

Life Together...



CALLED INTO
THE COMMUNITY
OF FAITH

The Marks of the True Church

Thesis: *The gospel is the essential mark of the Church.*

The title of this current series is *Life Together: called into the community of faith*. In my first sermon I pointed out that, yes, you were saved as individuals but the Holy Spirit immediately placed you into a body, the Body of Christ. Into this community you were called and in this community you live out your common faith. The idea of a freelance, private, independent, individualistic, Lone Ranger faith is completely contrary to both the spirit and the letter of true Christianity. So the goal of my efforts on July 13 was to help you begin to turn a corner in terms of how you actually *think* about the Church. Indeed, the point of my first message was this: when it comes to the Church, to think correctly is to think corporately.

This shift in mentality is like that of an independent single man who takes a wife and within a few years finds himself with several children. His thinking changes not just in the sense that he now “takes his family into consideration.” Rather, his thinking changes in that he simply can no longer define himself or interpret his pattern of living in isolation from his precious ones. Such a corporate mentality ought to characterize every professing Christian.

Last Sunday I put forward an answer to the question: what is it that binds this community together? What is the fundamental thing you have in common. The Bible teaches that you share a common life in Christ. You are joined to Him in both a representative and a vital union. Everything else you have in common is a consequence of this single fundamental spiritual reality. I closed with these words from A. A. Hodge, "Since all true believers are thus intimately united to Christ as the common Head of the whole body, and the Source of a common life, it follows that those same believers must be intimately united together" (*The Confession of Faith*, p. 324).

Today we focus our attention upon what historically have been referred to as "the marks of the church." In the first sermon I distinguished the visible and invisible church. The invisible church consists of all the elect – all the chosen of God - of all the ages. The visible church consists of all those on earth at a given time who profess the true faith along with their children. Now one cannot pull up the invisible church on a monitor, click select all, copy it, then paste it in the visible church file and leave it at that. The two are not identical because unbelievers may be, and actually are, members of the visible church. So how are we to discern the true church? G. I. Williamson says, "we may say that the true Church becomes visible, not by an identification of persons, but by an identification of presence. The true Church of Christ (his body of elect persons) will manifest itself, not by disclosure that particular persons are elect, but by a disclosure of certain things that true believers will do (even though there be hypocrites mixed in with them) ... It is the presence of these activities of elect persons which makes the body of Christ visibly evident" (*The Westminster*

Confession of Faith, p. 189). These evidences have historically been referred to as the marks of the church.

Many will remember the game show, *To Tell the Truth*. Hosted first by Bud Collyer and later by Gary Moore the format was simple. Three contestants were introduced as the same person and then Collyer or Moore would read the information about the individual. One contestant was telling the truth and the other two were lying. The four panelists would question each of the contestants and then vote for the one they thought was telling the truth. All three of the contestants made money when the panelists would vote for one of the impostors. After the votes were cast the host would then say the familiar, “Will the real (whoever) please stand up.” Imagine that three bodies, all claiming to be the true church, were being questioned. How would you know which was the real church and which ones were the impostors? What infallible criteria could be employed to verify that one’s claim of authenticity was valid? What would mark one of the three as genuine?

The classical marks of the church are delineated in the Nicene Creed (325 AD). “We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.” The marks are four – unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. In terms of unity “there can be only one true church – that which was founded by the Lord Jesus Christ and made viable and visible by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit” (Bloesch, *The Church*, p. 100). In terms of holiness, the church is holy in the sense that it is called out and cleansed by God to be His peculiar possession. In terms of catholicity, the church is comprehensive or universal. In terms of apostolicity, “the faith of the church must stand in continuity with the enduring witness [of the apostles]” (Bloesch, p. 102).

Edmund Clowney points out, “the Reformers continued to affirm the attributes of the church from the Nicene Creed. They protested, however, against the external and institutional way in which the Roman Catholic apologists interpreted them. [For example, unity was expressed in terms of organizational oneness. Apostolicity was expressed in terms of uninterrupted succession from Peter.] As we have seen, [the Reformers] pressed for a biblical and spiritual understanding of the church’s attributes. Above all, the Reformers emphasized the meaning of apostolicity. To be apostolic, the church must be built upon the doctrine of the apostles (I Cor. 3:10-11; Eph. 2:20, 3:4-5). Not the pretended chair of Peter, but the *teaching* of Peter was the real mark of apostolicity. The Reformation made the Gospel, not ecclesiastical organization, the test of the true church” (*The Church*, p. 101).

Now let’s make sure we understand what the Reformers meant when they spoke of the Gospel. I want to read, with annotations, from a paper by Lutheran theologian, J. A. O. Preus. “The classical Reformed and Lutheran traditions have maintained that the doctrine of justification is ... the article upon which the Church stands [or] falls ... in the minds of the reformers, the doctrine of justification is synonymous with the Gospel. Now when they spoke that way they intended to affirm the absolute necessity of the message of the Gospel for the Church's continuing existence. The message that sinners are justified before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith alone, apart from works of the law is absolutely necessary for the Church to be the Church.

According to the reformers, this Gospel (or the doctrine of justification) stands over the Church as the criterion of the Church's authenticity. It is the judge of what is truly the Church and what is not. It is the presence of this Gospel, in its

verbal [and] visible forms (i.e., Word and Sacraments), that identifies the Church of Jesus Christ and distinguishes it from every other organization or sect. Where this Gospel is, there you have the Church. Where you do not have evidence of this Gospel, you do not have visible, and therefore trustworthy, evidence of the Church. It is true that only God can see into the heart to determine if a person has faith. God can discern the true Church in its inner (or invisible) sense. But we cannot see into the heart. We are limited to what we can see. We can see and hear the Gospel. So, the Gospel, or the doctrine of justification, becomes the only visible or audible indicator of the existence of the Church.

Now that we've seen that the doctrine of justification is crucial, let's take a closer look at it to see its essential components. The Apostle Paul does a very helpful job of identifying these elements in his masterful summary of the doctrine of justification in Romans 3:21-24: *"But now a righteousness [or justification] from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness [or justification] from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."*

Thus, the Gospel first of all finds its center in the work of God in Christ. Secondly ... the Gospel is about what God did for us in Christ, not what God does in us or through us as a result of what Christ did. Third, since it is genuinely "Gospel" (i.e., good news), the doctrine of justification stresses the sole sufficiency of Christ's work on behalf of [guilty sinners] (*solo Christo*). Thus, in the fourth place, the doctrine of justification recognizes and genuinely honors the fact that our favorable standing before God is due solely to the grace of God (*sola gratia*). Placing the Gospel at the center, therefore, means that we will give credit

for our salvation nowhere except to God in Christ. The Gospel gives the glory to God alone (*soli Deo gloria*), for God's grace is the sole sufficient cause of our salvation before God. Finally, speaking the Gospel in a way that places Christ at the center means that we must acknowledge that a person's salvation is brought about alone through faith (*sola fide*, see Rom. 1:17), as a means of receiving the benefits of Christ's work on the cross (*The Doctrine of Justification: The Article on which the Church Stands and Falls*, ©2002 Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals). The Reformation made this Gospel the test, the mark of the true Church.

Martin Luther suggested seven marks of the church. Of the proclamation of the Word Luther says, "We are speaking of the external word, preached orally by men like you and me, for this is what Christ left behind as an external sign, by which his church, or his Christian people in the world, should be recognized. Now, wherever you hear or see this word preached, believed, professed, and lived, do not doubt that the true ... Christian holy people must be there, even though their number is very small" (*Marks of the Body of Christ*, pp. vii-viii). Of Christian baptism and the Lord's Supper he says, "For as was said above of the word, wherever God's word is, there the church must be; likewise, wherever baptism and the sacrament are, God's people must be, and vice versa" (p. ix). Of discipline Luther says, "God's people are recognized by the office of the keys exercised publicly. That is, as Christ decrees in Matthew 18:15-20, if a Christian sins, he should be removed; and if he does not mend his ways, he should be bound in his sin and cast out. If he does mend his ways, he should be absolved" (p. ix). To these four Luther added ordination, catechesis, and discipleship or suffering. All, however, could be rightly subsumed under the heading of the Gospel.

John Calvin reduced the marks to two. He says, “Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists (*Institutes*, Book 4. I. 9, p. 1023). Article 29 of the Belgic Confession (1561) states, “The marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if it maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church. Hereby the true Church may certainly be known, from which no man has a right to separate himself.” The gospel alone is the essential mark of the church and there are three dimensions to this mark.

The first dimension is this: **the proclamation of the Gospel in the ministry of the Word.** I Timothy 3:15 says, *but in case I am delayed, I write so that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.* “The great mark of the church is the message it proclaims: the gospel of salvation from sin and eternal death through the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who alone is the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (Clowney, *The Church*, p. 103). “The apostolicity of the church, therefore, means that the church is built on the foundation of the apostolic gospel. All other attributes of the church derive from this” (Clowney, p. 102). Luther says, “To qualify as a mark of the church, the word must be orally preached, and believed, professed, and lived” (*Marks of the Body of Christ*, p. 4). Indeed, we are obligated to ask some serious questions regarding any church to which we might attach ourselves. Does the minister regularly have a text? Does he explain the text? Does he seek, by the power of the Spirit, to apply that text to

my conscience? Does he seek to build me up (edification), hold me up (consolation), and fire me up (exhortation)? Does he preach the whole counsel of God? Does he preach all Scripture or just pet texts? Does he cut with the Law and then apply the balm of the Gospel to the conviction and comfort of my soul? Does he seek to find and show Christ in every text? If not, you may be in the wrong church.

The second dimension is this: **the portrayal of the Gospel in the Sacraments.** The gospel comes to you through signs that you can see, touch, taste, smell, and hear. The water is a symbol of cleansing. The bread is a symbol of Christ's body broken for sinners. The cup is a symbol of Christ's blood shed for the forgiveness of sins. Together, the spoken Word and the visible Word bear testimony that *Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God* (I Pet. 3:18). Clowney adds, "The sacraments also remind us of our fellowship with one another as we receive the Lord's blessing: they *require* corporate worship. The Lord's Supper is not a self-served, frozen TV dinner, enjoyed alone before the television screen. Baptism is not to be celebrated in the privacy of one's bath or shower. Western culture has made religion a private matter, tolerating Christian faith that does not go public or behave in ways that are politically incorrect" (*The Church*, pp. 272 – 273).

Friday evening I stumbled upon a religious program on TV. The Lord's Supper was the topic of discussion and Mr. Perry Miller was offering a private communion set for a donation of \$40. It resembled a little travel kit. A container for the bread, two small stainless steel chalices, and a vial for the wine all in a very nice leather pack with a belt loop on the back. The idea is that the believer can steal away in the airport, at school, or at work and enjoy his own little

private communion – unaccompanied by the Word of God, unattended by the people of God, administered *to himself by himself for himself* - the whole concept fraught with Biblical and theological error. Beloved, a healthy familiarity with the marks of the church will aid you in spotting such error and in recognizing those who propagate them.

The third dimension is this: **the preservation of the Gospel in discipline.** Church discipline is exercised in both a broad and narrow sense. In its broad sense discipline is all of the training, instruction, counseling, and encouraging that goes on within the community of faith. In its narrow sense discipline is the judicial censure inflicted by the elders of the church. The Puritan, William Ames observed, “Discipline is usually associated by the best theologians with the word and sacraments in the marks of the church” (*Marrow*, p. 199). Indeed “In the preaching of the word, the will of God is set forth and really applied to [give birth to] and increase faith and obedience. In the administration of the sacraments the will of God is applied to persons through the seals to confirm faith and obedience. In the exercise of discipline the will of God is also applied to persons in censure to remove the vices contrary to true faith and obedience” (Ames, p. 199). Indeed, it is through discipline that the integrity of the gospel is preserved within the community of faith and before a watching world.

Why is it important that we know these marks of the church? The **first**, and most obvious, reason is that familiarity with the marks will help you distinguish between true and heretical churches. **Second**, familiarity with the marks will serve to raise your confidence level that APC is, in fact, on the right track. You will see more clearly that a healthy ministry of Word and Sacrament is what it’s all about. You may say, hey, this thing about weekly communion is making

more sense all the time. **Third**, familiarity with the marks will serve to confirm the importance of the Gospel in the ministry of the church. You will say with the rest of us, “I want a ministry that tastes like the Gospel, smells like the Gospel, sounds like the Gospel, feels like the Gospel, and looks like the Gospel. **Fourth**, familiarity with the marks will provide a reliable and Biblical basis for deciding which church to join. **Fifth**, familiarity with the marks will help you to safely navigate the confusing and fragmented church landscape.

I read an article in last Tuesday’s Star-Telegram (7/22/03) about the auto industry and one car in particular. “The [Chrysler] Pacifica is in the vanguard of a wave of new vehicles aimed at increasingly specific groups of customers. Over the next three years, U.S. car buyers will have an unprecedented number of choices as manufacturers unveil nearly twice as many models as usual. Automakers are aiming for every niche of a marketplace that has fragmented with the rest of popular culture. ‘Haven’t we, as a society, become catered to? Our individual whims?’ said George E. Hoffer, an economics professor at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia, who studies the auto industry. ‘Everything has become so much more segmented, whether it’s restaurants, category-killer stores, radio, TV and now automobiles.’ “ (Greg Schneider, *Driving the Market*).

And I would add the church to that list. The marks steady the saint as you seek to sort through the proliferation of independent fellowships and parachurch ministries, the innocuous preaching and eviscerated worship, the disguising of distinctive doctrines, and the neglect of theological precision.

Sixth, familiarity with the marks may help put an end to knee-jerk decisions to leave a solid church. People leave good churches for the flimsiest of reasons. G. I. Williamson says rightly, “If a believer were to separate from a church because of any and every imperfection he could belong to no visible church at all” (*The Westminster Confession of Faith*, p. 191).

I close with the **seventh** reason. Familiarity with the marks will help you recognize what is vital. Calvin says, “But, as soon as falsehood breaks into the citadel of religion and the sum of necessary doctrine is overturned and the use of the sacraments is destroyed, surely the death of the church follows – just as a man’s life is ended when his throat is pierced or his heart is mortally wounded” (*Institutes*, Book 4, Chapter 2, p. 1041).

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The Family Man

Last Sunday:

What is it that binds this community together? What is the fundamental thing you have in common?

The Bible teaches that you share a _____ in Christ.

Everything else you have in common is a _____ of this single fundamental spiritual reality.

“Since all true believers are thus intimately united to Christ as the common Head of the whole body, and the Source of a common life, it follows that those same believers must be intimately united together” (A. A. Hodge).

The visible and invisible church

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The marks are four – unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolocity.

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Martin Luther

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_____ ... _____ ... to these four Luther added ordination,
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“The marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of
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of the _____ as instituted by Christ; if church
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The Three Dimensions

the _____ of the Gospel in the ministry of the Word

the _____ of the Gospel in the Sacraments

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