

BC art. 29; Gal. 1:6-10; Acts 20:17-27; The Mark of Truth I. A True Church II. A True Christian

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, if you were offered a new job in a new location- what sort of information would you need to help you make your decision? What did this new job pay- is there a good school to send your kids too nearby- what is the housing market like? At what point would you ask yourself- what church would we attend? Unfortunately, looking for a true and faithful church is sometimes the last think that enters our mind when we move off to college or say yes to new job. But as we saw last week, we are all duty bound- we are obligated to join a church as we seek to preserve the unity of the body and pond of peace. So the next question is this- which church should I join? How do I know which church is the correct one? Here in the States most people enter the church market with a consumer mentality- we even call it church shopping doesn't we! What does this church have to offer- what do I like about this building over against that other one? Well, today we are going to see that Jesus Christ calls His people to be united to a true church.

I. A True Church

In our first point, we consider the mark of truth when it comes to defining a true church. As we consider what it means for a church to be a true church, it must be said that the true church, although singular in number, is not to say that there is only one true church to be found. The true church is not limited to one congregation. Nor is the true church the sole property of one federation or denomination. In fact, there can be two true churches that meet in the same city but in different building. It is also true that there is a true church to be found in China, just as there is a true church found in Africa and America. So when we speak of true church we are not saying that there is only one local congregation that displays these marks. Rather, we are identifying the marks that prove the identity of this church body to be a true church. As Christians, it is our duty to be diligent as we make decisions- which church should I attend- which body of believers should I join myself to. Our BC article puts it like this, we are to discern diligently and carefully from the word of God. We are called to careful study- does this specific, local congregation meet the specifications outlined in God's Word- which proves the identity of this fellowship? We are called to be good detectives in this sense- to follow the facts- to look at the marks. Every

true church will have these traits in common. Children, do you share any family traits? If you were born naturally into your family- you will likely see some of your parents in yourself. The color of your eyes or your hair- even the way you talk- can be traced to your family. So it is with the church- when we are truly and rightly the body of Christ- we will share certain traits and characteristics as members of His family. The first mark- the most pivotal and central characteristic that all of God's fellowships share- is this- that when they gather for worship, they hear the pure preaching of the word. Look at Gal. 1:6- the church in Galatia had quickly forgotten the truth and had accepted another gospel- but this is just a pseudo gospel- a false gospel. There is only one, true Gospel- and that is the true gospel that Paul had preached. In fact, to accept anything else- to embrace any other teaching- is to desert the Lord and embrace a lie! In Acts 20:27, Paul tells the Ephesian elders that he did not shrink from declaring to them the whole counsel of God. And again in Acts 20:20- I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable- of repentance towards God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ! So the pure, preaching of the word is to have a preacher open God's Word- explain it and apply it- in all its color and uniqueness. Both the Law and the Gospel- the OT and NT- from Genesis to Revelation. Of the need for faith and repentance- of how we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ! When you are a part of a church, you should expect a variety of content that reflects the full counsel of God. By the way, that is why we have sermon series in the HC and BC because in that way the full contours of salvation are touched on every year. But although the preaching is to be varied and diverse- there is a central theme that must run through every sermon. As Paul said in I Cor. 1:23- we preach Christ, crucified. True preaching always brings in Christ- centers around His being! Who is this man? He is the beloved Son of God and the Son of Man. The Messiah and our Lord! What did He do? He became man and was born of a virgin, suffered and died for us on the cross, after three days He rose again and is now ascended into glory from which He will return to judge the Living and the dead. Any true preaching will touch on all major aspects of Christ ministry and work throughout the years. And why is the pure preaching of the Word so vitally important, because faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word proclaimed Rom. 10 states. The pure preaching of the Word is the voice of Jesus the Good Shepherd by which He calls, strengthens and discipled His people. So this first mark is really the central mark- and if the pure preaching of the

Word is taking place then the other two marks will evidence themselves as well. The Second Mark of the true church is that it makes use of the sacraments properly. So Baptism and the Lord's Supper will also be evident within the worship service as Christ has instituted. And the third and final mark of the true church is church discipline. The true church practices discipline for the correcting of faults- which means that there must be functioning elders who hold people accountable for what they believe and how they live. These last two marks; the sacraments and church discipline; will be dealt with in detail over the next weeks. But before we move into our second point, it is helpful to think about this true gospel and contrast it to false gospel. Back in Gal. 1:7 we find that there really is only one gospel- everything else is a distortion- a different gospel. If the true gospel is that we saved by grace through faith in Christ alone- if Christ and Him crucified is the only way by which we have peace with God- then what does the false gospel teach? The false gospel would be anything that undermines Christ or adds our works to salvation by grace. These issues are so vital- that if you lose them you lose the gospel and thus your faith is vain- empty! In Paul's day there were Judaizers that tried to push circumcision and ceremonies back into the New Covenant. You have to obey the law as a means to your justification- to keep you in God's favor you have to observe the rites and rituals like clean food and washed hands and separation from the Gentiles. As you can see, a works righteousness is nothing new! This is simply Legalism in new hat- obey these rules- do these things and only then will God be pleased with you! But Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness as Rom. 10 says. Because we are made righteous by faith- not by our works of the law! But today we have different gospels competing for our attention. We hear of the prosperity gospel- health and wealth preaching- you can have your best life now! We also find the social gospel- this teaching that the church's primary function is the make this world a better place. But these two are competing gospels- turning the good news about what Jesus has done into a do something and work harder. Every gospel that tries to supplement the work of Christ with the work of man is a distortion- a false gospel. And if a church preaching this false gospel, they are by nature a false church. The calling of pastor is to preach the Word- and the mission of the church is to make disciples of all nations by teaching and baptizing. So a true church will be faithful to this calling.

II. A True Christian

Now that we have established the identify of the true church, in our next point we move on to consider the marks of a true Christian. But although the church itself may be true- rightly preaching the pure doctrine and truth- it also needs to be stated that there may be members of that true church who are not true Christians! Being an external member of a true church does not guarantee that you are in fact a true member of Christ! As long as the church is in this world, there will be those who claim to be in Christ but who are nonetheless not part of His people! So not only do we need to know what makes a church a true church, we also need to be clear on what makes a member of this church a true Christian! As our article states, those who are of this church can be recognized by the distinguishing marks of a Christian. The first mark is that they live by faith. As Rom. 1 says, the righteous shall live by faith. So if we are truly united to Christ, we will believe in Him and trust Him for our salvation. We will as Rom. 10 says, believe in our heart and confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord- taking the content that is preached into our heart and responding with a dependence on Christ alone. As pure preaching is the central mark of a true church, so true faith is the central mark of a Christian! Next, our allegiance to Christ also manifests itself in our desire to obey His word. As John 14:15 says, if you love me you will keep my commandments. We will be committed to following His ways- fleeing from sin and pursuing righteousness as our article states. The life of daily conversion will evidence itself in us. And finally, we will love God and our neighbor which is summary of the Law. Lets read I John 1:5-9. The message changes us so that we walk in the light. Fellowship with Christ and with His people. Love for God and His church. This is the mark of all of God's people- all those who are true Christians.

To conclude, the church is not a human invention, but rather it is the work of Christ who gathers His people. In Eph. 5 we read that Christ loves the church and He gave Himself up for her. Jesus Christ calls His people to be united to a true church; so if you have the marks of a true Christian you will be one with His true body as well!