

Marks of the True Church

Study Questions

The assigned reading for this lesson is Edmund Clowney's *The Church*, pp. 99–115. Here are some questions to provoke your thinking as you read through that material. (We may or may not address these issues in class.)

1. We will discuss parachurch organizations in the next lesson, but Clowney raises a good question on page 100—how is the parachurch different than the church? Think specifically about Dallas Seminary. What does the church do that we do not? What *is* the church that we *are not*?
2. As described by Clowney on page 101, the Reformed tradition has identified three distinguishing features of the true church: “true preaching of the Word; proper observance of the sacraments; and faithful exercise of church discipline.” How does this compare to your response to question 1?
3. What kinds of errors can be tolerated if “true preaching of the Word” is to be maintained (p. 102)?
4. Most of our independent Bible churches do not make much of an issue out of church membership. Some say that is a reaction against the Baptist background of some of our leaders (Southern Baptists typically place a much stronger emphasis on church membership), but Clowney’s comment on pages 103–4 hints that there may be more to it. Does this highlight other areas of weakness in the Bible church movement, specifically with regard to the sacraments and church discipline?
5. Clowney raises once again the distinction between the visible and the invisible church. How does that help us address the question of whether or not a particular congregation or denomination is “apostate?”

Comment:

“For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst.” Spoken primarily in the context of church discipline, Jesus’ words in Matthew 18:20 establish an important pattern for the “true church.” He is present among those who are gathered in His name. Those persons who are so gathered do not tolerate willful disobedience to Christ, so they reprove and exhort one another in His name, making church **discipline** a mark of the true believing community. Other “marks of the church” have likewise been associated with signs of Christ’s presence. If He is present in the **preaching of the Word** and in the **sacrament**, those elements also function as marks of the church. Of course, for Him to be present in the preaching of the Word, the Word must be proclaimed in truth. Likewise, He does not honor the sacrament unless it is observed properly, a restriction usually thought to require both proper procedures and duly constituted leaders.

One might also say that Christ abides with His people through the Spirit, whose presence constitutes the definitive mark of the true church. The Spirit's presence in power sometimes demonstrated the authenticity of conversion in Acts (Acts 8:17; 10:44–47), and Paul regarded it as a good sign that the Thessalonians had, by the Spirit, embraced the gospel with joy in spite of persecution (1 Thess. 1:5, 6).

After the apostolic era, the early church seems to have focused on apostolic succession and the administration of the sacraments when identifying the true church. However, rigorous theological debates demonstrated that their claimed alignment with the apostles was not just personal, but doctrinal. This same approach may be seen again in the Reformers when Roman Catholics claimed to be the true church because of their global status. The Reformers argued that the true church needs to trace its doctrine back to the apostles, not its leaders. As a result, they emphasized the true preaching of the Word, not apostolic succession, as a mark of the church. This emphasis has continued through the Reformed tradition. It was modified in the twentieth century by Pentecostals, who sought to reemphasize the priority of the Spirit's presence and argued that the true church should also be marked by the practice of spiritual gifts.

For those who are aligned with particular denominations, the sign of a true church is often denominational membership in good standing. In the same way, a congregation's membership within a denomination thought to be apostate would not be a good sign. There may be exceptions either way, of course, and observation may convince us that a particular congregation does not follow the trend of its denomination. The situation is significantly more difficult with regard to independent churches, especially those who shy away from formal statements of faith. When visiting such local congregations, we tend to look for evidence of their allegiances: do they have a familiar bulletin insert? advertising for the next Promise Keepers event? the right kind of tracts in their visitor packet? Separated from strong denominational supervision and accountability, we come up with our own ways of identifying a common tradition.

It may be more appropriate to address this question from the perspective of a congregation's self-identification. When a group of people regard themselves as followers of Christ, and when they understand their mutual affiliation to be that of a church, gathering in the name of Christ and seeking to follow Him, they may be regarded tentatively as a church of Christ. However, if that congregation is not marked by adherence to and proclamation of the gospel of Christ, we would rightly conclude that it is not a true church. Genuine believers may be a part of the group, but the "church" itself is either apostate (if it has abandoned the faith) or cultic (if its identity is rooted in a formal denial of the faith). Of the Reformers' three criteria, the true preaching of the word is the most central mark of the church (John 8:31, 47; 14:23; Gal. 1:8; 1 John 4:1–3).

What if the church tolerates willful disobedience among its members? It would obviously not be a *good* church, but might it still be a true church? The church in Corinth was apparently lax in this area (1 Cor. 5:1), yet Paul still addressed it as "the church of God which is at Corinth" (1:2). On the other hand, perhaps Corinth was a church that was in danger of losing its status (Rev. 2–3).

What if the church does not appropriately administer the sacraments? What constitutes appropriate administration? This question will have to be deferred until a later lesson, but for purposes of this discussion it is important to note that the place of the sacraments in the criteria for the true church is twofold. First, since any group regarding itself as a church of Christ should obey Christ, an obvious test of that obedience is their observance of the ordinances given to the church. Second, if the Lord's Supper and baptism are thought to be *sacraments*, not just *ordinances*, means of grace and not just commands, the grace of Christ is mediated through them to the people. The church, in administering those sacraments, is the dispenser of grace. Only the true church can do this, and a church that does not do it is not the true church. A "church" that offers ceremony without substance, or one that offers grace without self-examination or church discipline, isn't really offering the true grace of God in the sacrament, so it is

apparently not a true church. Note: even if the sacraments are not means of grace to be dispensed to Christ's people through the mediating authority of the church and its ordained officers, the observance of the Lord's Supper and of baptism still reflects obedience on the part of the church, but the responsibility is often taken much more lightly.

Questions for Further Reflection

- What about a group that doesn't consider itself a church, but seems to do everything a church does? Is it still a church even if it does not want to be regarded as one?
- What is the place of love for one another? Jesus said that His disciples would be known by their love for one another (John 13:35). Jonathan Edwards argued that genuine love was a mark of true conversion, for it could not be counterfeited as easily as enthusiasm and other affections. But how does that contribute to our assessment of a particular church? How does one assess love in a congregation? (Cf. 2 Thess. 1:3; Rev. 2:4.)
- What are the consequences for someone who is a genuine believer but fellowships in an apostate church?