do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve. For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality" (Col. 3:23–25).

3. *Success.* If you define success in terms of size, your desire for numerical growth will probably outrun your patience with the congregation, and perhaps even your fidelity to biblical methods. Either your ministry among the people will be cut short (i.e., you'll be fired) or you will resort to methods that draw a crowd without preaching the true gospel. You will trip over the hurdle of your own ambition. But if you define success in terms of faithfulness, then you are in a position to persevere, because you are released from the demand of immediately observable results, freeing you for faithfulness to the gospel's message and methods, leaving numbers to the Lord. It seems ironic at first, but trading in size for faithfulness as the yardstick for success is often the path to legitimate numerical growth. God is happiest to entrust his flock to those shepherds who do things his way.

Our patience flourishes when we cultivate gratitude and contentment with where the Lord has placed us. So if you're in a smaller congregation and it's early on in your ministry, then enjoy the simplicity and sweetness of that smallness as long as it lasts. Don't let your idea of the perfect become the enemy of what's already good in the church you serve. Love the congregation as it is, not as you hope it

will become. Refuse to compare your situation unfavorably with that of other ministers you know. And if possible, seek out a brotherhood of like-minded fellow pastors in your local area who can share your joys, speak into your sorrows, help you keep things in perspective, and encourage you along the way.

Confidence in the Christian ministry does not come from personal competence, charisma, or experience; nor does it come from having the right programs in place or jumping on the bandwagon of the latest ministry fad. It doesn't even come from having the "right" graduate degree. Much as it was for Joshua, our confidence is to be in the presence, power, and promises of God (Josh. 1:1–9). More specifically, confidence for becoming and being a pastor comes from depending on the power of the Spirit to make us adequate through the equipping ministry of Christ's Word. "Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:4–6). And how does the Spirit make us adequate? What instrument does he use? It's not a program. It's Christ's Word. "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, [Why?] so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16–17; cf. Jer. 1:9; Ezek. 2:1–7; 3:1–11). The one thing necessary is the power of Christ's Word. That's why preaching and prayer will always be paramount—no matter what fad tops the charts. Stake your ministry on the power of the gospel (Rom. 1:16).

THINK TANK

1. Pick one person in your church whom you could start getting together with for his spiritual good.

2. Pick a book, or even just a booklet, that you'd like to read and discuss with him.

3. Could your ideas of time, eternity, and success be cultivating a spirit of impatience with the congregation you serve? If so, how? How might those ideas need to be reformed?