

Identifying the Church

I. How do you know whether a church is a church?

- There are true churches and counterfeit churches (“synagogues of Satan”; Rev 2:9; 3:9). How do you know if a church is not counterfeit?
- There are three marks of a true church (Acts 2:41–42). A true church needs all three:
 1. Sound preaching of the Scriptures.
 - A minimum baseline for “soundness” is the “Rule of Faith,” summarized in the Nicene Creed.
 - If there is no gospel, there is no soundness (Gal 1:8; Rev 3:2).
 2. Right administration of the sacraments.
 - Baptism in the triune name (Matt 28:19).
 - The Lord’s Supper: bread and wine, in remembrance of Jesus (1 Cor 11:24).
 3. Faithful church discipline (Matt 18:15–20; Gal 6:1; 1 Cor 5).
 - Church discipline is about requiring members to believe the gospel and to live consistently with the gospel.
 - Discipline implies that there is some leadership, an authoritative way of determining who is allowed in, and who must be removed.
 - Discipline implies that there is membership, a way of tracking who is part of the congregation.
- Nuances:
 - A denomination can be truly a church, while individual congregations are dead. Or, individual congregations can be truly a church, while a denomination is dead. A dead church can still contain true Christians.
 - A true church is not necessarily a healthy church. Mark Dever articulates nine marks of a *healthy* church: (1) expositional preaching, (2) biblical theology, (3) the gospel, a biblical understanding of (4) conversion, (5) evangelism, and (6) membership, (7) church discipline, (8) a concern for discipleship, and (9) biblical leadership.
- For practice, evaluate these:
 1. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
 2. A parachurch campus ministry (vs. RUF), or a Bible study.
 3. A group of believers meeting weekly in a home for the word, prayer, the Lord’s Supper, and encouragement.
 4. A Christian college.
 5. The Roman Catholic Church.
- An alternative view: apostolic succession. Catholics claim that the true church is determined by an unbroken succession of popes from Peter. (Eastern orthodox churches make their own claims of succession). How is the Reformation’s approach different, and who is to say who is right?

II. Seeking unity with other churches

- We should desire unity with other Christians. We are one with them, after all!
 1. John 17:11: “Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.”
 2. Eph 4:3–4: “[Be] eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit...”

3. 1 Cor 1:18: “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.”
- And yet, seeking unity is hard, because:
 1. WCF 25.4: “This catholic Church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible. And particular Churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the Gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them.”
 2. Sometimes our convictions do not allow us to work together with other Christians. For example:
 - Attempting to pray with a Catholic who prays to Mary, or praying with an Eastern Orthodox person, who prays to an icon.
 - Planting churches with an evangelical denomination that does not practice church membership, or that does not recognize churches as having authority over other churches.
 - Allowing a minister from an arminian denomination fill pulpit at our church.
 - A key issue for determining partnership is: how full and detailed should our creed be?
 1. If a creed is too full and detailed, it can alienate believers on secondary issues when we should be one. Theological diversity can be legitimate when the Scriptures are not very clear.
 2. If a creed is too vague and weak, it waters down the witness of the church and enables unhealthy compromise.
 - Separate denominations can be honoring to God (at least until Jesus returns), if the separation is because of our commitment to God’s word, and the issues of disagreement are important. Nevertheless, we should seek to be as unified as possible with other Christians, so far as our consciences allow.
 - Levels of church unity:
 1. Organic union (other churches in the OPC).
 2. Fraternal relations (other confessionally reformed churches in the world; these are churches of “like faith and practice”).
 3. Local, limited partnerships and friendships.

III. Application questions

- What should be our attitude toward other Christian churches, especially those that are not very close to us theologically?
- How does the gospel of Jesus help to keep us from an unhealthy narrowness?
- How can we more faithfully pursue unity with other Christians?