BC 29; I Cor. 1:18-21; John 8:39-47; Identifying the True Church I. The Mark of the Gospel II. The Mark of Gospel Defended III. The Marks of the Sacrament and Discipline

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, how do you tell the truth from a lie? Something that is real from something that is fake? Well, you have to have a standard right? There has to be some way to measure or compare the two. There is a quality issue at stake. For example, if you are going to buy a new pair of shoes, how would you tell a genuine Nike from a Chinese knock off? Well, one you would buy from Nike.com and the other you would buy from Temu.com. In a similar way, there is a true, authentic church on this earth and there is a fake, knock off church on earth as well. The real church is costly and precious, while the fake church is a rip off. It is important for us to know the difference between the true church and the false or fake church. Last week we saw that all Christians are duty bound to join the church. We are all obligated to be part of a local congregation. But which one? Are all congregations equal? The word “church” is dreadfully overused today. Many heretical groups and sects claim this name- such as the Morman church. Added to this, there are other branches of Christianity such as the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church. To make matter even more confusing, there are a host of other denominations such as the PCA, OPC, CRC and URC. How do we avoid getting lost in the Alphabet Soup of church denominations? Well, today we are going to be given a standard by which to weigh and measure the churches of this world. It is easy to affix the name church to your sign by the road. But calling a building a church does not make it so! Names and titles can be manipulated. So today we consider this theme: Jesus Christ clearly reveals the true church as the place where sinners are saved.

**I. The Mark of the Gospel**

In our first point we consider the marks that set the true church apart from the false church. Distinguishing the true congregation of Christ from false gathering is nothing new. Our article states that we ought to discern diligently and very carefully! In the early church, the apostles had to contend with various sects and perversions as well. For example, the sect of the Sadducees rejected the doctrine of the resurrection and the existence of angels. There were also the Judaizers that taught salvation by obedience and works. So the need to be diligent and discerning concerning which group or congregation to join is not something new. So if we are looking for a church that is true and acceptable to God, the first mark that we will look for this the pure preaching of the word. As our article puts it, the true church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel. This is the first and more foundational point. The true church preaching the pure Word of God! As Paul said to Timothy in II Tim. 4- preach the Word! Be ready in season and out of season. Reprove, rebuke and exhort with complete patience and teaching. This is particularly pressing because people will have itching ears as Paul continues to write- they will accumulate teaching for themselves to suit the own passions. So the temptation is clear- people will seek out pastors who tell them what they want to hear! By nature, people will flock to hear words that make them feel good! But you- Timothy- you must fulfill your ministry! The content of preaching at a true church is this- the pure gospel! Or as we read in I Cor. 1:23- preaching Jesus Christ and Him crucified- which is the power and wisdom of God! As we also heard last week from Rom. 10- God is pleased to use the preaching of the Word to produce faith in the heart of the hearer. And again in John 8:47- whoever is of God hears the Word of God! So the most vital and pressing mark that must be present in the church is this- the pure preaching of the Word! By this you will know a church- listen to preaching! Now this is a very specific application, and it has very concrete application! Just because a church belongs to a certain denomination- because it has the correct name on the sign- does not guarantee that the Word of God is being faithfully proclaimed! As Paul affirms in Acts 20- He did not shrink from declaring the full counsel of God. It is also true that just because a church once had faithful preaching does not guarantee that the Word is still going forth from that pulpit! Times change- churches change- as one pastor leaves and another comes- a church may in fact fall from its former glory. This is the very issue that John spoke about in Rev. 2:5. The church at Ephesus had once been a great bastion of truth- sending out faithful missionaries- a place where the gospel was faithfully proclaimed and the people of God built up. But they had abandoned their first love as Jesus rebukes them. He then warns them in Rev. 2- repent or I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. It is possible for a once, true and faithful church to devolve into a false, rebellious church! And the light of the witness in that place- the lampstand which represented the presence of the Spirit- could be removed! As Jesus warned- nothing good follows when the blind are leading the blind. Children, what happens if you are a passenger in a car whose driver is blind? Well, you will end up in a ditch! In a similar way, if you sit under the preaching of a false gospel, you will not hear the good news and you will not be free!

**II. The Mark of the Gospel Defended**

So this calls for diligence- every generation must stand firm- every elder must guard the good deposit entrusted to you. The Word of God must be declared in this church year in and year out- else even this place could lose its lampstand! Just as a child will not be saved based on the faith of their parents- so the standing of a local congregation is not guaranteed by past faithfulness! Added to that- the gospel can be replaced with another gospel- which is no gospel at all! All of this is to say, the first mark of the true church is the pure preaching of the word! And this mark must remain present- the church stands or falls on this mark. Is Jesus Christ and Him crucified the overarching theme of the pulpit ministry? Are God’s people learning to see their sin and misery- and that Jesus blood and righteousness is their only hope? If so, then that church has the makings of a true church. It is the true, gospel preaching that makes a church a true church! It is the responsibility of every believer to be discerning in this matter. Or as I John 4 says- do not believe every spirit but test the spirit to see whether they are from God- for there are many false prophets that have gone out into the world. Not just the elders then, but all of us must be on guard against the false teaching that has infected this land. For example, consider the prosperity gospel. Name it and claim it- the Joel Osteen brand of preaching. If you believe it, you can have it! God wants you to be happy and healthy- rich and prosperous. You are very powerful- it is your time to shine! Is this the gospel? Is this what Jesus taught? That our lives are supposed to be easy- or did Jesus say that in this world you will have troubles? Or consider the social gospel. In this movement it is the job of the church to combat every injustice and right every social wrong. The Bible is reduced to a collection of ethical statement. Do no harm- do not judge- be kind to everyone and you will be saved. The social conditions of other is the main focus of gospel- it is the job of the church to right the wrongs of society. But is this the gospel? Is solving poverty or providing homes to the needy the gospel? Don’t misunderstand this point- God’s people should be concerned with the plight of the poor and the distressed in society- but these works are not a replacement for the gospel! The third example of the false gospel is the cultural gospel. The cultural gospel is preaching that bends to the spirit of this age and accepts cultural norms. There are many churches today that preach acceptance and tolerance of all things. Gay marriage, homosexual clergy, trans rights. Feminism, pluralism, communism. Whatever the politicians of the age are pushing- whatever the media is fascinated with- this becomes the soap box upon which the preacher stands! This too is a perversion of the gospel! Not only does this kind of preaching fail to preach the Word- it goes so far as to call good what God calls evil! This kind of preaching refuses to call sin a sin! As Isaiah 5 says, woe to those who call evil good and good evil! God’s curse remains upon those who distort the truth and muddy the water! God’s Word does not change and His standard remains fixed! One more example is taken from our article- the false gospel proclaimed in the Roman Church which I will call works gospel. When you look at the marks of the true church and the false church in this article- it is clear that the Roman church is squarely in view. The RCC preaches a false gospel- of grace plus works. The very same thing that we have been seeing in our study of Galatians. In by grace- stay in by works. Your standing before God is dependent on your actions. This is another gospel- a false gospel. The Works Gospel is clearly refuted by Paul- since we are saved by grace through faith- and that not of your works so that no man can boast as Eph. 2 states. This is a good reminder- the Roman church is not a sister church or a separated brother- they are a false church. They teach a version of the gospel that is wrong and does not lead to salvation. Praying to Mary and supplementing the works of Christ with that of other saints is not the true gospel.

In order for us to be able to defend the mark of the gospel, we have to know what the gospel is? What is the good news revealed in God’s Word? If your answer starts with man- what we do- then your answer is wrong! The gospel is simply this- the good news of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ! Or as Titus 3 puts it- He saves us! Jesus Christ and Him crucified- in this work of Jesus is our good news found! We are born sinners- and we still struggle with our sin! But salvation is sovereignly secured and bestowed upon us! In order for a church to be a true church, this gospel message must be clearly heard! But as you know, there is no such thing as a perfect church! The mark of pure preaching is a mark of a true church- not the mark of a perfect church! There is no such thing as a perfect church on earth. Because as soon as people join a church- that church is populated by sinners. So there must discipline as we see in our final point. But this fact also means that those who lead within the church must be humble and teachable! No paster will preach a perfect sermon- there will always be room to grow. So perfection is not the standard- but rather the preaching must be true, gospel, Christ centered preaching! As the seminary professors remind their students- never preach a sermon that you could find in a Jewish Synagogue. A sermon is not just a message- not a feel good or do better lecture. But the cross of Christ on display!

**III. The Marks of the Sacrament and Discipline**

As I said before, there is no such thing as a perfect church. There will aways be sin that we need to deal with- iniquity that we need to struggle against. This is why every true church must also have elders who practice church discipline. As our BC article continues- added to the pure preaching of the word is the right administration of the sacraments and church discipline unto repentance. These two secondary marks rightly grow out of the first, primary mark. To say this another way- if the full council of God is being preached, the proper use of sacraments and discipline will likely follow. The sacraments are, in fact, the gospel made visible. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are the God ordained signs and seals of the church. The God approved visual aids to help us in our weakness. We will be looking at these two sacraments in BC 34 and 35. And concerning discipline, the reason that discipline is needed within the true church is because people can be hypocrites- they can be instruments of the devil seeking to wreck and overthrow the church of Christ. As we read in John 8:47- whoever does not hear the word of God is not of God. As the context of John 8 proves, simply sitting under the preaching of the gospel does not necessarily mean that you are a true, child of God. In John 8 the Jews had been listening to Jesus preach and yet they rejected His word. The hated Jesus and were making plans to put him to death. They were led astray by the devil who was a murderer and liar from the beginning. What recourse does the church have if there are members of the church who, like these Jews, embrace false teaching or engage in wicked actions? The answer is this- Jesus gives church discipline. I Cor. 5 is another example- here in the Corinthian church we find a member who was living in incest- a sexual sin that was flagrant. The elders are instructed to remove this sinner and hand him over to the devil. By way of church discipline with the final step of excommunication, the wicked rebel who refuses to repent is removed from the church. So hypocrites and false teaching is exposed and God’s people are protected. So a person’s doctrine and life need to align with God’s Word. As a mark of the true church, the local congregation is to have elders who take their job seriously. Watching over the flock- taking head to the congregation of Christ as Acts 20 puts it. If a person is teaching falsehood- they are to be exposed and rebuked. If a member is living in sin, there are to be confronted and corrected. If they repent, then their life has been spared and they have been snatch from the fire. If they refuse to repent, then they are to be excluded and treated as an outsider. Remember that a life of continual faith and repentance is the mark of God’s people. So those who make it clear that they are not one of God’s people are to be excluded.

To conclude, the marks of the true church are a helpful tool. When considering these three marks, we can begin to distinguish between a church that God approves of and one that He does not. When moving or going off to college, for example, your journey to a new church home should rightly start here. Does this congregation display the marks of a true church? And when our young people are looking for a spouse- they should look for those who attend a true church as well! Jesus Christ clearly reveals the true church as the place where sinners are saved. May we all be committed to pursuing and protecting these marks as they are gifts of the Good Shepherd for His sheep.