

Doctrine of the Church: Marks

Let us return to our study of the doctrine of the church. In this case we are looking at the marks of the church. We reversed our order when we studied the nature of the church. Then we looked at the historical theology. Now we move to the biblical rationale for the marks.

There are three marks of the church. The first mark is the Word. In the Great Commission, our Lord mentions the mark of the Word, the indispensability of God's Word for the life of the church. Jesus said in Matthew 28:18, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age." I left something out on purpose just to see if you are alert. Verse 20 says, "...and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Let us put it this way. Jesus included no superfluous words in that little commission. Everything is important. There is a command to make disciples, which implies evangelism. It explicitly mentions disciple making. Baptism is here in the threefold name and then teaching. The Word, of course, is involved in this teaching ministry. The Word of God is in fact the mark of the church, which establishes the other marks. In 2 Timothy 4:2, Paul commands his younger understudy to "preach the word. Be prepared in season and out of season." Verse 1 is a solemn charge: "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead and in view of His appearing"—we are talking real solemnity here—"and His Kingdom, I give you this charge. Preach the Word."—He did not say to preach current events, your opinions, or moralisms, but preach the Word.—"Be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction."—Notice the next verse—"For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, and discharge all the duties of your ministry." "Preach the Word" was a command from the apostle to his apostolic delegate, Timothy. The Word is thus the primary mark of the Christian church. Without the Word, there would be no church. As the Word falls into disfavor in a denomination in a local fellowship of believers, as the minister comes in, who does not really believe the Word or preach the Word, to that extent it ceases to be a church. At least it ceases to have a life it once had, and it actually can get to the place where there is even no salvation in it anymore if the Gospel is not preached.

So am I also saying that the Word is the ultimate authority in the life of the church as opposed to the Watchtower, the Book of Mormon, doctrines, covenants, and so forth? Yes, but we are saying that it is the Gospel message. The cults, of course, do not have that Gospel message. In that way they fail to have the most fundamental mark of the church. Furthermore, they do funny things with the ordinances of the church. The ordinances, in simple terms, baptism and the Lord's Supper, are the Gospel. The Gospel is there even if it is given in a ceremony form (as long as you have the words with the ceremony). That is a really beautiful thing. A liberal church where the pulpit is not what it should be is a sad thing to see. However, if that liberal church has the Lord's Supper with the words of institution, it would still be possible for people to come to the Lord in that church. The reason is because the Gospel is there and it is ineradicable. It cannot be wiped out. How tragic to have the pulpit disagree with the Lord's Table. That is a tragic thing, and there is great confusion there. If they mess it up enough and do not have the words of institution or do not have the Lord's Supper, then there is perhaps no Gospel at all. But if they have the Lord's Supper with the words of institution, "This is My body, this is My blood," the Gospel is built

in and there will be people in heaven who believed the Gospel in that supper. Remember 1 Corinthians 11:26, which says, “As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” That is, the supper itself is a proclamation. Calvin called it a visible Word of God. I am getting way ahead of myself.

We will talk about the ordinances later on, but even now, just as an introductory concept, the ordinances give no new content. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper give no new information. It is the old information, the old, old story of the Gospel that Jesus thought was so important. He built it into the life of the church in two different rights or ceremonies: an initiation right and baptism. The initiation right pictures the Gospel in the application of the water either, in my estimation, by sprinkling, pouring, or dunking. They are all fine ways of doing it, but that picture is the cleansing of sins and other things too. The other ongoing ordinance is baptism. Baptism is once and for all. The Lord’s Supper is frequently observed many times in a person’s lifetime, many times in a year, Lord willing. This too is a presentation of the Gospel: “As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” So, in that way, the ordinances and sacraments are merely the Word acted out. We did not make them up.

They are the Word in a couple of ways. They are authorized by the Word. It is not that the leaders of your local church got together and said, “Well, I think we ought to have four ordinances. What do you think, Harry?” “Oh no, I think we ought to have three.” We do not do that. We are not free to do that. The Lord of the church gives the ordinances to the church just like we do not add to the Word. Jesus gave two ordinances. When the reformers studied the Bible, it took them a little time, but they came to see that Jesus only commanded two ordinances, not seven as Rome had said. There are, pretty uniformly, two ordinances in Protestantism. They are governed by the Word, they are instituted by the Word in the first place, and their message is the Gospel. The ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper give no new message except the Gospel itself. There is a lot more, but when we say, “the Word,” we mean the Gospel message itself. We also mean the Bible as a whole, including the Bible being the chief authority for the life of the congregation. Added to the Word, one of the documents we read said, “annexed to the word” are the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. I will reveal them both; otherwise I will forget to reveal them.

Let us get back to the Great Commission. Jesus told the disciples to go and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Trinity. Christian baptism is important. We will study it later on in detail. For now, it is enough to say that it is a mark of the Christian church. Show me a group that does not baptize and I will show you a very confusing situation. I had a student back east who came from a particular group of churches that actually had the Gospel, but a group of my students and friends, who were dispensationalists, called this church hyper-dispensational. And so it was. That is, this particular group of churches divided up the book of Acts into dispensations, and baptism was considered a Jewish right and not for the Christian church. Do you understand? I am happy to tell you that my student, through the study of the Word of God in our seminary, came to understand that Christian baptism was given to the church. He understood that it was significant. He was baptized and is now a minister in a Bible-believing church that holds not only to the Word but also to the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

Concerning the Lord’s Supper, we could point to a number of places in Scripture. Matthew 26:26-28 records the institution of the Lord’s Supper at the Last Supper, which was a first century Jewish Passover meal. Later on I will go over some notes with you that summarize what that first century Jewish Passover was like. You say, “Oh I know, I had a Jewish Christian Passover in my church.” Well,

you might be surprised to know that the one you had in your church was probably from the middle ages and was the result of great development since the first century. And it probably was a much simpler affair in the first century than what you are used to. It is kind of fun, I think, to see exactly what Peter, Andrew, and the boys would have done in their households ever since they were little kids. Now Jesus takes the place of their fathers. He is the president of the feast. What does Jesus do that is the same as they did in their homes every year at the Passover? The really interesting thing to note is what new features He adds—He adds very little, but what He adds is just a total shock. It is a wonder that they even ate and drank in light of what He said. They could not have understood it fully, but in retrospect, they could have.

In any case, Matthew 26:26 reads, “While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it and gave it to his disciples saying, ‘Take and eat [it is a command], this is my body.’ Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them saying, ‘Drink from it all of you. [It is a command]. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’” Here He commands His disciples to eat and to drink, and He associates the elements with His own body and blood. In 1 Corinthians 11, we see that the church continued to practice the Lord’s Supper. We will see later on that we really have very little information in the Bible on the Lord’s Supper. In God’s providence, the Corinthians were messing this up too. I am thankful or we would not have as much information as we would like to have. We still do not, but we have a lot more because of their errors. Because of their problems, we have information in 1 Corinthians 10 and especially 11 that really helps us understand 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, which says, “For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you. The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread and when he had given thanks he broke it and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way, after supper he took the cup saying, ‘This cup is a new covenant in my blood. Do this whenever you drink it in remembrance of me. For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.’” Paul is not presenting this as an option. He is presenting this as a fixed ceremony of the Christian church. There are two baptisms and the Lord’s Supper. We call them ordinances because they were commanded by Christ. We call them sacraments, at least some branches of the church do, because they were holy signs instituted by Christ. The word “sacraments” has been abused in some communions and it makes others nervous. I have been using the two interchangeably. We will define those things later, but for now let us get back to the biblical rationale for the marks of the church.

The Word is the most important mark. Under the Word, the sacraments are important. They mark the people of God as the people of God while the threefold name is pronounced over them, water is applied to them, and as they remember the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Church discipline is a derivative of the Word. I am not so concerned with the number of marks. For example, you could have discipline and the Lord’s Supper as subsets under the Word. Or you could make discipline a subset of either the Lord’s Supper or the Word. But three has become the traditional number.

Discipline is also a mark of the Christian church and the way to distinguish a true church from a false one. Although, I do acknowledge individual churches and even denominations that preach the Gospel (at least in some measure) and have the ordinances but that have gone weak on discipline. I will just say this: it is not a good sign for discipline to be lacking. If it persists for a long enough time and ministers who do not believe in some of the fundamentals of the faith are allowed to minister, then in time, the Gospel will be affected. Do you understand? Everything can go downhill that way. If there is no discipline of ungodly living in the church, the same thing can happen. So, this is an important one.

Calvin called church discipline the sinews that hold the body of Christ together. It is a picture of discipline giving the body of Christ its spiritual tone, if you will. Without church discipline, the church gets flabby. It gets out of shape. Church discipline is like the calisthenics of the church. That is the truth. Show me a church without discipline, and I will show you a church in a dangerous situation that could end up tolerating false gospels and immorality that could lead to the destruction of the church. The reason why I say this is because in Matthew 18 Jesus said, in verse 15 and following, “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over, but if he will not listen, take one or two others along so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.” He was sighting an Old Testament principle from Deuteronomy: “If he refuses to listen, tell it to the church and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.” This meant that he should be treated as you would treat an unsaved person.

To answer the question in some of your minds, “Do you completely shun unsaved people and have nothing to do with them?” The answer is no, but you do not give them the false assumption that you accept them as believers, do you? So it is not saying that we ought to have nothing whatsoever to do with them, but it is saying that you do not receive them as brothers and sisters in Christ. You still pray for them and do good to them and seek to bring them to repentance. You do not hate them. God does not call us to hate unbelievers.

The question was asked, “In Matthew 18, what did the church look like at that time?” It is, of course, presented in the ministry of Jesus. In chapter 16 He made the famous prediction, in answer to Peter’s confession, that He is going to build His church. So, it is sort of looking to the future and giving rules for what the church would do in the future. I point you to commentaries on the Gospel of Matthew. One outstanding one is the *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are all housed in that same volume. I do not know the number of it, but T. A. Carson has written a strong one on Matthew. It will discuss that issue and almost any other issue you could think of.

Is church discipline to be taken to the extreme that some groups do, whereby individuals are shunned and family members have nothing to do with their spouses or children? My answer was implied in what I already said—of course not. Yet, I do not show love toward my friend if he or she has been excommunicated if I say, “It does not matter. You are fine with the Lord.” You can persist in saying that is not love. But on the other hand, how are we to treat the unsaved—with hatred and disdain, having nothing to do with them? No. We are to love them. It is a delicate situation. How do I love and at the same time communicate that a person is not really my brother in Christ the way he is living? It does not look like he is a Christian at all. I am not saying that this is simple, but it is too simple just to shun them. Shunning is not what is involved.

There are many discipline passages, such as 1 Corinthians 5:1-5: “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you and of a kind that does not even occur among pagans: A man has [is living in a conjugal, sexual relationship with] his father’s wife.”—They say “father’s wife” because of how unnatural it would be for a son and mother to co-habit.—“And you are proud! Should you not rather have been filled with grief and have put out of fellowship the man who did this? Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.” I am not going to get into all the ramifications of it. For now, I will just say that the church is to exercise discipline.

Let us look at one more passage, 1 Timothy 5, this time dealing with elders. Do you remember what I said before that if you show me a church where there is no discipline in the area of the ministers—in what they believe and how they live—then I will show you a church in trouble? Here is Scripture on that. Verse 17 of 1 Timothy 5 says, “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.” The implication here is that all the elders are to lead, and some are especially involved in preaching and teaching. Verse 19 continues, “Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses.” If this were followed, it would save the ministries of some men. Some men have been run out of town by one person. At times, it was by a woman who made advances at the pastor, and even though he resisted, she was out to get him. Certainly, we are thankful that most of the sisters in the church do not do that. I am not trying to be anti-woman in my remarks. Men certainly sin too. Anyway, we need to follow God’s Word. “Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning.” There is the notion of the spiritual tone of the church.

I have been asked, “Why do I think church discipline is so neglected today?” It is really neglected. In liberal communions, discipline has been abandoned, even officially, for a long time. It is scarcely practiced even in some Bible-believing local churches and sometimes in whole denominations. Why is that? I think it is an example of our culture squeezing us into its mold. The unpardonable sin is intolerance. You are supposed to put up with anything and everything and never make waves. Now, I know that some people are too intolerant, and that is wrong. That is sinful. But it is not loving for the church not to care what its ministers believe in, or for a church to allow people to live in open sin without seeking to help them. Discipline is for the good of the church. John Calvin, in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, indicates three purposes for church discipline. He does it so well. He says, “The primary reason for church discipline is for the glory of God.” That is right. That is the primary reason for everything. If God thinks it is important enough to say it in different contexts, in different words, and through different writers, then it is important. We cannot just omit it—“for the glory of God.”

Church discipline is also necessary for the health of the whole body of the church. That is what it said in Timothy: “So that the others may fear...” Sometimes God has stepped in Himself and done church discipline. I am thinking, for example, of Ananias and Sapphira. What does it say? “And the whole company of believers had the fear of the Lord.”

Finally, and in this context, the most important thing I am trying to say is that church discipline is for the good of the offender. Galatians 6 gives the spirit in which it should be administered—that is, in a spirit of bearing one another’s burdens. Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. Galatians 6:1 says, “But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”

So, it is in love that a church should discipline. I have known situations where church discipline has taken many forms. The most basic and recurrent form is the pure preaching of the Word. Who has not been stung by a sermon? I tell you this: one difference between a believing church and an unbelieving one is that unbelievers go to hear their liberal minister talk about current events, social issues, and all kinds of stuff. They go to have their ears tickled. Believers go to get a spanking. You know, if I have not been convicted, then something is wrong here. I am not talking about spiritual masochism. We are talking about spiritual growth. We need to be corrected. The greatest church discipline is preventative medicine—the ongoing warning of the Word. The seeds for the destruction of your marriage and mine

are in our hearts right now. The seeds for the breakup of your church into all kinds of factions are in our hearts already. The only thing that needs to happen is that those seeds take root and grow. I am not trying to be a negativist here, but rather a realist. That is why God has ordained the regular preaching of His Word. That is why if you keep track of your pastor's themes, there are about a dozen of them that occur with striking regularity—if he does his job, if he preaches through the Word. Themes that reoccur are the worship of God, the importance of our own personal relationship with the Lord, Bible study and prayer, the importance of sharing our faith, and the importance of obedience and gratitude. Why? Because we need to hear those things every week of our lives. So the most important basis and practice of discipline is the preventive medicine of the preaching of the word. Discipline also occurs as we are involved in small groups, as we meet with other men and women individually for accountability, and as we are rebuked by a brother or sister. You know, we have our own canons of spirituality and sometimes we miss the point.

I will tell you what being spiritual is. According to Psalm 19 and James 4 as well, it is being teachable to the Word of God. It is receiving it well if someone comes to you privately and gently says, in the same spirit in which they would like to hear it, "Sister, I am concerned about your life. I want to share something with you that may hurt, but 'faithful are the wounds of a friend.' My intention is only to help you." If you get all bent out of shape and mad at them because of that, you are not as spiritual as you think. Although, I have known a few people in my life who think they are God's gift of rebuke to the church. Everybody hides when they come. I am not talking about those people. They ought to shut up, but most of us are too reluctant to correct somebody. Why? We think the person is not going to love us anymore. But again, we need to pray about it. And I am not talking about sniping. If you see your brother doing something he should not be doing, and you know it—I do not mean just once—or your sister is doing this or saying that, then pray, pray, pray, and go privately to them. It is going to start and end right there and Lord willing it will be taken care of. You do not bring 15 people, the whole church, and the elders to the person. There are procedures here we are talking about. The ultimate tool is to excommunicate a person—that means to cut them off from the Lord's Supper. If the most profound meaning of the Lord's Supper is union with Christ, then being cut off from the Lord's Supper means, in our estimation and to the best of our fallible knowledge, you are not a Christian. You are cut off from Christ. We are going to give you a visible symbol of that. Please repent. Please, right now, repent so we do not have to do this. In our case, they might say, "I refuse." "Okay, until you show a sign of repentance, you are officially barred from the Lord's Table." That is a hard blow. God has used it to break more than one stubborn Christian's heart. May we not get to the place that we need that, but if we ever do, may we listen to our brothers and sisters.

Is the threat of civil suit another reason for the lack of discipline today? Yes and amen. And, if you are a leader in a church, you better have a lawyer. In your congregation, if you are part of a denomination, you probably already have disciplinary procedures. Sometimes Christians have messed up. There is no doubt about that. On the other hand, should the church totally give up its function and role because of such fears? No, it certainly should not. We are not done with this issue. It is a difficult situation. Thank God for godly Christian lawyers who are writing books and articles and instructing saints as to how to go about it in a right way.

Does what I say imply that excommunication bars a person from the Lord's Supper but that he should still be obligated to come and hear the Word? The answer is yes. That is the only remedy. That is the only help they are going to get. Now, usually they go off in a huff and they do not want to hear the Word. But in Calvin's Geneva, for example, if you have sinned to the point of getting yourself excommunicated, you had better show up in church because that was the only hope you had in getting

things right with the Lord. And in their context, you could end up in jail, which is different in our context with the church and the State. But yes, surely the sinner needs to hear the Word. That is how the person is going to get straightened out. But they are barred from the Lord's Supper. That is a symbol—a sign to them—that they are on shaky ground and that we think they are not living like a Christian at all.