

The Three Marks of the True Church

by Dr. C. Matthew McMahon

Salvation cannot be obtained except through the true Church of Jesus Christ.¹ Thus, it would be gravely important to make a distinction between false churches (who do not profess the true religion of Jesus Christ) and true churches which do and hold to the pattern of sound doctrine. In such distinctions there are certain external marks of the visible church in which it can be distinguished from false dens of iniquity and synagogues of the Devil. These marks are external signs which are necessary and essential, and those things known must give a certain and infallible impression of the truth that it is invariably attached.

In viewing the marks of the true church, one must be sure that the category by which these marks are measured are done as they so reflect the invisible church, but are necessary to the visible church. This is not a generality, but rather the means by which the visible church may be distinguished between heretical and false churches. The true visible church will reflect a certain measure (some more and some less) to the invisible church. Such marks are bound up in the classic Reformed formulation of the pure preaching of the Word of God as sound doctrine, with its lawful administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of censure and discipline pressing a holiness of life and obedience to the Word preached and taught. Acts 2:42 says, “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.” Three main things are mentioned here: continuing steadfastly in sound doctrine (handed down by the apostles), fellowship (by which unity and communion appear as opposite to judicial censure and discipline), and the regular administration of the sacraments (which is the general term of “breaking bread”). All these are to be washed in prayer. As Turretin says on this passage, “Therefore, wherever the doctrine of the apostles and the legitimate use of the sacraments and of prayers are, there the true church certainly is.”¹

Even from the beginning of the apostle's teachings after the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, doctrinal decline began as a result of ungodly practices and persecution. There was a need for establishing the true marks of the church. This happened over the course of five centuries of theological and political turmoil. As Robert Reymond says, “Church historians are fairly unanimous in their observation that the church in many areas of the then known world rather quickly departed from the pure gospel and teaching of the apostles and began to espouse defective views of the Trinity and the person and work of Christ, and to advocate Pelagian and sacerdotalistic version of salvation.”² Here the marks of the church were critically needed to ensure the continuation of the true church against the false church.

¹ This sounds more like a Roman Catholic statement than reformed. It's not. Salvation is not justification alone. In a general sense, salvation is a right response to the proclamation of the true Gospel, and it includes our sanctification within the context of the Church. We are not saved by confessing a false orthodoxy; and we are not sanctified by exercising a false orthopraxis. And so, in that sense at least, our salvation depends on a true church which exhibits the three marks that Dr. McMahon describes here – *WH Gross, Colorado Springs CO 2008.*

Mark 1: Sound Doctrine (John 8:31, 47; 14:23; Gal. 1:8-9; 2 Thess. 2:15; 2 Tim. 3:16-4:4; 1 John 4:1-3; 2 John 9-11)

The first mark of the church is the pure preaching of the Word of God and sound doctrine, for without this, the church could not possibly exist. Such a mark houses a certain amount of flexibility since some true churches are more pure or less pure than others. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* states, “The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error.”³ Though some churches have a purer understanding of the Word than others, the Scriptures demonstrate this mark as essential to the visible church from a host of passages. Here, the Word of God is of paramount importance to the life and vitality of the church. Ephesians 5:26 says, “...that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word.” James 1:18 states, “Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth.” 1 Timothy 3:15 says, “...but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.” In John 10:27 Jesus demonstrates the unbelieving Jews were not part of His church, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.” This is not simply of the elect alone, but also of the whole church. It is necessary by extension that the whole church follows the voice of the Shepherd.

Also, one must be aware that the keeping of the Word of God is a necessary mark by which Jesus will be among those who do so. John 8:31-32 states, “Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” The opposite is equally true, for if they do not abide in His Word, then He will not be in the midst of them. In John 8:47 the same is said of those who hear, “He who is of God hears God's words.” In John 14:23 the promise extends to the fellowship of Christ with the believer, “Jesus answered and said to him, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him.”

One should consider the purity of sound doctrine as the example given by the apostolic church in the narratives of Acts. Acts 2:42 is among the preeminent passages which has already been quoted, “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.” Without following the doctrine of the apostles as it has been handed down by Christ to them, there would be no church. But those that follow sound doctrine are among those who profess true religion. If there are those who do not profess this true religion, or are deviant from it, then they are not part of the true church. 2 John 1:9 says clearly, “Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son.” And this admonition is linked to John's practical application in this in verse 10, “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him.” Purity, in this manner, should be seen in the

fundamental doctrines of the church that entails its being. Thus, concerning this first mark, the visible church holds to the sound pattern of doctrine which has been given to it by God. Psalm 147:19 states, “He declares His word to Jacob, His statutes and His judgments to Israel.” As Calvin says, “Let it therefore be a fixed point, that a holy unity exists amongst us, when, consenting in pure doctrine, we are united in Christ alone.”⁴

It should be noted that some Reformed theologians stop at this point, and simply rest the *esse* of the church (its being) to the mark of sound doctrine following the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. James Bannerman, for example, holds this view. He says, “The Westminster Confession limits the definition of a Church to the profession of the true religion, as the one essential mark of a true Church.”⁵ *The Westminster Confession of Faith* does in fact say, “The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.”⁶ Bannerman does say, however, “There is no doubt that the profession of the true faith by a Christian Church will, in all ordinary circumstances, necessarily lead to the establishment and administration of the sacraments also; and in this way the profession of the faith may be said to imply or infer the outward ordinances likewise.” This latter statement is the consensus view of the Reformed Church. Yet, Bannerman does stress that “the possession of the truth, is, on the contrary, fundamental and essential to the idea of a Church, is apparent from the fact that the Church was instituted for the truth, and not the truth for the Church.”⁷ In this way, the fundamental importance of sound doctrine must be at the head of the essential marks of the Church, since, by the profession of the “true religion” and that alone under girds the foundation upon which any ordinances may follow. However, any rejection of the ordinances or of church discipline would necessarily demonstrate that the body professing such a rejection is not the true Church since they are rejecting sound doctrine. In this way, the fundamentals of the faith (1 Cor. 1:2; 12:12-13; Psa. 2:8; Rev. 7:9; Rom. 15:9-12) are of grave importance to the viability of the Church.

Mark 2: Right Administration of the Sacraments (1 Cor. 10:14-17, 21; 11:23-30)

The second distinguishing mark of the true church is the right administration of the sacraments, which is birthed by sound doctrine and spills over into the unity of fellowship. It is certainly true that where right doctrine is found, there will be a necessary overflow of that right doctrine into the teaching of the sacraments, or means of grace. Berkhof says, “The sacraments should never be divorced from the Word, for they have no content of their own, but derive their content from the Word of God; they are in fact, a visible preaching of the Word.”⁸ The sacraments have been instituted in the church by Christ and are presented in the Bible as to the manner in which they are to be dispensed. The sacraments are seals of the Covenant of Grace and intended for the partakers of the Covenant of Grace alone. As the *Westminster Confession of Faith* states,

“Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ, and his benefits; and to confirm our interest in him: as also, to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the church, and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to his Word” (Romans 4:11; Gen. 17:7, 10, 11; Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 11:23; Rom. 6:3-4; Col. 2:12; 1 Cor. 10:16; 11:25-26; Gal. 3:27; Exod. 12:48; Gen. 34:14; 1 Cor. 10:21; Rom. 6:3-4; Gal. 3:27; 1 Pet 3:21; 1 Cor. 5:7-8; 10:16).⁹

Even though various churches may “claim” to have the sacraments, this does not argue that they are lawfully or correctly dispensed. As a’Brakel states, “One church uses them either as a symbol of unity or as a mere external commemoration of the suffering of Christ, while another church assumes the external signs to be Christ Himself, attributing Christ’s efficacy to them, thereby negating the nature of the sacraments.”¹⁰ The correct *administration* of the sacraments must *accompany* the sacraments themselves for them to be used *as a means of grace*. The sacraments, in this case, can never be divorced from the Word of God and must be dispensed accordingly. They should be administered by lawful ministers, in accordance with the divine institution, and only to believers and their seed (Genesis 17:6; Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38-42; 1 Cor. 11:23-30).

Mark 3: The Right Administration of Discipline (Matthew 18:17; Acts 20:28-31a; Rom. 16:17-18a; 1 Cor. 5:1-5, 13; 14:33, 40; Gal. 6:1; Eph. 5:6, 11; 2 Thess. 3:14-15; 1 Tim. 1:20; 5:20; Titus 1:10-11; 3:10; Rev. 2:14-16a; 2:20).

The third distinguishing mark of the true church is the holiness of her members which is directly related to the right administration of church censure and discipline. This is exceedingly important for the maintaining of sound doctrine and for the right administration of the sacraments. This has also become known as the “power of the keys” by which the officers of the church of Christ who have been given such rights, may exercise the divine right to include or exclude those whom Christ has commanded to include or exclude. The keys, in this regard, are a visible proclamation of the Word of God, just as the sacraments are a visible preaching of it.

Under the Lord Jesus Christ the entire body of Christians are united. He is the sole King of the Church, and in this role of Kingship (in differentiation to His prophetic and priestly offices) He “executes the office of a king, in calling out of the world a people to himself, and giving them officers, laws, and censures, by which he visibly governs them; in bestowing saving grace upon his elect, rewarding their obedience, and correcting them for their sins, preserving and supporting them under all their temptations and sufferings, restraining and overcoming all their enemies, and powerfully ordering all things for his own glory, and their good; and also in taking vengeance on the rest, who know not God, and obey not the gospel” (Acts 15:14-16; Isa. 4:4-5; Gen. 49:10; Psa. 110:3; Eph. 4:11-12; 1 Cor. 12:28; Isa. 33:22; Matt. 18:17-18; 1 Cor. 5:4-5; Acts 5:31; Rev. 2:10; 22:12; Rev. 3:19; Isa. 63:9; 1 Cor. 15:25; Psa. 110:1-2; Rom. 14:10-11;

Rom. 8:28; 2 Thess. 1:8-9; Psa. 2:8-9).¹¹ Here Christ has given keys, commanding to keep out and to cast out all those who do not hold to sound doctrine nor live in accordance with sound doctrine. Christ instructs the disciples in Matthew 18:17, “And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.” God is against such and commands they be judged by the courts of the Church. Paul says, “But those who are outside God judges. Therefore “put away from yourselves the evil person” (1 Corinthians 5:13). He also teaches this in 2 Thessalonians 3:14, “And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed.” The church can be identified in this way with the keys.

The correct use of church discipline must be in accordance with sound doctrine and determined by the Word of God. Those who fall under judicial censure must be excluded, and those who are not must be included by the right administration of such power. If the church fails to exercise the power of the keys, and rejects the use of them, it cannot be said to be a true Church. However, as imperfection is to be found in every church, this imperfection does not nullify the church as a true church if it seeks to use the keys soundly. It must, though, seek the right administration of church discipline otherwise the church would become overrun with those who do not follow the pattern of sound doctrine or profess the true religion.

It must also be noted that *discipline* is separated into three categories: 1) ecclesiastical discipline, 2) administrative discipline, and 3) judicial discipline. Ecclesiastical discipline is the exercise of authority given the Church by the Lord Jesus Christ, to instruct and guide its members and to promote its purity and welfare. This is discipline in which is exhortive, not corrective. It is exhortive since it revolves around teaching and preaching, but may be corrective only in the sense that it sustains true doctrine over false doctrine. Administrative discipline refers to the ordering of governing records and procedures, which includes: inspection, training, guardianship and control which the church maintains procedurally over its members, its officers and its courts; the purpose of its exercise is that all rights may be preserved and all obligations discharged in its administrative functions. Judicial discipline, in a restricted and technical sense, signifies judicial process. The purpose of judicial discipline is to vindicate the honor of Christ, promote the purity of His Church and reclaim the offender.¹² Such matters of judicial process form the manner in which the Church should follow Matthew 16 and 18.

Judicial censure as a mark of the church follows a given structure based on the teachings of church discipline in Matthew 16 and 18. In judicial discipline there are four degrees of censure: admonition, rebuke, suspension and excommunication. Admonition consists in tenderly and solemnly confronting the offender with his sin, warning him of his danger and exhorting him to repentance and to greater fidelity to the Lord Jesus Christ. Rebuke is a form of censure more severe than admonition. It consists of setting forth the serious character of the offense, reproving the offender and exhorting him to repentance and to greater to the Lord Jesus Christ. Suspension

is a form of censure by which an officer or other member of the church is deprived of certain privileges, for a definite or indefinite period of time. Excommunication is the most severe form of censure, and is only resorted to in cases aggravated by persistent impenitence. It consists of a solemn declaration by the judicatory that the offender is no longer considered a member of the Body of Christ.¹³ These ought to follow those who uphold the true measure of ecclesiastical discipline so define as that which is judicatory.

Conclusion

The true Church of Jesus Christ manifests itself by a true confession of Christ and His truth as seen in the above marks. There must be taken into account the reality that the Church will be more or less visible as a result of its inherent sinfulness and imperfections. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* says, “This catholic church has been sometimes more, sometimes less visible. And particular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them” (Rom. 11:3-5; Acts 2:41, 47; 9:31; 18:8-10; Acts 2:41-42; 1 Cor. 5:6-7; Rev. ch. 2-3). This external condition should be of great importance to the members of the visible church since the Church should always be a light on hill (Matthew 5:14) and a beacon to those traveling and wandering about the darkness of the world. There is nothing the local church should fear more than to have her light extinguished or her candlestick removed by Christ because of its deterioration into error, or ungodly practices (Rev. 2:5). The desire of the local assembly should be that it glorifies Christ in its striving to be a visible light of hope with the Gospel in her community, city, and nation; even the world. This visible manifestation is, as the *Westminster Confession of Faith* said, the profession of the “true religion.” It is for this purpose that the Church gathers together to hear the Word of God preached, to partake of the sacraments, and keep itself unspotted from the world (James 1:27). In this there is true religion. Thus they are able to walk just as Christ did. As John says, “He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked” (1 John 2:6). Here the visible marks of the true church should be seen, and will be seen *if the Word of God is rightly taught*.

Source: <http://www.apuritansmind.com/Pastoral/McMahonThreeMarksTrueChurch.htm>

¹ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Vol. 3 (Phillipsburg, P&R Publishing: 1997) 89.

² Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, (Nashville, Thomas Nelson Publishers: 1998) 838.

³ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 25:5, Of the Church.

⁴ John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, (Dallas, Protestant Heritage Press: 1995) 129.

⁵ James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ Vol. 2* (New York, Westminster Publishing House: 2002) 61.

⁶ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 25:2, Of the Church.

⁷ Bannerman, 62.

⁸ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdman's Publishing Company: 1988) 577-78.

⁹ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 27:1, Of the Sacraments.

¹⁰ Wilhelmus a'Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, Vol. 2 (Carlisle, Soli Deo Gloria: 1993) 36.

¹¹ The Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 45.

¹² RPCGA Book of Church Order, D1:1-1:2

¹³ For a full treatment of biblical church discipline see Jay Adam's work, *A Manual for Church Discipline*.