

THE MARKS OF A TRUE CHURCH

Shawn Woo

Lead Pastor, Trinity Cambridge Church (Cambridge, MA)

The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord," and yet, in this age between Christ's two advents, the church is "by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed."⁵⁴ As the Belgic Confession states, since "all sects in the world today claim for themselves the name of 'the church',"⁵⁵ how can we ensure that a local church is part of the *true* Church?

The Sovereign Grace *Statement of Faith* identifies three marks of a true church: "the faithful preaching of the Word, the right administration of the sacraments, and the proper exercise of church discipline." These three marks are not the only attributes and activities of a true church, but they are the distinguishing marks.

Preaching identifies Christ as the head of the church (Eph. 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Col. 1:18), and the sacraments and church discipline identify the church as the body of Christ that is spiritually united to him (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:12, 27; Eph. 4:12, 16; Col. 1:24).

Faithful Preaching of the Word

Jesus is building his church on the foundation of the apostles (Matt. 16:18-19; cf. Eph. 2:20), who "once for all delivered to the saints" "the faith" of the gospel (Jude 3; cf. Luke 1:2; Acts 2:42). A voluntary association that stands on another foundation might be a synagogue, a mosque, a lodge, or a temple, but it is no church. Even if an apostle or an angel from heaven preaches a different gospel, we must reject them and their message, for there is no other gospel (Gal. 1:6-9).

In 1 Timothy 3:15, Paul uses two metaphors to describe "the church of the living God." The first one is familiar, "the household of God," but the second less so, "a pillar and buttress of the truth." The church exists to prop up "the truth," namely the mystery that "[Christ] was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory" (1 Tim. 3:16). The church stewards "the knowledge of the truth" by which "people [are] saved,"—that "there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all" (1 Tim. 2:5-6). "The word of truth, the gospel of ... salvation" (Eph. 1:13) is the keystone of the church, and a congregation that does not uphold it cannot properly be called a church.

⁵⁴ Samuel J. Stone, "The Church's One Foundation Is Jesus Christ Her Lord," 1866.

⁵⁵ Belgic Confession, Article 29

More broadly, a true church upholds the written, God-breathed Word, the Scriptures—all thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and twenty-seven books of the New Testament. The Bible itself does not save us, but only the Bible leads us to Jesus who alone saves, for it is "able to make [us] *wise for salvation* through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15). In the book, *The Insanity of God*, the author Nik Ripken tells the story of five Muslim-background believers, who came to faith in Christ in a country where Christians are intensely persecuted and where there is virtually no access to the gospel:

One of the five men told me, 'I dreamed about a blue book. I was driven, consumed really, by the message of the dream. "Look for this book," the dream said, "read this Bible!" I began a secret search, but I could not find a book like that anywhere in my country. Then, one day, I walked into a Quranic book shop and saw this sea of green books lining the walls. I noticed a book of a different color on a shelf in the back of the store, so I walked back there and pulled out a thick blue volume to discover that it was a Bible. It was published in my own national language.

I actually bought a Bible in the Islamic bookstore, took it home, and read it five times. That's how I came to know Jesus.' Another one told me, 'I dreamed about finding Jesus, but I didn't even know how or where to look. Then one day I was walking through the market when a man I had never seen before came up to me in the crowd. He said, "The Holy Spirit told me to give you this book." He handed me a Bible and disappeared in the crowd. I never saw him again. But I read the Bible he gave me three times from cover to cover, and that's how I came to know and follow Jesus.' Each one of the five men told me a different variation of this same story. Each one of them had come across a Bible in some unusual, miraculous way. Each one had read the Gospel story of Jesus. Each one had decided to follow Him.⁵⁶

Scripture is where the gospel of salvation is recorded permanently and preserved reliably, and "the word of God is living and active" (Heb. 4:12). In the inscripturated Word, we encounter the incarnate Word.

Buttressing the word of truth involves more than preserving the Scriptures in some safe deposit box somewhere to be preserved for all time. It must be *preached*, for "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). No one can call on the Lord who saves without first believing in him, and no one can believe in him unless they first hear of him, and no one can hear of him unless someone preaches to them (Rom. 10:14). So we must "preach the word" (2 Tim. 4:2-3). It is when we "speak the truth in love" that the church "grow[s] up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Eph. 4:15).

⁵⁶ Nik Ripken, *The Insanity of God: A True Story of Faith Resurrected* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), 280.

Right Administration of the Sacraments

The faithful preaching of the Word *alone*, however, does not make a true church. John Calvin added that a true church exists where “the preaching of the gospel is reverently heard and the sacraments are not neglected.”⁵⁷ A lone preacher might proclaim the gospel faithfully and fervently, but if no one else hears it and believes it, a church does not exist, for a church is “where two or three are gathered in [Christ’s] name” (Matt. 18:20). The faithful preaching of the Word ensures that Christ is the Head; the right administration of the sacraments ensures that the Church is his Body.

Jesus instituted two sacraments: baptism and the Lord’s Supper (Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 11:23-26). Baptism is an unrepeatable, initial sacrament (Acts 2:38-41; Gal. 2:16; 3:26-27; 5:2-6; cf. Col. 2:11-14) for those who have repented and come to faith in Christ, and it signifies the washing away of guilt and the purifying of our conscience (1 Pet. 3:21). We are baptized “in the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 2:38), signifying our union with Christ in his death and resurrection and our participation in the body of Christ (Rom. 6:3-4).

The public and corporate dimension of baptism is important. Baptism is an outward expression of an inward faith. John 12:42-43 speaks of those who “believed in [Jesus], but for fear of the Pharisees ... did not *confess* (ὁμολογέω, *homologeō*) it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.” An inward faith must be confessed outwardly. Those who do not “*acknowledge* (ὁμολογέω, *homologeō*) [Jesus] before men” will not be acknowledged before the angels of God (Luke 12:8-9).

It is those who “believe in [their] heart that God raised [Jesus] from the dead,” and also “*confess* (ὁμολογέω, *homologeō*) with [their] *mouth* that Jesus is Lord” who are saved (Rom. 10:9-10). This is why, throughout the New Testament, a public baptism, and not a private recitation of the Sinner’s Prayer, is used to mark the beginning of a Christian’s life (Acts 8:36; 19:2-4). Baptism is the stake in the ground that publicly marks the believer as belonging to Christ and his Church.

As baptism signifies the believer’s new *birth* into the family of God, the Lord’s Supper signifies the believer’s ongoing *participation* in the family of God. By eating the bread, which signifies the body of Christ broken for us, and drinking the cup, which signifies the blood of Christ poured out for our sins, we confirm our union with Christ and fellowship with the church (1 Cor. 10:15-16; 11:27-29). By faith, the hand and mouth of our souls, we consume the flesh of Christ and drink his blood, receiving spiritual nourishment for our souls (John 6:40; cf. John 6:54). The Lord’s Supper *unifies* the Body of Christ as participants in the one Bread of Life, and thus *identifies* the Body of Christ in contradistinction to the world.

⁵⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), IV.i. 10, 1024.

This *visible* participation in a local church via the sacraments is important, because it is our love for the brothers and sisters in Christ whom we have seen that prove our love for the God whom we have not seen (1 John 4:20). Our membership in the invisible, universal church (2 Tim. 2:19; Matt. 13:24-30), must be evidenced by our membership in the visible, local church (1 Cor. 1:2; 1 John 2:19). We must not have a docetic view of the church that considers only the invisible, transeclesial fellowship as the “real” church. The gathered church, as it cherishes and proclaims the gospel, really does have the power of the keys to bind and loose on earth what shall be bound and loosed in heaven (Matt. 16:19; 18:18; John 20:23).

Proper Exercise of Church Discipline

This is why the proper exercise of church discipline is the third mark of a true church. It is really an entailment of the right administration of the sacraments.⁵⁸ A church that indiscriminately baptizes people and admits them to the Lord’s table will soon cease to be a true church. For the sake of preserving its integrity and witness, the church must dissociate from unrepentant sinners who are bringing disrepute to Christ (Matt. 18:17). Scripture lists several sins for which the church should excommunicate a member, for example, “sexual immorality or greed, or [someone who] is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler” (1 Cor. 5:11), those who are unwilling to work and “walking in idleness” (2 Thess. 3:6), those who neglect to “provide for his relatives ... especially for members of his household” (1 Tim. 5:8), those who “[stir] up division” (Titus 3:10), those who are “lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power” (2 Tim. 3:2-5), and those who preach a different gospel (Gal. 1:8; 2 Tim. 2:17-21; 2 John 10-11). There is no definitive, exhaustive list, but it must be a demonstrable sin for which the lack of repentance evinces his or her unregenerate state.

One might ask, “If Jesus ‘receive[d] sinners and [ate] with them’ (Luke 15:2), who are we ‘not even to eat with such a one’ (1 Cor. 5:11)?” Paul clarifies in 1 Corinthians 5:12-13, “For what have I to do with judging *outsiders*? Is it not those *inside* the church whom you are to judge? *God* judges those outside. ‘Purge the evil person from among you.’” These two verses follow a neat A-B-A-B structure, speaking of how we should not judge *outsiders*, then about how we should judge *insiders*, then about how *God* will judge *outsiders*, and again about how the *church* ought to judge *insiders* and “purge the evil from your midst” (Deut. 13:5).

We cannot dissociate from the unrepentant sinners “of this world ... since then [we] would need to go out of the world” (1 Cor. 5:10). We leave their judgment to God. However, it *is* the church’s responsibility to judge its own members who are living a double life of unrepentant sin, because by doing so they are besmirching

⁵⁸ Ibid., IV.i.15, 1029.

the name of Christ and belying the corporate witness of the church. Jesus is, indeed, the friend of tax collectors and sinners (Matt. 11:19; Luke 7:34), but he

gave himself up for [the church], that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish (Eph. 5:25-27).

Sinners who spurn God's grace by refusing to repent have no part in the bride of Christ. Church discipline ensures that the church remains distinguishable from the world. And when it is exercised with faith, sobriety, and humility, it often becomes, by God's merciful grace, a means of restoring wayward sinners (Matt. 18:15; Gal 6:1).

A True Church

When the resurrected Jesus met with his disciples on the road to Emmaus, Jesus did two things with them. “[B]eginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27), and “he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them” (Luke 24:30; cf. 22:19). It was when Jesus “opened to [them] the Scriptures” (Luke 24:32) and “took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them” (Luke 24:30; cf. 22:19) that “[their] hearts burn[ed] within [them]” (Luke 24:32) and “their eyes were opened” to recognize Jesus (Luke 24:31).

A true church is a gathering of believers where the Word of Christ is spoken and the Bread of Christ is broken. Such a church is a battering ram of Christ against which the gates of Hades cannot stand.