

DAILY ORAL THEOLOGY

Marks of the Church

1) Faithful preaching of God's Word

Faithful preaching was the first mark of the true church because preaching most directly brings God's Word to His people. The Reformers stressed that God's great means of speaking to His people was by preaching. Luther talked of the several forms that the Word takes. The first is the eternal Word, the second person of the Trinity. The second is the incarnate Word, Jesus. The third is the inscripturated Word, the Bible. The fourth is the "shouted Word," the preaching. At the heart of Christian worship and life is the ministry of the Word in preaching. If preaching is not faithful, the life of the church cannot be faithful. It is an essential mark of the true church.

Calvin added that this first mark of the true church is not just faithful preaching of the Word. A man standing on a street corner may be faithfully declaring the Word, but there is no church. Calvin said that in a true church a further dimension of this mark is that the Word must also be faithfully heard and received. Reformed worship is sometimes called a dialogue between God and His people—God speaks and His people respond. Calvin's point is that if God speaks through the preaching of His Word and no one is listening and responding, then no church exists. But where the Word is faithfully preached and received, there the mark of the true church can be seen.

2) Faithful administration of the sacraments

The second mark of the true church is the faithful administration of the sacraments. At first glance we might be tempted to think that this mark is really more a sixteenth-century concern than a contemporary one. The Reformation, after all, confronted the Roman church, which stressed the absolute centrality of its seven sacraments. Did the Reformers make the sacraments a mark of the church just to distinguish their teaching of two sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper) from the sacraments of Rome?

The Reformers certainly had a more fundamental concern than just to separate themselves from Rome on the sacraments. They were convinced that the sacraments are a fifth form of the Word, the visible Word. That phrase—"the visible Word"—had originated with Augustine and Calvin in particular had repeated it. The sacraments visibly display the very heart of the Gospel. Baptism shows that we are saved only by the washing away of sin in Jesus, and the Lord's Supper shows that Christians live only through the body and blood of Christ offered as a sacrifice on the cross. These sacraments are an observable mark of the true church. In a true church the biblical sacraments are faithfully administered and received.

3) Faithful exercise of discipline

The exercise of the discipline taught in Scripture demonstrates the church's determination to pursue holy living before the Lord. If flagrant heresy or notorious unchristian behavior is tolerated in the church, how can that church be genuinely receiving the Word of God? Paul clearly insists that the church exercise such discipline (1 Corinthians 5:1–5, 13). Discipline is necessary in the church according to the Belgic Confession (Article 32) to preserve harmony, unity, and obedience. Where such discipline is missing, the church is not recognizable as a holy community.