

## CHAPTER 3.

### THE MARKS OF THE CHURCH

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Things are not always what they appear to be. John began working for a new company in town, Dynamic Software Development. Before he was hired, everything seemed positive about the company: the pay, the benefits, the drive to succeed, and the friendly atmosphere. Three months later, though, he realized that the workforce politics at Dynamic were dragging down company morale, and management regularly pressured workers into completing their tasks after hours at home. Things are not always what they appear to be.

The same is true of people. Our Lord Jesus Christ taught this in his Sermon on the Mount. He said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 7:21). In fact, some of these people who say, “Lord, Lord,” may even perform amazing feats: prophesying, driving out demons, and even doing miracles (Matt 7:22). Surely, when people do extraordinary things like that in the name of Jesus Christ, we would assume that they are on the side of our Saviour, as co-workers in God’s service (1 Thess 3:2; 2 Cor 6:1). Yet Christ has a completely different evaluation of such people. He tells them plainly, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness” (Matt 7:23).

How can this be? Christ gives the answer when he identifies these people as “false prophets” (Matt 7:15). In fact, his language becomes even more vivid when he goes on to describe them as teachers who come in

“sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.” To be sure, it is confusing that people can appear to follow Christ so enthusiastically and yet at the same time be opposed to him. However, this is the very nature of falsehood: it confuses, it deceives, it misleads.

A closer look at Scripture reveals that there are many falsehoods that cause disorder and tragedy within the church. The list includes false prophets (Deut 18:22), false visions (Lam 2:14), false teachers (2 Pet 2:1), false teachings (1 Tim 6:20), false brothers (2 Cor 11:26), false apostles (Rev 2:2), and even false messiahs (Matt 24:24). In addition, no one should underestimate how misleading false teachers can be. Our Chief Teacher, Jesus Christ, warns us that not only will many false prophets appear, but that they will also deceive many, “if possible, even the elect” (Matt 24:11, 24). So, if any overconfident Christian thinks that he will easily be able to pinpoint and refute any falsehood, then he should think again and be careful lest he fall for that very same deception (1 Cor 10:12).

For this reason the apostle John reminds God’s people to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). In line with this, the Belgic Confession applies the same principle to churches. All Christians are earnestly called to join a church and not just remain on their own (Art. 28). However, which church should they join? There are so many different churches with different teachings and different practices. How is a sincere Christian to find his way through this ecclesiastical labyrinth? The Belgic Confession answers in this way: “We believe that we ought to discern diligently and very carefully from the Word of God what is the true church, for all sects which are in the world today claim for themselves the name of church” (Art. 29). It then goes on to identify three marks that ought to be used in that process of discerning: the pure preaching of the gospel, the pure administration of the sacraments, and the godly exercise of church discipline.

Christ taught us that an individual may say, “Lord, Lord,” but that this does not necessarily mean he or she is truly serving the Lord. Likewise a

group may say, “We’re the church, we’re the church,” but that does not necessarily mean they are submitting to the Lord as he desires. Therefore Christians must learn to discern what a true, or faithful, church is by using the marks of the church.

Many are reluctant to speak of *true* and *false* churches. They are afraid that it breeds ecclesiastical arrogance and elitism. Their concern is that some churches will look down their nose at other churches, affirming their own superiority and alluding to the others’ inferiority. Such a concern should be taken seriously. At all times the bride of Christ must follow the godly example of her Bridegroom in demonstrating humility, not haughtiness (Phil 2:1–3). However, exercising humility and discerning the spirits are not mutually exclusive activities. In fact, the King of the church commands us to do both (Phil 2:1–3; 1 John 4:1). Therefore, enabled by his Spirit, we ought to do both.

#### THE MARKS IN FOCUS: THE SHEEP FOLLOW CHRIST (JOHN 10:4)

To understand the marks of the church properly, we should begin by ensuring that we are clear about our terms and what they mean. Too often in our discussions about the bride of Christ, matters are lumped together in a rather haphazard fashion and the result is confusion rather than clarity. So, let us narrow down precisely what we need to focus on.

#### **Attributes and Marks**

In the preceding chapter we spoke about the *attributes* of the church. However, now that our attention has turned to the *marks* of the church, we do well to differentiate between the two terms. Perhaps an example will help. Let us say that, while you are at a large family reunion, your aunt gives you a description of her son named William, a cousin whom you have never met. She tells you that he stands five feet and ten inches tall, has dark hair, and is wearing a plaid shirt. With this description, or awareness of these attributes, you can begin searching for William in the crowd.

Now, in order to illustrate the point at hand, let us say that you find no fewer than three men who match those attributes. To make things more difficult for you, they all claim to be William, the son of your aunt. Now what? Well, for starters, you could return to your aunt for help. Perhaps she can give you a test by which you can discern which one is truly her son. For instance, she might inform you that when William was a little boy, your aunt would often sing a hymn, “Holy, holy, holy,” to him while he was playing and that it soon became his favourite hymn. With that added information you can go back to those three men and use this favourite hymn as a litmus test in order to find out who is the true William, the son of your aunt.

Every analogy has its weaknesses, but this one can help us pinpoint the difference between the attributes and marks of the church. The attributes give an overall description of what the church is like. She is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. However, many groups claim to be the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. Therefore we need something more, some kind of test, to determine which ones are true churches. Used together, the three marks—gospel preaching, sacraments, and church discipline—are the ecclesiastical litmus test that helps Christians find a genuine church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Sects and True Church**

The Belgic Confession contrasts the true church with “all sects” (Art. 29). The complete sentence reads: “We believe that we ought to discern diligently and very carefully from the Word of God what is the true church, for all sects which are in the world today claim for themselves the name of church.” Today the word *sect* is often reserved for groups that have extreme views and may even withdraw by themselves and avoid contact with others. That is why we also speak of the sectarian tendencies of those who split off from a certain church and remain in their own isolated little group. Overall, *sect* is a rather negative word. Consequently, the contrast set up in the Belgic Confession between true church and sect might seem to be unduly radical. Are there only two options: a solid, faithful church and a false sect? Is there no room for a new church

that wants to be faithful but still clings to some doctrinal errors? Where does a church which used to be faithful but is now beginning to struggle fit on the spectrum? Is this two-category grid of true church or sect not far too simplistic for our complex ecclesiastical world?

In order to answer these questions, we need to explore the broader meaning of the word *sect*. It originates from the Latin word *sequi*, which means *to follow*. This leads directly into the next question: follow whom? A sect is a group that elevates the teaching of one man, or a particular group of men, above and beyond the Word of God. In this way the group is in danger of becoming a sect when they insist on following their leader's erroneous teaching, even though they are plainly shown the truth from God's own Word. As John Calvin once explained in a sermon on 1 Tim 4:1–3, "So it's not a question of a man or a sect, but it's a question of the teaching which God wants to be observed, and *following the way which he has shown to us.*"<sup>1</sup>

All church groups are following someone. Yet the difference between a true church and a sect lies in whom they are ultimately following. In John 10 our Saviour teaches us whose voice we need to follow. When the watchman opens the gate for the true Shepherd, the sheep who belong to him "hear his voice . . . and [he] leads them out" (John 10:3). In fact, the sheep are so intent on following their own Shepherd that they will not follow a stranger but will run away from him instead because they do not recognize his voice (John 10:5). So, this kind of intensive and exclusive listening to the voice of Christ is the hallmark of a true church. A young church may still have a spiritual journey to make and doctrines to sort out, but so long as they are hearing and heeding the voice of the great Shepherd, they are on the path of faithfulness. Conversely, the church that once followed the Shepherd's voice but now runs after the praise of the populace or the whispering of their own heart is on the path of unfaithfulness, which is ultimately sectarian in the sense that it is following the wrong voice.

1. *Calvin's Commentaries* on 1 Timothy 4:1–3 (emphasis added).

Of course, there is an immense challenge here. Since Christ has ascended, we cannot listen to him directly like the crowds that gathered around Jesus as he walked the hills of Palestine. Now his voice comes to us in the Holy Scriptures. This Word of God is explained to us in the preaching of the gospel, and preachers are fallible human beings. However, it is our responsibility, both communally and personally, to be like the faithful Bereans, double-checking that we hear the voice of our great Shepherd through men rather than the voice of human beings who are trying to gain prestige for themselves by mentioning the name of Christ from time to time (Acts 17:11; 1 Tim 4:1–3).

### **True Church and Hypocrites**

The church of Christ is “a holy congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers” (BC 29). Yet, at any given time, a congregation may have members who give the appearance that they are Christians but, truth be told, are not genuine. They put on a pious show, attending worship and perhaps even being involved in other church activities, but in their heart of hearts they are not grieved by their sins and they do not seek their salvation outside of themselves and in Jesus Christ. Such people are called *hypocrites* in Article 29 of the Belgic Confession.

The difficulty with hypocrites is that only God knows reliably and precisely who these people are. We can only judge a tree by its fruits, that is, a person’s outward actions (Matt 7:15–20), but God can read the innermost recesses of human hearts (Luke 16:15; John 2:25). Of course, most hypocrites have a hard time keeping up their hypocrisy with complete consistency. Sooner or later it usually becomes obvious that people really do not love the Lord from the heart. After all, “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt 12:34). When insincerity and ungodliness begin to manifest themselves, then the church must apply discipline until either the person repents or the unbeliever is removed from the congregation. Since church discipline takes time, the fact remains that at any given moment there may well be hypocrites in a congregation.

The presence of hypocrites, in and of itself, does not disqualify a congregation from being a true church. In fact, Jesus clearly taught that there would be a mixture within his kingdom right until the final Judgment Day (Matt 13:24–29, 47–50). Moreover, the apostle Paul confirms that “not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel” (Rom 9:6). In discerning whether a church is true we must therefore be careful not to simply look at the members and their conduct. With members we will always find weaknesses and, yes, at times even outright hypocrisy. However, the pertinent question is this: does the church as a whole give evidence of the three marks, namely, gospel preaching, sacraments, and church discipline?

With this in mind, the Belgic Confession warns us not to confuse discerning true from false church with distinguishing true Christians from hypocrites. Both discernments are valid and important, but they are not the same exercise. The confession puts it this way:

We are not speaking here of the hypocrites, who are mixed in the church along with the good and yet are not part of the church, although they are outwardly in it. We are speaking of the body and the communion of the true church which must be distinguished from all sects that call themselves the church (Art. 29).

Conversely, there may also be true Christians who are presently members in a false church. Over time, something then needs to change. Either the sincere Christians within that church are able, under the Lord’s blessing, to convince the church that she needs to repent and leave her unfaithfulness behind, or the true Christians will eventually have to “separate from those who do not belong to the church and join this assembly wherever God has established it” (BC 28). However, this does not take away from the fact that at a particular moment there may be true Christians in a false church. Of course, the presence of those true Christians, in and of itself, does not establish the faithfulness of the church. Again, we must distinguish between two equally valid questions: *is the church true or false* and *is the Christian true or false*? The Belgic Confession does this purposefully when it speaks of the marks of the true church and the marks of true Christians in separate paragraphs.

## THE HEART OF THE MATTER: “AS THE CHURCH SUBMITS TO CHRIST” (EPH 5:24)

Now that we have discussed some definitions and distinctions, it is time to zero in on the basic issue at stake here. The Belgic Confession sends us in the right direction when it provides us with a summary: “In short, [the true church] governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and regarding Jesus Christ as the only Head” (Art. 29). It is that last phrase—“regarding Jesus Christ as the only Head”—which needs our attention in the first place. These words steer our hearts in the right direction: to Christ, who bought the church with his precious blood (Acts 20:28).

Following the language of Scripture, the confession describes Christ as the Head of his body, which is the church (Eph 1:22–23; 4:15–16). Still, it is one thing to say that Christ is the only Head of the church, but it is quite another for the church to live consistently out of that truth. By way of comparison, consider for a moment how all the different parts of your body are connected to, and submit to, your head. If your hand moves from right to left, it is because your head gave it the signal to do so. If your feet move forward in order to walk, it is because your head gave them the command to do so. Even the so-called autonomic functions of your body, such as breathing and heart rate, are controlled by the lower part of the brain, the hypothalamus, which is inside your head.

The Holy Spirit also uses this analogy of the head and the body to explain the marriage relationship between the church and Christ. Listen to what he says in Ephesians 5:22–24:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

It is noteworthy that the Holy Spirit moves without interruption or hesitation from the connection between the head and the body, through the submission of wives to husbands, and on into the relationship of the



church to her eternal Bridegroom (Eph 5:23–24). In other words, being the bride of Christ is more than just having a privileged title. It also involves action, a very specific kind of action: submission, and even more specific than that, submission to Christ in everything (Eph 5:24).

In line with this passage, the Belgic Confession sums up the heart of the matter by saying that the true church of Christ “governs itself according to the Word of God, rejecting *all things* contrary to it” (Art. 29). At first glance this may seem to set the standard far too high. After all, how can any church consistently and comprehensively reject all things contrary to the Word of God? Surely no church is perfect, and certainly, every church will have something in its doctrine and life that is at least slightly askew. That is correct, and we do well to admit this about our own church just as much as we recognize it in other churches. At the same time, you will notice that the Belgic Confession does not back off from this high standard because it appears to be too lofty. As we learned at the beginning of this volume, the church is an article of faith, not an analysis of empirical data. Faith is grounded in the Word of God, and God’s Word clearly speaks of a total submission of the bride, the church, to her Bridegroom, the Christ, in everything (Eph 5:24). To shrink back from that standard in order to adjust to the brokenness of this life would not honour the One who died for his bride.

In practical terms, then, this means that the faithful bride of Jesus Christ is always aspiring to greater submission to her Groom. For her this is not a matter of arrogant perfectionism. Quite the opposite, this is an expression of her heartfelt, undying love for him. Why is the true church so eager to reject every single little teaching that contradicts God’s Word? Is this a case of being over-precise about doctrine? Or is this eagerness rooted in haughtiness, superiority, or elitism? No, at least it should not be. The faithful church simply wants to devote herself completely to the Husband who lovingly gave up everything, yes, even himself, in order to redeem her (Eph 5:25). With the holy bond of Christ’s marriage, it really is a matter of all-encompassing love. His total love for her is expressed most fully on the cross, and in turn, her total love for him is expressed most fully in her passion to submit to him.

The marital relationship between Christ and his bride is the right context within which to consider the three marks of the true church. If we extract these marks from their proper scriptural context, things will inevitably go astray and misunderstandings will creep in. To illustrate the point, when a wife is passionately particular about being loyal to her husband in every aspect of her life, she is praised as a faithful bride. However, when a church is passionately particular about submitting to God's Word in every detail of doctrine, it is often criticized as being uncharitable toward others. Why this difference? Most of the time it is because we forget that, properly speaking, the church is a *she*, not an *it*. Alternately, if we remember the church's identity as the bride of Christ, then we should be thankful for her desire to submit to her heavenly Husband in all things. After all, the heart of the matter is marital faithfulness, not rigid fussiness.

#### THE MARKS EXPLAINED

Once the faithfulness of a church is set within its scriptural context, the three specific marks of this church fall more naturally into place. From the outset it should be mentioned that throughout church history there has been some variety in the exact number of marks. John Calvin, for instance, identified two marks, while Martin Luther suggested seven. In the end, these differences have more to do with how things are organized and divided than with actual content. However, for our present purposes the three marks mentioned in the Belgic Confession will serve us well: the pure preaching of the gospel, the pure administration of the sacraments, and church discipline.

#### **The Pure Preaching of the Gospel**

Not only is this *a* mark of the true church, but it is the *first* mark. This position is not accidental. In placing the preaching of the gospel first, the church indicates that she genuinely understands her God-given identity. In the first place, she is not a social club, although her members do certainly enjoy fellowship with each other. She is not a relief agency, although she definitely has concern for the poor and needy. Rather, she

is an assembly of believers who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ (BC 27). However, as an assembly of *believers*, she must focus primarily on the preaching of the gospel because it is precisely through this proclamation that faith is worked and strengthened (Rom 10:14–15; 1 Pet 1:23–25; LD 7, Q&A 21; LD 25, Q&A 65). To say it differently, if there is no preaching of the gospel, there are no believers, and if there are no believers, there is no church. Preaching is therefore a top priority.

Moreover, as the Belgic Confession adds, this preaching must be pure (Art. 29). Please notice that the Confession does not refer to perfect preaching, but to *pure* preaching. There is a marked difference. Outside of the preaching of our Lord Jesus Christ himself (Matt 4:23; 9:35), there is no such thing as perfect preaching. Every preacher is fallible, and no preacher receives a temporary respite from his sinfulness when he steps behind the pulpit to begin preaching. Every sermon will have weaknesses and perhaps even mistakes in it. However, the Belgic Confession is emphasizing something different. The purity of the preaching is linked, immediately thereafter, to “the pure Word of God” (Art. 29). That is to say, the Holy Scripture is not a mixture of human ideas and divine revelation. Instead, it is purely God’s revelation. Likewise, the preaching of the gospel, though imperfect, must strive to be unmixed. The preacher must not go into the pulpit with the idea that he can offer up his own personal insights and opinions, all the while referring here and there to some passages in the Bible. If that is the case, preaching degenerates into a mixture of God’s gospel and man’s ideas (1 Cor 2:13; Col 2:8, 22). In short, it becomes impure. Rather, the preacher must be clear in his mind that his task in the pulpit is to explain, in the very best way that he can, what *God* is saying to his people in the passage chosen for that particular sermon.

Given this need for pure preaching, it is not difficult to anticipate how it connects with the third mark, namely, church discipline. To avoid human opinion and speculation in the pulpit is a steep challenge for any preacher. For this reason he will certainly need the oversight and, if necessary, admonition of his fellow office-bearers, especially the elders, to ensure that he remains faithful to his calling. To be more specific, pure

preaching of the gospel requires a preacher who is sincerely willing to improve the weekly preaching constantly, making every effort to keep it in conformity to God's Word. After all, if God's Word does not govern God's pulpit, how will God's Word govern God's people, the ones who are listening to that preaching from week to week?

Practically speaking, then, those who are seeking a faithful church need to look in the first place for a church where preaching is central in the worship service. Added to that, the preaching must clearly be an exposition of God's Word, not an expression of human opinion. Finally, since the marks of the church are not stagnant signs but living realities, the preaching should be supervised in order to keep it pure and to make it even purer.

### **The Pure Administration of the Sacraments**

The preaching of the gospel is primary while the sacraments are secondary, and therefore subject to the preaching. For that reason you understandably might assume that if the preaching is pure, the administration of the sacraments will also be pure. If that is the case, then is there really a need for a second and separate mark that focuses on the sacraments? Well, perhaps in a perfect world this second mark would be superfluous. However, this world, as well as the church, is anything but perfect, and that is why this second mark is both helpful and effective.

A picture is worth a thousand words, so they say. By way of analogy, you might also say that a sacrament compresses dozens of distinct doctrines within itself. The sacraments are visual signs and seals that represent to our eyes, in a concentrated fashion, the teaching of the gospel. Take, for instance, the sacrament of baptism. To begin with, there would be no need for the washing of baptism if it were not for the filth of sin. Thus, the whole doctrine of original sin is portrayed in the sacrament. Next, the water represents not only the blood of Christ, upon which our justification is founded, but also the Spirit of Christ, who is responsible for our sanctification (LD 26). Baptism is linked to repentance (Matt 3:11) but also to discipleship and spiritual instruction (Matt 28:19–20). Fur-

ther, baptism is a sign of the covenant (Gen 17:11; Col 2:11–12), with the result that Scripture’s entire teaching on the covenant, including both promises and responsibilities, is compressed into the sacrament. In sum, when the sacrament of baptism is administered, most of the major doctrines of salvation are compressed and visually represented before our eyes. Much the same can be said of the Lord’s supper.

In this way the sacraments are a particularly valuable indicator of a church’s faithfulness. Sacraments do not cover spiritual territory that stretches beyond the Word. On the contrary, they cover the same territory, but they do so in a concentrated fashion. This also means that if the sacraments are administered purely, it is a swift yet solid indicator that on the whole the teaching in the church is sound. Conversely, if the sacraments are not administered purely, it is a virtually certain indicator that there are many other problems in the church, most likely related to both doctrine and discipline.

Pulling things together then, when the Belgic Confession speaks of *pure* administration it does not mean *perfect* administration. There is no such thing as a perfectly administered baptism or Lord’s supper. Instead, the Confession is emphasizing the unmixed quality of the administration. In other words, as the sacrament of God is being administered, the church is careful to follow precisely what God says about his sacrament in his Word—nothing less, but also nothing more than that. Sacraments must not become a conglomerate of scriptural revelation and human innovation. If that is the case, then the bride is forgetting who she is. She is not submitting to her heavenly Husband in all things. Instead, she is giving in to a spirit of independentism, which has no place in a relationship where the two have become one.

### **Exercise of Church Discipline**

Discipline is an unpleasant thing (Heb 12:11). We do not enjoy disciplining other people, especially since we are weak and sinful ourselves. We immediately wonder, “Who am I to correct the other person when I need to be corrected myself?” In his unforgettable parable of the man

with a plank in his eye, the Lord Jesus Christ vividly reminds us that discipline begins with ourselves (Matt 7:3–5). True, discipline begins close to home, but it does not stop there, for at the end of that same parable Christ instructs us, “Then you will see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother’s eye” (Matt 7:5). Most people forget about the last part. They are so busy reminding others to take planks out of their own eyes, that they overlook the Lord’s clear instruction that even the little specks need to be removed from our brother’s eye. As the apostle Paul writes, “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness” (Gal 6:1).

In fact, exercising mutual, loving discipline of each other as brothers and sisters in the Lord is something that God’s Word repeatedly and clearly instructs us to do (Matt 5:23–24; 18:15–18; 1 Cor 5:9, 12–13; 2 Thess 3:14). Following natural instinct, we do not want to do it, or if we do, we often wish to use it in a selfish and authoritarian way, which simply protects our prestige rather than seeking to bring reconciliation between God and the sinner. Keeping these things in mind, discipline is another one of those matters of pivotal importance in church life in which the genuineness of our devotion to Christ, or lack thereof, becomes obvious. Is the bride going to listen to her heavenly Husband and discipline members who err in doctrine or lifestyle, or will she avoid the unpleasant duty and go her own way? Is the bride going to discipline in love, and toward repentance, even as her Lord disciplines in love (Heb 12:6), or will she give in to selfish ambition and use discipline merely to oppress and control? This is a key litmus test of a church’s faithfulness.

Beyond this, the faithful church must be a place where submission to Christ is a concrete reality, not just a pious point of discussion. If there is no discipline within a church, then members can discuss true and false teaching but in reality false teaching will never be rejected. As a consequence, false teaching quickly becomes just one more human opinion that is tolerated within the church of Christ. Likewise, if the church follows Christ and dares to say that certain lifestyles are wrong in his sight (e.g., greed or sexual immorality, Eph 5:3), then she must also stand up and correct those who persist in these sins. Otherwise all her talk about

Christian lifestyle is as hollow as it is pious. Commitment to Christ is both talk and walk. Therefore both preaching and discipline are marks of the true church.

#### THE MARKS APPLIED

In conclusion, there are a number of practical points that we should remember when we use the three marks to identify true and faithful churches of the Lord Jesus Christ. The list provided below is incomplete, but hopefully still helpful.

*The marks of the church help genuine believers find faithful churches.*

People can debate for hours about the distinction between true and false church. However, let us not forget where this doctrine is located in the Belgic Confession. Article 29 comes immediately after Article 28. Article 28 urges all believers “to join this assembly wherever God has established it.” But that only raises the question: where has God established the church? This, in turn, is the very question that Article 29 seeks to answer with the marks of the church. In other words, distinguishing between true and false church is not an interesting pastime for people who love to debate. On the contrary, making this distinction is a real, serious, challenging, and yet necessary step that Christians need to take if they are not presently members of a faithful church.

*The marks of the church are not intended to produce a master index of all churches worldwide.*

As mentioned in the previous point, the marks are to be used in concrete situations, such as when a true Christian is looking for a faithful congregation, or when a church federation is deciding whether it should have an official relationship with another church federation. Distinguishing between true and false churches is not a religious game or sport. Beyond that, in order to determine the faithfulness of a church, you often need to observe how she responds when she reaches a critical crossroads. Faithfulness is most readily noticed in the crucible of a trial. Then the pressure is on to conform to the world, and *that* is a crucial moment in which

a church decides whether she will be faithful to her Bridegroom or follow the lure of the masses. Humanly speaking, it is impossible to track all the churches worldwide in all their crucible moments and produce a master list of true and false churches. Distinguishing between true and false church is something too significant to be done lightly and swiftly, let alone carelessly and ignorantly.

*The marks of the church must be used with a view to the ongoing work of Christ.*

The temple of the Holy Spirit is still being built (1 Pet 2:5) and the flock of Christ is still being gathered (John 10:16). The church is not a *fait accompli* but a work in progress. Therefore anyone using the marks of the church must have a keen eye for the direction in which a particular church is heading. It may be that a certain church does not yet reject all things contrary to God's Word (BC 29), but it is both willing and eager to receive further instruction and reform itself more and more in submission to its only Head. Such a church is on the path of faithfulness and ought to be treated accordingly. Conversely, a church may have been faithful for many years but is recently making more and more decisions that conflict with God's Word. Such a church is on the path of unfaithfulness and ought to be treated accordingly. Nevertheless, nothing stands still in the church, for Christ's work continues. Using the marks of the church is therefore by definition a dynamic and ongoing process.

*The faithfulness of the church is in the first place a matter of attitude, not of using a checklist.*

In a sense this particular point flows directly out of the previous one; still, it is worthy of being mentioned separately. Sometimes people use the three marks of the true church merely as a checklist. Preaching? Check. Sacraments? Check. Discipline? No. Conclusion: false church. As such, there is an element of truth here. A missing mark does indicate unfaithfulness, and this should not be swept under the carpet. However, when we remember that the church is a *she* rather than an *it*, we begin with her attitude, not with our clipboard. The marks are there specifically



to draw out what is in the heart of the church. Does a church genuinely, in the core of her ecclesiastical being, wish to submit to Christ? Is she willing to work on areas of unfaithfulness and bring them in conformity to Scripture? Or does she just want to use the name of Christ but then proceed to travel down her own preferred path? This is the question that the marks of church are trying to get at. To use them *merely* as a checklist does not do justice to the full weight of their potential to confirm genuineness and expose falsehood.

*The marks and attributes of the church must be distinguished but not separated.*

Often people put so much emphasis on one attribute of the church, such as unity, that they forget to use the marks to determine whether it is really “the unity of the true faith” (LD 21, Q&A 54). By the same token, other people put so much stress on the marks of the true church that they lose sight of the church’s attributes, such as catholicity. Both errors should be studiously avoided. The marks and attributes should be used together in a harmonious and balanced fashion.

*A false church also manifests the marks of a false church.*

The unfaithfulness of a church is not only apparent in the absence of the three marks of the true church but also in the presence of the marks of a false church, such as elevating human opinion above the ordinance of God and persecuting those who wish to submit to God’s Word alone (BC 29). Like the marks of the true church, the marks of a false church become obvious over time, especially in crucible moments. As a rule, the mark of persecuting “those who live holy lives according to the Word of God” will only manifest itself if there are those who are bold enough to “rebuke the false church for its sins” (BC 29).

*Discerning the faithfulness of a church must not be confused with identifying true Christians.*

Identifying true Christians using the marks of Christians (BC 29) does not necessarily and automatically establish the existence of a true church.

Conversely, finding hypocrites in a church does not necessarily and automatically categorize that particular church as false. The marks of Christians help discern between hypocrites and genuine believers; the marks of the church help discern between faithful and unfaithful churches. Both exercises are valid but they are not identical.

*Do unto others as you would have them do to you.*

The marks of the church must be continuously applied to our own church as fervently as we apply them to other churches (Luke 6:31). Furthermore, when we do apply them to other churches, let us be charitable and patient, remembering to show grace to them even as God, in Christ, has extended abundant grace toward us (Eph 4:32).

If we keep in mind the eight principles mentioned above and if we carry them out in practice, then the marks of the church will be a great blessing in the midst of the churches. In the end, using these marks is an exercise not in being elite but in being truly evangelical. That is to say, the marks are all about being genuinely and thoroughly Christ-centred and gospel-focused. And that, after all, is what being church is really all about.

*Suggested Readings: John 10:1–18; 2 Timothy 4:1–5*

#### QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Define and distinguish the following terms: attributes of the church, marks of the church, true church, false church, sect, true Christian, false Christian, and hypocrite. Give at least two examples of how we can blend some of these terms together in an unhelpful way. Then discuss how the terms should be used properly.
2. The apostle John connects testing the spirits with confessing that “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” (1 John 4:1–3). Why is Christology, the doctrine of Christ, so central to the faithfulness of the church? As the Athanasian Creed demonstrates, confessing Christ as one person who has two natures is challenging. It takes only a few wrong words to begin slipping into heresy. Does a

church therefore immediately become false if it does not affirm the truth of the Athanasian Creed? Give clear reasons for your answer.

3. Is missionary and evangelistic zeal an attribute, a mark, or a duty of the true church? Discuss why it is important to use the right term to show the connection between the church and the Great Commission.

#### QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Does a church become false when its doctrine becomes unbiblical, or when its conduct becomes unholy, or both? In connection with this, consider the letters to the churches at Ephesus and Pergamum (Rev 2:1–7, 12–17).
2. Let us say that a group of Baptist churches in your area has become captivated by the Reformed faith. They cherish the Reformed emphasis on the sovereignty of God's grace and the perseverance of the saints. Over time they have grown to appreciate the Three Forms of Unity and can accept everything that is confessed in them except infant baptism. Even then, they are not staunchly opposed to baptizing children; they are just not at the point where they can wholeheartedly affirm it either. In addition, they are open to further teaching on this point. Can a Reformed federation, with a clear and good conscience, officially acknowledge this becoming-Reformed group of churches as a true and faithful church? Or is that going too far too fast, and is it wiser to wait until they have, the Lord willing, accepted infant baptism? Provide biblical and confessional reasons for your answer.
3. Spiritual discipline comes in various forms: personal, mutual (among fellow believers), and official (when the consistory becomes involved). What particular challenges do you perceive and experience in each form of discipline? How can we, together as a church community, best meet those challenges?
4. Let us assume that your own church is striving to exhibit the three marks of a true church. At the same time, your congregation does not always feel as spiritually vibrant as it could be. Is it possible to

be a true, yet dormant, church of Christ? What can we do so that both faithfulness and vitality are present in our congregations?

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