

The Marks of the Church

by Rev. Tom Aicken

Many articles have been written on the marks of the Church, identifying them as being one, holy, catholic (universal) and apostolic. These, however, are better described not as marks but as attributes of the Church. The marks of a true church, what to look for in distinguishing it from innumerable counterfeit churches, parachurches and other religious organizations, are the pure preaching of the Word of God, the faithful administration of the sacraments (Baptism and the Lord's Supper), and church discipline (specific measures taken to encourage that the ministry of the Word and sacraments is dutifully received).

The Holy Bible, consisting of the sacred Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, is the inspired, and therefore inerrant Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and life. In light of that, first among the marks of the Church is preaching, for this is the means the Lord our God is pleased to use to make His Word known (Rom. 10:14-17). The apostle Paul did not shun to declare the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27), focusing particularly on the message of Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor. 2:1-5). He understood that he was not preaching the Word of God at all apart from that because he knew that the whole Bible, Old Testament and New Testament alike, is all about Christ Jesus and His atoning death for sinners. There is no other gospel (Gal. 1:6-10). As this was the principal part of Paul's own ministry (1 Cor. 1:17), so he instructed others to preach as well (2 Tim. 4:1-5).

Sadly, this kind of preaching has been abandoned in too many pulpits today, having been replaced with theatre, entertainment, or even 'how to' messages which focus on ways to improve one's life rather than on Christ Himself. People are too easily drawn into such assemblies, and, once in the door, they may not recognize their own need to leave or sense any urgency for doing so. Having started on that slippery slope of carelessness, one can make an unforeseen and relatively effortless fall into every kind of fable, false doctrine and even unprincipled behaviour. Let us follow, rather, the good example of the Bereans (Acts 17:10,11) who searched the Scriptures daily to find out if what the apostles were preaching was consistent with what they had been taught and knew to be true (see also 1 Thess. 5:21,22).

If the first mark of the Church is preaching, the oral Word, the second mark consists of the sacraments, what might well be called the visible Word. Let it be noted that neither water baptism nor the celebration of the supper contains any special blessing beyond what is communicated in preaching. This is not to say that they are unimportant, or that we are free to abandon them, for they are both commanded (Acts 2:38; 1 Cor. 11:24-26) and we are to take advantage of them if we have opportunity to do so. What, then, is the purpose of them? Quite simply, while faith comes by hearing, and is strengthened by applying what is heard, weak faith can also be strengthened somewhat by seeing. God stoops to our weakness in baptism, for instance, in the sprinkling of water, by showing to men their need to be cleansed of sin and by sealing to believers their eternal security. Similarly, He stoops to our weakness in the holy supper, in our eating the bread and drinking the wine, by showing us how it is that we who are Christians are to feed on Christ by faith and to continue doing so if we are to grow in grace and the knowledge of Christ.

Some religious assemblies focus on baptism and the supper, promoting these external signs and symbols over preaching and the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit to that Word on the heart. This is a serious misapplication of the sacraments known as sacramentalism. Rome goes a step further, engaging in sacerdotalism, the practice of attributing to priests the role of mediator, claiming that they have the power to use the sacraments as a means of setting men right with God. This is heresy and is clearly contrary to the plain teaching of the Bible. There is only one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 2:5), and salvation is by faith in Him, not by any works of the law or sacramental privilege bestowed by a priest (Rom. 3:21-26). Other assemblies go to the opposite extreme, such as the Salvation Army, neglecting the sacraments altogether and insisting that they are not important.

The third mark of the Church is discipline. What happens when professing members of a church forsake the ministry of God's Word, neglect the sacraments, and become noticeably careless in their whole manner of life? This is when established steps of discipline need to be exercised (Matt. 18:15-17), and, as difficult as that may be, love for the wayward soul demands that it be done. It helps to remember that whom the Lord loves He chastens (Heb. 12:6-11), and that church discipline is one arm of that chastening.

In our day many members of churches mistakenly think that “judge not, that you be not judged” (Matt. 7:1,2) means ‘do not interfere with other people’s business – let them live their own life – do not correct others but leave well enough alone’, and because of that we can surely understand why a growing number of such assemblies quickly flee from the responsibility of exercising any kind of discipline on their fellow members. Avoiding discipline is an easy trap to fall into, especially when it is believed that there is scriptural warrant for it, but it is a trap and it is of the devil. If we adopt that view and embrace that careless practice, we can fully expect that within a generation or so everything else the church is supposed to stand for will be lost as well.

Are you looking for a church to attend and support? Are you looking perhaps to move to another part of the country? Before moving anywhere, be sure to scout out the churches within a reasonable driving distance of your desired location to see if they bear, not one or two, but all three of these marks. There are no perfect churches, but all true churches bear these three marks. If all the churches in that area fall short in any of these marks it warrants your looking for another location in which to live.

If any assembly emphasizes preaching, for instance, even if it appears to be Christ-centred preaching but does not exercise discipline on its wayward members (perhaps it does not even acknowledge a formal membership of professing believers who need pastoral care), that is not a church but a preaching station. It denies an essential part of the fellowship (the ‘koinonia’ or partnership) that Christians have been given in the body of Christ, the responsibility they have to and for one another (1 Cor. 5:9-13).

If any assembly makes too much, or too little, of baptism and the supper, that is not a church either, however close it may appear to be one on the surface.

If any assembly elevates church discipline over Word and sacrament, attempting to establish order and decorum through fear and intimidation, that is not a church but a cult. What immediately comes to mind here are the Mormon, Jehovah’s Witness and Amish communities, but there are many others who, with varying degrees of subtlety, try to exercise some kind of discipline to gain control over their followers. Even the preaching and sacraments, if they have them, are too often used in such cases as means to maintain control.

