Mark Dever addresses twelve major challenges that faced the church in the first century and that still face the church today.

The church Paul had seen established in Corinth in the first century was young and full of life—and just as full of problems. No single church in the New Testament had so many and such a diversity of problems. The church was plagued by partisanship, pride, immorality, false teachers, super-spirituality—and the list goes on.

In his latest book Mark Dever, longtime pastor and leading authority on the subject of church health, tackles twelve challenges that confronted the church in first-century Corinth—and churches today, including: division, asceticism, disobedience, legalism, autonomy, thoughtlessness, selfishness, and decline. As he presents each challenge, Dever provides ways for individuals and churches to respond to these challenges biblically. He writes for both church leaders and laymen, insisting that the health of the local church should be the concern of every believer.

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My Personal Review:
If there are nine marks of a healthy church, then how many challenges can a church face? No, that isn't the setup line for an ecclesiological comic. The answer is "twelve"—at least that is the number of challenges Mark Dever highlights from the book of First Corinthians.

Here is a book that will serve you well from many angles. First, there is the actual content itself. Taking the disunified and dysfunctional church of Corinth as a launching pad, Dever brings forth the following challenges a church may face: forgetfulness (1:1-9), division (1:20-3:23), imposters (4), sin (5-6), asceticism (7), disobedience (8:1-10:13), legalism (10:14-11:1), autonomy (11:2-16), thoughtlessness (11:17-34), selfishness (12-14), death (15), decline (16).
Second, preachers can utilize this book as an example of fast-paced, "big-picture" expository preaching. Dever gives solid exegesis even as he covers the entire biblical book of sixteen chapters in only twelve of his own chapters. Now, we can all admit there is a season to commit more time to a book, delving into the forest and looking close at the trees. But, I for one had never considered the book of First Corinthians in such a united manner. Sure, I've looked at some of these texts in excruciating detail that Dever's book lacks. But I have also looked at them in such detail that I forgot how they fit into the broader context of the book. So, I think a book like this great for preachers who can soak up the method of combining good exegesis and big-picture homiletics.

Third, Dever brings in history (Hugh Latimer, Frederick Douglass, Teddy Roosevelt), references to culture and current events (Moby, Hurricane Katrina) right alongside a robust theology of the cross, church discipline, and divinely mandated gender-distinction. All that to say, Dever thinks and writes both wide and deep, and serves as a model for how to weave various arenas of thought together.

At a brief 180-ish pages, I'd rather see it produced as a $12 soft back rather than an $18 hardback. I think it would get more play at a cheaper price. Be that as it may, there is good profit to be had from this book.

In thinking through the question of who might find this book profitable, a group of church elders reading through it together would be an excellent idea. Another use would be to use it as a study for a Sunday school class, taking a quarter-year to go through the twelve chapters.

Let me close with one particular paragraph from the book, a few sentences serving up the gospel in brief. I read this to my kids - they understand Mark. It comes from a chapter on "division," showing that for a preacher like Dever, the gospel of the cross is foundational to his well-established ecclesiological passions. Although this paragraph doesn't mention the church, it comes from a section called "Godly unity displays Christ":

"My friends, let me be clear about what Christianity teaches. There is one God who has made us all. We have sinned against him - we have done what we have wanted rather than what he has told us to do. We have rebelled against him, and so he is rightly committed to punishing us, as our sins deserve. But, in his great mercy, he came in Christ - fully God and fully man - and lived a perfect life with no punishment of his own to bear. Yet Christ died on the cross to pay the penalty for the sins of all those who would ever turn from their sins and trust him. He rose to new life, and he offers us new life as well, if we will turn from our sins and trust him. We lay hold of Christ savingly by believing in this message and having faith in him."
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