

The Doctrine of the Church In These Times

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Chapter 3

THE CHURCH IDENTIFIED

"The reformers defined the marks of a true Church (local or regional) as:

- (1) the pure preaching of the word of GOD
- (2) the administration of the sacraments according to CHRIST's ordinance
- (3) discipline so administered that the evil surviving in believers should be purged out and the good in them fostered and strengthened." (*The Nature of the Church*, Edited by R. N. Flew p. 282).

"A visible Church of CHRIST is a congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the Gospel; observing the ordinances of CHRIST, governed by His law, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word." (New Hampshire Confession Article 16).

"Properly speaking New Testament Christianity knows nothing of the word 'sacrament,' which belongs essentially to the heathen world of the Graeco-Roman empire and which unfortunately some of the Reformers unthinkingly took over from the ecclesiastical tradition. For this word, and still more the overtones which it conveys, is the starting point for those disastrous developments which began soon to transform the community of JESUS into a Church which is first and foremost a sacramental Church." Emil Brunner (*Misunderstanding the Church*, pps. 72, 73).

"The Church, almost unnoticed becomes a 'public institution,' which expresses and satisfies the people's 'religious needs,' instead of being CHRIST's instrument of salvation." K. E. Skydsgaard (*The Nature of the Church*, Edited by R. N. Flew, p. 88).

"Whether we have sought to expand our organizations in the Church through the direct political measures which create state Churches, or have as free Churches entered into competition for popular support with other Christian organizations and also with secular institutions, in any case, we have managed to bring into our Churches many who have made no personal commitment to the Lord and His cause." H. Richard Niebuhr (*Man's Disorder and GOD's Design: Amsterdam Report*, p. 81).

"What is the trouble with the visible Church? What is the reason for its obvious weaknesses?"

There are perhaps many causes of weakness. But one cause is perfectly plain - the Church of today has been unfaithful to her Lord by admitting great companies of non-Christian persons, not only into her membership but into her teaching agencies. It is indeed inevitable that some persons who are not truly Christian shall find their way into the visible Church; fallible men cannot discern the heart, and many a profession of faith which seems to be genuine may really be false. But it is not this kind of error to which we now refer. What is now meant is not the admission of individuals whose confessions of faith may not be sincere, but the admission of great companies of persons who have never made any really credible confession of faith at all and whose entire attitude toward the Gospel is the very reverse of the Christian attitude. Such persons, moreover, have been admitted not merely to the membership, but to the ministry of the Church, and to an increasing extent have been allowed to dominate its councils and determine its teaching." J. Gresham Machen (*Christianity and Liberalism*, p. 54).

"All too many preachers have walked out of Churches brokenhearted and feeling it to be the part of humility to bear their sorrow in silence, only to have another and another minister endure the same sorrow at the hands of the same wicked and perverse organization that goes by the name of a Church." Fredrick K. Stamm (*If This Be Religion*, p. 54)

How can the true Church be identified? How does the Church remain the same Church and yet not the same? If any Church today is a true Church, it is because there is a well established and identifiable continuity with the apostolic Church What is that identity?

- Can it be identified by its name? Not always. Scriptural names are preferable, but Churches which have long ceased to be New Testament Churches may have New Testament names.

- Can it be identified by its form of government? There are Churches with New Testament forms of government which are not New Testament Churches.

- Can it be identified by its Head, the Pope, or by its succession of ordination? Hardly, for a Church may or may not acknowledge the Pope, and this does not constitute apostolic identity. One may be ordained correctly according to any ecclesiastical rule and still not be a true minister of CHRIST. How can a New Testament Church be identified?

1. A New Testament Church is marked by the true preaching of the Word of GOD.

New Testament Churches were biblical; New Testament preaching was biblical; the New Testament on every page indicates that it is rooted in the Old Testament, the Word of GOD. The Scriptures were authority in the New Testament Churches (I Corinthians 15:3, 4).

The New Testament abounds in instructions and admonitions to preach the Word of GOD. Paul exhorts Timothy, "**Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine**" (II Timothy 4:2,3). The writer to the Hebrews tells us that "**the Word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrows, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart**" (Hebrews 4:12). Paul asserts that "**all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be thoroughly**

furnished unto all good works" (II Timothy 3:16, 17). Paul writes to Titus as he does to Timothy exhorting him to speak the things which become sound doctrine (Titus 2:1).

R. Newton Flew observes, "It is the undoubted duty of the Church to protect and propagate Christian doctrine in its integrity and incorruptness." (*The Nature of the Church*, p. 21) The true preaching of the Word of GOD in its fullness, as recorded in the Scriptures, is a mark of the true Church and sharply distinguishes the true from the false. This does not mean that a true Church must be correct in every detail of doctrine, but it does mean that it wants to be, that it endeavors to be, and that it is sufficiently sensitive to the HOLY SPIRIT to be molded into the kind of Church that GOD wants it to be.

There is a limit beyond which a Church cannot go in the misrepresentation or denial of the truth, without losing her true character and becoming a false Church. This is what happens when the Fundamentals of the faith are denied and holiness of life disappears. Miner Raymond, an old Methodist theologian says, "An association of individual persons that ignores or contravenes the requirements of GOD's Word, no matter by what name it may be called, is not a Church of GOD, can not claim His sanction, nor expect His promised blessing. It is essential to a divine institution that it be fashioned after the divine pattern in all respects wherein the divine will is revealed. In matters concerning which there is no revelation, the discretion of the Church, in determining what the exigencies of the case require, is the authorized tribunal; and to its authority the individual member is bound to submit." (*Systematic Theology*, 3:241, 242) The true Church acknowledges and preaches the Word of GOD in its purity.

2. The New Testament Church is known by its scriptural administration of the ordinances.

The ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper are ordained of GOD, taught in the Word of GOD, and the manner of their administration clearly set forth. These ordinances, based upon the Word of GOD, are not mere religious traditions, hallowed customs, but ordinances significant with meaning and pregnant with spiritual blessing. The ordinances should never be divorced from the Word of GOD, for they derive their meaning from the Word of GOD. The tendency of the modern Church to reduce them to the level of ritual, and little more, is to depart from the Scriptures, to disobey God and disregard the commands of CHRIST. There are some fundamental principles concerning the ordinances which must be re-emphasized in this day when the Word of GOD concerning these matters has come to have little influence.

(a) The number of the ordinances. There are two ordinances ordained of CHRIST our Lord in the Gospels: baptism and the Lord's Supper. The five commonly called sacraments: confirmation, penance, orders, matrimony, and extreme unction, are not the commands of our Lord but the inventions of men. Many institutions and practices of the Church may be spiritually helpful, but they are not ordinances of the Gospel.

(b) The ordinances are commanded (Matthew 28:18-20; I Corinthians 11:23-34). Since these ordinances have been commanded by divine authority, their observance is not optional for a true disciple of CHRIST, they are mandatory. The rejection of the ordinances is not simply a refusal to follow religious customs but the serious sin of disobedience to GOD. The fact that some have attached too much meaning to the ordinances or permitted them to become empty ritual is not sufficient justification for disobeying God in this respect.

(c) These ordinances are Church ordinances. The Report of the Theological Commission on Intercommunion, World Council of Churches, says: "Nothing must be done to obscure the truth that it is Churches and not ecumenical committees or conferences that have the right to celebrate the Lord's Supper." (*Intercommunion*, p. 39) Again, it says: "There appears to be general agreement on the principle that a body like the World Council of Churches or the World's Student Christian Federation must not, as such, hold its own Communion Services, because such a body is not a Church," (p. 35) We do not agree, however, with the Committee in its suggestion that the Churches can arrange such a communion for the visiting convention, which seems to violate the very nature of the prohibition just laid down.

(d) New Testament Churches are alone qualified to conduct the observance of the Lord's Supper, not for the benefit of hundreds whose spiritual state and doctrinal views are unknown, but for its own people and those whom they may permit to share their fellowship. The ordinances are ordinances of the true local Church of CHRIST, and not to be observed in conferences, conventions and vague gatherings of what not. The above Commission observes: "Thus even the ecumenical gatherings (especially conferences of Christian youth), while deeply inspiring to some people, have made a very different impression on others, because they seemed to present the distressing spectacle of a diverse crowd, from many varied Churches and traditions, gathering together at the Lord's Table without any sufficient unity of belief about what they were doing there! This criticism could be offered concerning many highly advertised united communion services in the liberal groups of our day. The ordinances are ordinances of the local Church, and the local Church has no authority in the Scriptures to extend the hospitality of the Lord's Table to a great host of visiting strangers of whose beliefs and life they know nothing.

(e) The ordinances were given to New Testament Churches which bear the marks of a true Church of CHRIST, Churches may be defective in some respects, hold erroneous interpretations of the Scriptures (in all good faith) and still be used by the HOLY SPIRIT for the salvation of men. These Churches which have the fundamental marks of the true Church are qualified to administer the ordinances.

In our day we have another type of Church, A Church which does not accept the final authority of the Word of GOD, doubts the virgin birth of CHRIST, questions or perverts the doctrine of the deity of CHRIST, rejects His atoning blood, questions His bodily resurrection, refuses the promise of the second coming of CHRIST - such are not true Churches and have no authority to administer the ordinances of the Gospel. A true Church is marked by the scriptural administration of the ordinances.

3. The true Church is marked by the faithful exercise of scriptural discipline (Matthew 18:15-18; I Corinthians 5:1-5, 13; 14:33,40; Revelation 2:14, 15, 20).

The doctrine of the external sanctity of the Church is a lost doctrine, and a futile effort is being made to give to the Church a standing in the world which its degree of holiness does not deserve. There is an attempt being made to give a holiness to the Church which does not involve the holiness of the people in the Church. Scriptural disciplines are necessary to purity of doctrine in the Church, a godly testimony to the world, and a proper observance of the ordinances. To have no rule of doctrine and no rule of life as conditions of membership or participation in the Lord's Supper, is to corrupt the meaning of both, and destroy their spiritual usefulness.

Every organization which proposes to work smoothly, and yet efficiently, must have certain rules and regulations to be followed; certain laws for the individual members to obey. There is no society to which these remarks apply more appropriately and with more emphasis than the local Church of Christian believers who profess before the world to have found a Saviour from sin and a superior way of life. When these laws fall into disuse, the message of the Church is corrupted and the lives of its members cease to inspire confidence.

These disciplines can be applied wisely or unwisely. E. T. Hiscox (The New Directory for Baptist Churches, pp. 101, 102) says, "To some the word discipline has an unpleasant sound. It seems punitive. It savors of transgression, conflict and punishment. But Church discipline is not to be taken in this narrow sense alone; nor does it develop these unlovely features, except, where, by the culpable neglect of pastors and others it has fallen into decay, good order and the well-being of the body have been long disregarded, and the Church has become a lawless and disorderly company.

Then a very hasty, and possibly an intemperate effort to make matters right, without sufficient prudence and precaution, may develop difficulties . . . Whatever the difficulties, in many cases the disciplines of the Word of GOD must be used to restore the Church to health and the Lord's Table to holiness. Hiscox says, "Many a Church has found serious trouble in re-establishing a healthful order and discipline, after long continued neglect and disorder. But many a Church has also found that a thorough course of Christian labor, and the reestablishment of a healthful scriptural discipline, has brought back to the body order and harmony, reinvigorated its wasted energies, has produced a better tone of practical piety, and became the precursor of a revival of religion,"

A true Church uses scriptural disciplines lovingly and wisely.

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