

No.4, *The Marks of the Church -- (1) the Preaching of the Word*

In last week's study reference was made to a certain feature of a study on the Doctrine of the Church, namely -- "the marks of the church." The comments last week regarding *the marks of the Church* were made in relation to the issue of the distinction between *the church invisible & the church visible*. It was underlined that this distinction does not mean that there are two churches but there is one church viewed in two ways. Moreover, it was also observed that it is vital to maintain this distinction due to the erroneous manner in which Romanism projects herself as the only true church and claims that the marks of the church are found only in her -- especially such marks or characteristics as *indefectibility, unity, sanctity, apostolicity and catholicity*. Today we wish to look again at this subject of *The Marks of the Church*, for there are other points to note.

THE MARKS OF THE CHURCH IN RELATION TO CHURCH HISTORY

In speaking of "the marks of the church" reference is made to the need to point to certain marks or features by which the true Church could be recognised.

In her early and pristine purity when the Church in her N.T. form was established, and when there was only one visible Church, there would have been little need felt to look for such marks. But, as the N.T. shows, that first purity was soon sullied and spoiled by the emergence of heresies, and the consciousness at least to have "the marks of the Church" was soon apparent in the early church as is evidenced in the writings of the Apostles.

During the middle ages, the awareness of the need to identify the marks of the church diminished due to the great apostasy and spiritual declension of that period. But when the Reformation took place the need to identify the marks of the true Church became of paramount importance. Rome still claimed to be the only true church. Moreover, the Reformers were deeply aware -- on the pertinent basis of hindsight -- that the visible Church may become subject to error, depart from the faith and totally degenerate. Thus, the Reformers and the Reformed Churches stressed the need for standards or marks of truth to which the Church must correspond.

Reformed teachers and theologians differed as to the number of the marks of the Church. Some spoke of one only -- the preaching of the pure truth of the Gospel. Others such as John Calvin spoke of two -- the preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments. And others still added a third -- the faithful exercise of discipline. Louis Berkhof in his *Systematic Theology* states -- "*Strictly speaking, it may be said that the true preaching of the Word and its recognition as the standard of doctrine and life, is the one mark of the Church. Without it there is no Church, and it determines the right administration of the sacraments and the faithful exercise of church discipline. Nevertheless, the right administration of the sacraments is also a real mark of the Church. And though the exercise of discipline may not be peculiar to the Church, that is, is not found in it exclusively, yet it is absolutely essential to the purity of the Church.*"

THE SPECIFIC MARKS OF THE CHURCH

From these details as set forth in the history of the Reformed Churches these are the three specific marks of the Church one of which we will note today.

**1. Preaching the Word of God**

As noted already, the preaching of the Word is the most important mark of the true Church. It should be kept in mind that this mark is not to be interpreted as requiring *a perfect ministry of the Word* in order to the acceptance of a church as a true church. Such is not possible on this earth and will not be found among the best of men, because the best of men are still imperfect. The fact is that only relative purity of doctrine can be ascribed to any church. However, there is a limit beyond which a church must not go with regard to failure in the area of doctrine, otherwise it becomes a false and apostate society. This takes place when there is a public denial of fundamental articles of the faith, and faith and practice are no longer under the control of the Word of God.

In the light of these facts the Church that will be recognised as being relatively true or faithful must observe two issues with respect to this mark of the church, i.e., the preaching of the Word:

(a) A true Church presents what she teaches in a clear Biblical statement or confession of faith.

Some groups piously claim that their statement or confession of faith is the Word of God, and most of such groups will also repudiate the possession of a "Confession of Faith" But what is a confession or statement of faith?

It is a setting forth in a systematic and summarised form the foundational doctrines of the faith in order to be recognised as a true Church. Do we have a Biblical example of such a formal statement of belief? Yes -- for example, the Ten Commandments as recorded in Exodus 20 are essentially a statement of belief with regard to the moral law of God. Our own Shorter Catechism states that the moral law of God is "summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments." This is right -- the Decalogue is a summary of the moral law, it is not an exhaustive presentation of it. In the Ten Commandments God has summarised His law -- it is essentially a statement of what we are to believe and practise with regard to moral behaviour. Then, as noted last week, surely 1 Tim 3: 16 is essentially a statement or confession of faith. Note again in v.15 that the Church is to be "the pillar and ground of the truth." Then, what that truth is, is summarised for us in v.16. This, again, is not an exhaustive statement of the Gospel. But it is a succinct summary of the person and work of Christ, the truth of which the Church is to uphold. Moreover, it is the touchstone from which we are not to depart, for if we do we go into apostasy, 1 Tim 4: 1.

A "confession" therefore is a means of presenting to God's people what a particular church believes. God's people should wish to know that to which they adhere as far as doctrine is concerned. I would suggest to you that one reason why some groups do not have a confession of faith is that in many areas they have departed from Biblical truth by espousing their own peculiar views on various issues; and they wish to keep that hidden in order to keep themselves from the immediate charge of being heretical in those areas. A "confession" it is also for the purpose of preserving purity of doctrine and ministry, for if a church minister denies what he swore to uphold at his ordination and begins to teach heresy, he can be censured and disciplined for violation of the Word of God.

(b) A true Church not only presents a Biblical statement of doctrine she also proclaims that doctrine in the preaching of the Word.

To be "the pillar & ground of the truth" is essentially to lift up the truth so as to make it known -- it is to preach it. One of the great hallmarks of the N.T. Church was that it was a preaching Church.

One of the main words translated *to preach* in the N.T. signifies "to proclaim as a herald." It is therefore a word that vividly defines what preaching is -- it is to herald forth what the Lord has revealed in His Word. It necessarily involves explanation or exposition, but the word primarily means to proclaim the Word that God has given. Thus, it is not enough to adhere to orthodoxy in doctrine -- there must be a clear presentation of it in preaching, 2 Tim 4:2 -- "*Preach the Word.*"

Note 1 Cor 1: 21 -- this verse teaches two vital facts. (a) The substance of the Gospel is the doctrine of Christ crucified -- which of course entails a presentation of His entire work that culminated in His atoning death. (b) The public proclamation of the Gospel is the means of salvation -- all other means of grace, are either preparatory or subordinate to preaching. It should be remembered, as Dr. Charles Hodge put it, "that *preaching* in the Scriptural sense of the term, includes the inculcation of the truth, whether to an individual or to a multitude -- whether by the road side, or in the school, or lecture-room, or the pulpit. Philip, as he rode in the chariot with the eunuch, 'preached to him Jesus,' Acts 8: 35."

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