

The Marks of A Faithful Church Aug. 2014
Revelation 2 and 3

Hello Dear Listeners;

This month on our program we're busy with proclaiming the Gospel concerning Christ's holy, catholic and apostolic, Christian church. That's the church which is uniquely Christ's own possession. It, or better "she" for she is Christ's bride is "holy" which simply means that church is separated unto the Lord, — set apart for Him, purified by God the Holy Spirit. She is "catholic" which simply means she is universal, so not "confined or limited to one particular place or to certain persons, but is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world." ¹ She is "apostolic" for she is built on the foundation of the apostles' teaching, their proclamation concerning Jesus Christ the church's Head. And she is Christian for she is Christ's own possession and is set apart from the many unchristian, sects and cults that are so prevalent today.

But now, how can you and I find a faithful, God-honoring church? For certainly not all churches are the same. Someone has estimated that there are approximately 33,000 different churches in the world today. And that's not all for besides these there are many, very many sects as well. Sects which are often heretical in nature and really don't deserve the name "Church".

Seeing you will be faced with a bewildering array of denominations, all claiming, to have some corner on the truth, will you need to be some kind of superhuman spiritual Sherlock Holmes?

We live in a world of consumerism in which we are taught to think in terms of what *we* want and need, indeed, what suits *us!* It is no wonder then that people would tend to evaluate churches according to their own preferences. So you will hear the question, "What are you looking for in a church?" rather than "What is God looking for?" Yet the latter question is rurally the correct one. For it is based

¹ A statement from the Belgic Confession of Faith, art. 27.

on God's own Word and not on the whims and ideas of mortal, (and sinful)! human beings.

The Lord God in His mercy has left us a most reliable 'blueprint', that reading it and following it, we might find a church with which He himself is pleased. It's the bible, which from beginning to end is God's own truthful testimony.

It witnesses to us that it is Jesus Christ who owns, builds and directs His church. For example, in the Book of Revelation we read of seven letters which Jesus Christ, directed to various churches in Asia Minor long ago. With these seven, (a number of fulness) the ascended Christ had his universal Christian church in mind.

One of those letters was directed to "the angel" or messenger of the church of Smyrna .In it the Holy Spirit says, among other things,

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold the devil is about to throw some of you into prison..... Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life.

It's quite clear that such faithfulness has everything to do with *keeping God's Word*. That's what the Spirit also went on to say to the church of Philadelphia, which ,together with that of Smyrna were the only two churches out of seven against which God did not allege any wrongdoing. To Philadelphia He said,

I know that you have little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.... (ch. 2:10)

And again,

Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world.... (ch. 3: 8b, 10)

I think it is clear that the most important ‘mark’ of a faithful church is pure, true-to-Scripture preaching. A faithful church’s minister will lead and feed and shepherd the flock under his care through the ministry of the *Word of God*. How will he do that? Listen to what the apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, whom he called “ My true son in the faith” (1 Timothy 1:2).

Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage — with great patience and careful instruction
2 Timothy 4:2

When you read Paul’s letter to Timothy it is evident that the Word of God was under attack by false teachers. That’s why you hear Paul saying,

Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have wandered from the faith. (1 Timothy 6: 20, 21)

Also then, as now, people didn’t want to hear true doctrine and faithful preaching. Elsewhere Paul said such people have “ itching ears”. (2 Timothy 4: 2-4)

Yet it is God’s rule, and no human invention, that there must be pure and faithful preaching . Yet it is not the only characteristic of a true and faithful church for the bible shows that also the “*pure administration of the sacraments as Christ has instituted them*”² is necessary. There are two sacraments: Holy Baptism and Holy Supper and not seven as Rome alleges.

That word “sacrament may seem strange but it simply means something like a 'holy oath”.³ Both holy baptism and holy supper are very rich and meaningful

² This is the wording found in Belgic Confession art. 29

³ This term is attributed to Rev. Clarence Stam in his explanation of Lord’s Day 25 in Living In The Joy of Faith p. 172.

“ holy visible signs and seals”⁴. The bible speaks of such signs and seals in Romans 4:11. In our days we see lots of signs intended to make something clear while seals are still found on important documents . They confirm or authorize something that is stated or promised in writing.

The Lord God knows how it is with us and our faith. We’re often weak in faith and we doubt and falter. The two sacraments are “*additional assurance that we are indeed God’s children and that we can depend on the Lord.*”⁵ The churches that sponsor this broadcast confess this with these words,

*We believe that our gracious God, mindful of our insensitivity and weakness, has ordained sacraments to seal his promises to us and to be pledges of his good will and grace towards us. He did so to nourish and sustain our faith.*⁶

In the Old Testament God gave such visible signs and seals — (think of circumcision and celebrations, such as the Passover) in order that the faith of God’s people would be made stronger. So that they literally might “*taste and see that the Lord is good,*” as a psalmist said in Psalm 34:8.

Yet there is one more important element that must be found in a faithful church. It is what is called *church discipline*. It’s not one that is popular in our day and age. Yet the exercise of *church discipline* characterizes the Church of Christ for where it is neglected, the sacraments will be profaned and spiritual corruption and unbelief become tolerated. This to the detriment of a church which ought to expect God’s blessing in the way of maintaining faithfulness and truth.

Christ Jesus gave the instrument of church discipline not (as a crude saying goes) to “*kick someone out of the church*” but to gain a sinner who has hardened himself and is going astray. To cause such a person to realize that he or she has

⁴ The wording of the Heidelberg Catechism in Lord’s Day 25

⁵ Ibid p. 171

⁶ Belgic Confession art. 33

grieved the Lord. ⁷ At the same time it is God's way of purifying his church and keeping her "on track". On the track of his unfailing, trustworthy word.

There may be churches that take pride in not having exercised discipline for many years. Yet it is nothing to be proud of.

So then, dear listeners, put your walking, talking, questioning and observing shoes on. Keep these three most important marks in mind and look for that faithful church to which you may be joined. No, should you by the grace of God find such an assembly which God is pleased to call his own it will not be perfect. Yet it will be church where you will be fed the great riches of God's precious, infallible word. Where you and your family, together with other brothers and sisters "in the Lord" will be able to grow in faith and in godliness.

In this way, Jesus Christ will be pleased and you will rejoice in His gathering work.

Amen and thanks once again for listening.

7. see for example 1 Corinthians 5:

