

No.5, *The Marks of the Church -- The Administration of the Sacraments*

In a situation where a number of individuals claim to be called Christians, yet who differ widely from one another on certain spiritual opinions and practices, there must be a test by which it may be determined which of them are and which of them are not entitled to the name. The test that must be employed is of course to bring each man's profession of faith to the standard of Scripture; and according as his profession fundamentally agrees with or differs from that standard, so he is to be adjudged as one who either deserves or does not deserve the name.

THERE MUST BE A CRITERION FOR DISCERNING TRUE CHURCHES

In the same manner, with regard to those religious bodies that claim to be entitled "Churches of Christ" yet differ in a variety of ways from each other with regard to faith and practice, there must be some criterion to which they are brought that it might be determined whether they are entitled to be recognised as true Churches. Moreover, as it is with the individual, the Word of God and it alone is the standard for making such judgment. There are many religious bodies that claim to be Christian churches that will not submit to the authority of God's Word to have their system of belief tested, but their refusal is an immediate indication that they have forfeited the right to be recognised as Christian.

Historic Christianity has always stood on the basis that there must be an infallible standard for discernment, and that standard is the Scripture. It should be noted that in our own Westminster Confession the first chapter is on the Word of God. Why start with Scripture in a systematic presentation of theology? Simply because it is the revelation of all else that we need to know about spiritual things; and, therefore, the Scripture is the infallible standard & touchstone in matters of making spiritual judgment. Thus, all religious societies that claim to be Christian churches must be tested by the Scriptures in order to determine whether they are entitled to be called such. In other words, such societies must give indication of possessing *The Marks of the Church*.

AN IMPORTANT DISTINCTION

In discussing the subject of *The Marks of the Church* it is necessary to make a particular distinction: that is, a distinction between what is necessary to the being of a church and what is necessary to its wellbeing. The point is that there are certain Biblical truths that are to be received and embodied without which the Church cannot exist or have being. But on the other hand there are certain Biblical truths that should be held in order to the wellbeing of the Church, but they are not essential to her being or existence. Often these truths given for the church's welfare are neglected. The outcome is not that the Church ceases to be but that her wellbeing is impaired. For example, for the sake of the wellbeing of the Church the Lord has ordained the ordinances, certain offices etc. If a church neglects the teaching of the Word in these areas, she will be injured and impaired, but she has not necessarily ceased to be a true church while she holds to that which is essential to her spiritual life, namely the faith of the Gospel, the true way of salvation.

Thus, a Church cannot exist except on the foundation of the one true faith as revealed in God's Word. It is the faith of the Gospel that produces & sustains the life of the Church. Whatever may be the differences in other areas, they are subordinate to the one vital test of holding to the truth of the Gospel, which by its presence marks a true church, but by its absence reveals a church to be apostate. Thus, as we noted last week, *the chief mark* of a true Church is adherence to the faith and the preaching of that faith in that the Church is to be the pillar and ground of the truth. Therefore, the other two marks of the Church -- the administration of the sacraments and church discipline -- are subordinate and secondary to this first mark.

VARIATION IN CHURCH CONFESSIONS WITH RESPECT TO THIS DISTINCTION

In relation to this position that the second two marks are secondary to the first it is interesting to note the difference in the definition of the Church as given in the Articles of the Church of England on one hand and in the Westminster Confession on the other hand. The WCF confines the recognition of a genuine church to adherence to the true faith as the one essential mark, ch.25 section 2 -- "*The visible church consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion.*" But the Articles of the Church of England include both adherence to the true faith along with the right administration of the sacraments, Article 19 -- "*The visible church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the sacraments be duly ministered, according to Christ's ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.*"

Thus, the idea of the necessity or not of the administration of the sacraments being a mark of a true church constitutes the difference between the WCF and the Thirty Nine Articles on this issue. Why did the framers of the WCF adhere only to the mark of allegiance to the true faith and not the sacraments as well when speaking of recognising the true church? In order to avoid the error that they no doubt foresaw, i.e., that participation of the sacraments is essential to salvation, which was Rome's position and became the position of much of the Church of England. The delegates to the Westminster Assembly took the position mentioned above -- that there is a distinction between what is for the church's being and what is for her wellbeing; thus, since the ordinances were given to the church for her wellbeing, they are not essential to an individual's salvation or to a church's being.

THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE SACRAMENTS & EXERCISE OF DISCIPLINE

While we note the important aforementioned distinction, nonetheless the administration of the sacraments in the visible church is commanded by Christ and is to be observed, as well as the exercising of discipline. These are the other two subordinate marks of the Church.

Baptism was practised by John the Baptist and by Christ and His disciples, Matt 3: 5, 6, John 3: 22, 23, 4: 1, 2. It was commanded by Christ to continue in the Church to the end of time, Matt 28: 19, 20. The same is true of the Lord's Supper, 1 Cor 11: 23-26. Thus, while these ordinances are not essential to being as the preaching of the Word is, yet, as noted, they are given by Christ to His Church for her wellbeing and should not be neglected, and of this neglect some groups in Church history have been guilty. For example, the Quakers or *The Society of Friends* founded in England in 1668 by George Fox have no ministry and do not observe the sacraments at all.

Such a position is manifestly wrong. The sacraments of Baptism & the Lord's Supper must be observed, and they must be properly administered -- i.e., stripped of all non-biblical glosses and observed with Scriptural simplicity. In the teaching of the Apostles it was the established principle that baptism is a means of expressing one's faith and participation at the Lord's Table a means of sustaining our faith.

With regard to church discipline there are two vital points to note. In the first instance church discipline means that a true church is characterised by control over admission to membership and over the behaviour of its members, necessitating appropriate dealings with those who violate Biblical standards of Christian behaviour, Matt 18: 15, 2 Cor 7: 8, 13: 2, Gal 6: 1. Then, in the second instance there is Biblical organisation with things being done decently and in order in the church, 1 Cor 14: 40. This necessitates the appointment of church officers along with a system of church decorum that is congenial to the life and witness of the church. As a consequence the church is marked as one that is equipped to spread the Gospel efficiently.

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