

The Organisation of the Church

OUTLINE

The marks of the church
The means of grace

INTRODUCTION

When do we call a group of Christians a church? What distinctive marks does it have to have to qualify as a church? At what point would you call a church apostate and say they were once a church but they are a church no longer? What is the bare minimum for having a church? Isn't a church when 2 or 3 are gathered?

Is it a church when:

A few friends meet at a coffee shop to discuss the spiritual message in a film like the Matrix?

When a family is having its daily devotions?

When the staff of a Christian publishing company meet for morning prayer before work?

When the staff of a Christian book shop go on a retreat together?

The group of ladies on a ladies retreat?

When the youth group meets?

When a home cell meets?

When 2 Christians are enjoying God's creation doing a round of golf?

When the bible college students and faculty meet for chapel?

Are mission agencies and evangelistic ministries churches?

Is a soup kitchen event church?

I want to show you why none of these scenarios are properly called, church. As our point of departure we will be using what the Reformers called, the marks of the church. The later reformers and reformed confessions came to a basic consensus that there are three basic ingredients to a true church: the true preaching of the word of God, the proper administration of the sacraments, and the administering of church discipline. Implied within these three is a fourth mark, properly appointed officers of the church, in particular elders who both teach and oversee the disciplinary aspects of the church. And still further the mark of membership is implied as a fifth mark.

Last week we looked at the church as an organism, the Spirit wrought, gospel created reality of our unity, and we showed how what we are determines how we are to act and how we grow. Today I want to continue looking at what the church is, but the other side of the coin, the church as organization more than organism. We will begin by looking at the marks of the church, and then secondly look at the means of grace.

The marks of the church

Usually application comes at the end of a sermon, but I want to begin with it. Perhaps you are sitting here and you are thinking, why is it important to know about the church as an organization? In fact, you may be already opposed because the idea of organization may

have negative connotations for you. But this already shows why it is necessary that we discuss these things. We do live in an age where the church is despised, where confessions are seen as stifling the Spirit, where the moving of the Spirit is associated with no leaders, no preaching, no constitutions, no buildings, no sermons, no membership, no discipline, no rules for how worship should be done.

But imagine with me a few situations: firstly, it is a baptismal service, and your three year old toddler, or grandchild asks you the questions, 'What are they doing, why are they doing that?' Secondly, it is a Communion service and the elements pass before you, your child reaches out to take some of the bread and one of those little cups perfectly suited to little hands, you say 'No.' Afterwards they ask you, 'Why do Christians eat the Lord's Supper, and why can't I have any?' Thirdly, its ten o'clock on a Sunday morning and your teenager is still not up and ready to go to church, you stick your head into their room and tell them to get ready for church, they don't feel like getting out of bed and ask, 'Why do I have to go to church, why can't I just stay at home and listen to a John MacArthur sermon, he is a better preacher than Nick anyway?' Fourthly, your 12 year old comes home from school and a classmate has invited them to go along to church, a Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall. You tell them no and say that the JWs are not a Christian Church. Your 12 year says, 'but they preach from the bible and sing and baptise, why aren't they a church?'

Understanding the organizational aspects of the church, namely the marks of the church and the means of grace help to clarify these things and guide us through the mine field of church related questions. Your generation if you are older might take for granted that going to church is what Christians do, and traditional 'church' is something you accept. However, this generation is challenging everything their parents did and we need to show that church is something established from the Bible, and it is not customizable according to personal preference but had essential elements that make it a church, and deliberate things that need to be done.

The idea of the marks of the church was formulated at the time of the Reformation when the Roman Catholic Church accused the Reformers of leaving the church, when they left Rome. This brought up the whole question whether Rome was a true church or an apostate church, and upon establishing a biblical church what should that look like. The word, the sacraments and church discipline, with the implied ideas of eldership and membership give us a basic definition of a church.

The church of God cannot come into existence nor grow in the Lord without the true preaching of the Gospel. The preaching of the Word of God is essential to the church and cannot exist or be healthy without it. This is not the teaching of one isolated verse but the background assumption in the whole of the NT. One theologian writes, "The New Testament grounds the church in God's revealed truth. The apostles established the church by preaching the Scriptures and their fulfilment. The fellowship of the book of Acts exists among those who continue in the apostolic teaching (Acts 2:42). The growth of the church is described by Luke as the growth of the Word (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20). The ministries by which the church is built up are the ministries of the Word (Eph. 4:11). The apostolicity of

the church, therefore, means that the church is built on the foundation of the apostolic gospel. All the other attributes of the church derive from this.¹

Without this faithful ministry of the word the church cannot exist. Just as God spoke the world into existence, the church is likewise spoken into existence through the ministry of the word. It is not coincidental that God breathed life into Adam and likewise breathed out His word (Gen. 2:7, 2 Tim. 3:16-17). The operation of salvation and the word go hand in hand, James 1:18, 'Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.' 2 Cor. 4:6, 'For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.' Whether it is the preaching or the reading of God's spoken word, it is the only instrument that the Spirit uses to save us. The other verses noted also show that not only are we birthed by the word but fed upon it, sanctified by it and transformed into Christ's image through it (1 Pet. 1:22-23, 2:2; John 17:17; Col. 3:10).

So then, discussions in a coffee shop about the spiritual message in the Matrix, or fellowship around an enjoyment of creation, or a session where each one of us brings an internal word based on our own intuitions, feelings, experiences and thoughts. These are not to be confused with the apostolic teaching which is the staple diet of the church whereby God calls it into existence and strengthens it. We must necessarily reject all views of the church which have undermined this foundational aspect of the church. If there is no word there can be no church.

Baptism was the mark of entrance into the church so is held in high regard with church discipline that regulates who is in or out as important. The word of the gospel creates believers, baptism seals them as believers and the Lord's Supper continues to confirm them as such. Jesus gave the command to be baptised very clearly in the great commission, Matt. 28:18-20. Those who fail in the preaching of the Gospel cannot form churches, those who fail to obey baptism fail to openly identify the church that God has made by His word, and if we fail to practice church discipline with regards to only baptising those who have given a credible confession of faith and admit to the table those who have believed and are sealed as such, they too fail the visible expression of the church. National churches are an example of the break down the doctrine of the church, for baptism and the Lord's Supper are administered indiscriminately, parachurch organizations, those that emphasize the spiritual and inward at the expense of the outward and visible, the salvation army, and other organizations cannot be properly called churches as they do not uphold the NT teaching on who should be admitted.

Baptism is not an issue of us giving names to our children, but God giving His name to us. It is a visible seal of God's invisible grace, a commandment of Christ that should never be neglected. We agree then that baptism does not save, but it certainly does speak about those who are saved and who can legitimately be said to be the church of Christ. The doctrinal minimalism of fundamentalism has undermined the role and importance of

1 E. P. Clowney, *The Church*, p102.

baptism. We should all agree that baptism marks the church visibly. It is those who have come to Christ and identified themselves as disciples in baptism that make up the true church of God. The NT knows of no unbaptized believer after Pentecost.

The Lord's Supper likewise is important because Christ commanded it 1 Cor. 11:24. And it also visibly identifies the church of Christ. The Gospel causes one to be born again and part of the church, baptism marks one outwardly as part of the church, and it is the Lord's Supper which continues to affirm our position as God's children and part of the church. It is when a Christian who has confessed faith and been baptised, who sins impenitently, who are cut off from the table as an indication that they are no longer part of the body of Christ. They are no longer part of the community who have the assurance of their friendship with God expressed in a fellowship meal.

This naturally leads to the last mark which is church discipline. Given the fact that God gave the keys of the kingdom to the church (Matt. 18:18-20; 1 Cor. 5.), the keys being the preaching of the gospel, the administration of baptism, the administration of the table and discipline, the issue of discipline is bound to the marks of the church. It is through the God appointed, authorised elders that baptism is practiced, elders take a pivotal role in regulating who can participate in the table, and it is the elders who ought to lead in disciplinary action to the impenitent and finally bring it to the church. To neglect discipline, that is the true applying of the keys, that is opening the door in visible signs for those who have professed faith, and closing in visible signs of excluding from table fellowship in discipline, to neglect these is, in the words of Calvin, to cut the throat of the church. It will merely be a matter of time before the church is corrupted and dies. We might say that an implied fourth mark of the church is properly functioning church officers. Those churches which do not have officers fulfilling these roles ultimately undermine the identity of the visible church.

So why do we need to have this discussion, is it purely academic? The answer is absolutely not!

Our definition of the church will define how we fulfil the great commission. If we think that all Christ calls us to do is evangelise but not plant churches with elders and discipline who baptise and administer the Lord's table we will plant churches that are weak and destined to be unhealthy.

Our definition of church will help us when we are looking for a spiritual home when we move towns, when our children are looking for places of worship when they go off to university, or when you need to recommend a place for a new convert to go.

This definition will help us evaluate our own health as a church. Are we faithful in preaching the gospel, administering baptism, the Lord's table, and discipline through a plurality of elders? If not we need to become biblical.

Are you individually brainwashed by the doctrinal minimalism of your age and not grafted into the visible church through baptism, partaking of the table regularly, and in submission to an eldership for discipline if necessary? If not then you are not participating in the life of the church as God intended.

The means of grace

Today there is a dichotomy between the Spirit and the Word, but this is an unbiblical division. The sword of the Spirit is the word. The word and the Spirit always work together, if you want the Spirit to work in your church then you have to have the word. We live in an age that has separated emotion from thought, experience from understanding and the church is infected with this false way of thinking.

We believe that the Bible outlines certain things that we ought to do, like sit under apostolic teaching Acts 2:42, read the Bible in public 1 Tim. 4:13, pray together 1 Tim. 2:1-4, observe baptism and the Lord's Supper Matt. 28:18-20, 1 Cor. 11:23, sing in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs Col. 3:16, contribute to the needs of the saints and the expansion of the gospel Acts 2:44-45, Rom. 15:24. We know that if God commands it, then He blesses it, and even though it is foolishness in the eyes of the world, even though it does not measure up to the entertain value and standards of the latest digital advances techniques, it is more powerful and effective because God uses it. We believe it is more powerful to save and sanctify us, and so faithfulness not innovation is our goal.

So when we meet we don't have puppet shows, plays, poetry readings, multimedia presentations, smoke machines, award winning quality music, but those things commanded in scripture.

Millionaire at the coffee shop illustration:

For this reason we have a call to worship from the word that all our meeting will be seen to be at God's command and not simply our idea. Then we sing the word to one another. Then we read the Word in public. Then we give to support the ministry of the word. Then we pray that the word would prosper in the world to the glory of God, praying according to the promises and guidelines of the word. Then we sit under the word. Then we have the promises of the word send us out into the world speaking God's promises over us, and all of this to equip us to do the word in our families, work places, and in everything we do in the week to the glory of God.

How does this apply in your life? Well, when you see that God serves you first when you come to church in order that you can go out and love your neighbour during the week. The most basic form of application is, go to church. Another application is the freedom you feel to do the so called traditional thing, not simply because it is traditional but because you realise that our Christian forebears did them for biblical reasons. This means that when something new comes along, like the Toronto Blessing, or revival meetings that call for a doing away with the regular means of grace, you don't have to feel that you are missing the boat and grieving the Spirit. God works through humble means. You will also have reasons for what we do, and you can instruct your children so that they can see why we do what we do. We can show how every part of what we do is deliberate and biblical and we do it with the expectation that God works through it and so faithfulness not innovation is the key.

