

Jesus Is Building His Church

What Is a True Church?

Matthew 16:18

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Scripture

Last week I began a short series of sermons on the topic of the church.

Jesus is building his church. All over the world, whether in urban or rural areas, in densely or sparsely populated areas, or in places hostile or friendly toward Christianity, Jesus is building his church.

The title of last week's sermon was, "What Is the Church?" I noted that the church is the community of all true believers for all time, that the church is invisible and visible, and that the church is local and universal.

Today, I want to continue with another message in the series I am calling, "Jesus Is Building His Church." My message today is titled, "What Is a True Church?" So, with that in mind, let us read the narrative where Jesus told his disciples that he is building his church. It is found in Matthew 16:13-20, and the particular text for our focus is Matthew 16:18. Let us read the word of God:

¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴ And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸ **And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.** ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." ²⁰ Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ. (Matthew 16:13-20)

Introduction

Many of you have answered a knock at the door and been greeted by two or three nice-looking people offering you one of two magazines titled *Awake* or *Watchtower*. As you talk with them, *if* you talk with them (because I know that some of you unfortunately do not talk with them), you discover that they are “Jehovah’s Witnesses.” If you continue your discussion, you learn that they worship on Sundays at the Kingdom Hall of Jehovah’s Witnesses. The Jehovah’s Witnesses try to convince you that they are in fact a true church. Are they a true church?

Sometimes you have been riding down the road and seen two young men. They are almost always identified by their clothes. They have dark pants, white shirts, dark ties, and large name tags on their shirt pockets. If you were to talk with them, you would discover that they are on a two-year mission with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, more commonly known as Mormons. They also claim that they are a true church. In fact, they imply that in the name of their denomination, don’t they? They are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. So, are they a true church?

At the time of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century one of the central questions had to do with the definition of a true church. The Roman Catholic Church insisted that it was indeed a true church.

The debate centered on the marks, or attributes, or characteristics of a true church. The Roman Catholic Church said that the revised Nicene Creed of 381 AD contained a definition of the attributes of a true church. One of the affirmations states: “I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.” This, said, the Roman Catholic Church is a statement that specifies the attributes of a true church.

Let’s look at these attributes in the order in which they were discussed. *First, the church is apostolic.* Apostolicity for the Roman Catholic Church was the apostolic authority of the Pope. The

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Pope was the apostolic successor to the Apostle Peter. And so, a true church is one which submits itself to the apostolic authority of Peter's successor, the Pope. Thus, the Roman Catholic Church asserted that the Protestant churches of the Reformation were not true churches because they had renounced the authority of the Pope.

Second, the church is holy. According to the Roman Catholic Church the holiness of the church was the holiness dispensed by properly consecrated priests from the altar in the sacraments. The Protestants rejected the sacramental grace of the sacraments as the Roman Catholic Church presented it. The Protestants also rejected the fact that ministers had to be consecrated by apostolic bishops. So, the Roman Catholic Church declared that Protestants had no sacramental grace to dispense and no apostolically ordained ministers either. Therefore, the Protestants could not be holy.

Third, the church is catholic. The word *catholic* means "universal" or "general." As far as the Roman Catholic Church was concerned, this was the clincher for their understanding of what a true church is. The Protestant church was not catholic, that is, it was not universal. The Protestant church was found only in northern Europe, whereas the Roman Catholic Church was universal, planted wherever the Portuguese and Spanish colonists had set foot.

And finally, the church is one. The unity of the church was defined by the Roman Catholic Church as unity in submission to the Pope as the one Vicar of Christ in the world. This unity was as visible, Cardinal Bellarmine said, as the Republic of Venice. Not only had the Protestant church severed unity by leaving the Roman Catholic Church, they had no single leader who was the one who held the church together in unity.

In response the Reformers did not reject the attributes listed in the Nicene Creed. Indeed, the Reformers would continue to affirm those attributes. But the Reformers did reject the way in which the Roman Catholic Church tied the attributes to the institutional papacy.

The Reformers instead interpreted the attributes of the Nicene Creed biblically.

The Reformers did not believe that the true church consisted in apostolic *succession*. They believed rather that the true church was grounded in apostolic *teaching*.

The Reformers did not believe that grace was a commodity to be dispensed through apostolically consecrated priests. Rather, God himself dispenses his grace through the means that he has appointed, such as the ministry of the word and prayer.

The Reformers did not believe that the true church was universal only in terms of geography. They believed that the church was also universal in terms of time. Thus, the Roman Catholic Church might claim to be spread throughout the world but it had ruptured its link with early church by corrupting the teaching of the apostles.

And finally, the Reformers did not believe that the true church was simply a matter of locating the Pope. The unity of the church was not bound up in the person of the Pope. In fact, at times in history there had been two and even three claims to the papacy at the same time! Rather, unity is found in adherence to the doctrine found in the word of God.

So, how do you know what is a true church? How can you distinguish a church that is in decline from a church that is heretical? Frankly, that judgment is not always easy. In fact, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* says, “The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan.”¹

After his ascension into heaven Jesus said to the church at Sardis, “I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead” (Revelation 3:1). And yet, in spite of his assessment, Jesus continued and said to the church at Sardis, “Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die. . .”

¹ *Westminster Confession of Faith* XXV:5.

(Revelation 3:2). As far as Jesus was concerned, the church at Sardis still had the embers of life. There was not much time. The situation was serious. The Lord Jesus had not yet removed his hand from the church. But, they had to act quickly.

The church at Corinth was also in grave danger. Paul wrote two long letters to correct some serious problems at the church. Nevertheless, it was still a church.

There are churches that are in a precarious position. There are true churches. And there are false churches.

So, again, I ask: how do you know what a true church is?

Lesson

That is the question I plan to answer today. The Reformers have given us great help in answering this question. They insisted that the four attributes in the Nicene Creed—that the church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic—must be understood biblically and spiritually.

They particularly wanted to stress that the true church is apostolic in its *teaching* and not in its *succession*. The teaching of the apostles was grounded in the gospel. Thus, the gospel, and not ecclesiastical organization, was the test of the true church.

Nevertheless, the Reformers wanted to clarify the characteristics of a true church. Three marks or characteristics were defined in distinguishing a true church of Christ:

1. The true preaching of the word,
2. The proper observance of the sacraments, and
3. The faithful exercise of church discipline.

I. The True Preaching of the Word

The first mark of a true church is the true preaching of the word.

Where the Scriptures are faithfully preached the word will bear fruit. A church that hears the word of God has the means for

reformation.

Yet the Apostle Paul preached the word of God faithfully over a period of time in synagogues that never became churches of the Lord Jesus Christ. They refused to receive the word of God as the word of God, and so they remained subject to the judgment of God.

So, what is it about the true preaching of the word that makes it the first mark of a true church? The mark of the word requires that the word be received and confessed as well as proclaimed.

In other words, the preacher has a responsibility to remain true to the word of God. But the hearers also have a responsibility, and that is to hear, receive and obey the word of God.

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* describes the elements of a worship service. As one would expect, the elements of reading, preaching, and singing, among others, are listed. But, what is so interesting to me is the inclusion of “hearing.” Listen to how the Westminster divines put it: “The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear; the sound preaching, and *conscionable hearing* of the word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence.”² So, the sermon time is not nearly as passive as many think. When the preacher gets up to preach, he is to proclaim the truth of the word of God. He is to remain true to the apostles’ teaching.

But the congregation has a responsibility too. When the preacher gets up to preach, they are to pay attention. They are not to settle down to relax and take it easy. No. The congregation is to *hear* what is said. Why? Because it is not merely the preacher speaking, but rather it is God speaking through the preacher. The congregation is to hear what God is saying to them.

And when the word of God is so preached and heard, there you have the first mark of the church.

But, what about a preacher who makes mistakes when he preaches? I am not saying that preachers are infallible. Preachers are sinners, and they make mistakes.

² *Westminster Confession of Faith* XXI:5.

John Calvin allowed for errors in preaching, so long as the “grand doctrine of religion is not injured” and the basic articles of faith are not suppressed. In other words, preaching that is true will uphold and proclaim the central, core doctrines that have been clearly revealed in God’s word.

What are these core doctrines? They would be the essentials of the faith, the doctrines that have to do with the essence of salvation, such as the nature of God, the fall of man, and the person and work of Christ. And all of this is revealed in the word of God.

So, there is a mutual responsibility in the true preaching of the word. On the one hand, the preacher must give himself to the faithful, accurate, and true proclamation of God’s word.

And on the other hand, you must give yourself to the conscientious hearing of the word of God. You must be like the Bereans who “received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11). Your task is to hear God’s word, examine it to see if it is accurately preached, and then apply it to your life. For as James says, “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing” (James 1:22-25).

So, the first mark of a true church is the true preaching of the word.

II. The Proper Observance of the Sacraments

The second mark of a true church is the proper observance of the sacraments.

The Protestant Church recognizes two sacraments: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. These two sacraments correspond to the Old Testament sacraments of circumcision and the Passover.

The two sacraments seal the ministry of the word in the church.

First, baptism is a sign of initiation into the church. It is a sign of entrance into the visible body of Christ. Baptism does not save, but it points to the salvation that is promised in Christ.

Jesus wants every person who is regenerated by the Holy Spirit to receive the sign of his name. As an outward sign baptism marks the family of God, and for that reason baptism is an intolerable offense to many who are not Christians. Yet, baptism is a sacrament ordained by Christ, who will have his church confess his name before a watching world.

Because the promise of the covenant of grace is to us and to our children, our children have a right to the sign of the covenant. On the Day of Pentecost the Apostle Peter said to those who heard the sermon, were cut to the heart, and asked what to do, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” (Acts 2:38-39).

Second, the Lord’s Supper is the sign of fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ, the head of the church. As often as the Lord’s Supper is celebrated, the people of God proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes (1 Corinthians 11:26).

Once baptized children come to profess their own faith, they are then admitted to the Lord’s Supper.

If a professing believer engages in sin and refuses to repent, he is to be disciplined. Initially, the elders of the church will deal with him pastorally. They are praying that he will repent and walk in a manner worthy of the Lord Jesus Christ. However, should he continue to be stubborn and contumacious, then the elders will suspend him from receiving the Lord’s Supper, in hopes that he will repent. But, should he still continue in his sin, the elders will finally ex-communicate the sinner. That means that he is no longer allowed to participate in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, al-

though he will of course be allowed—indeed encouraged—to attend to the ministry of the word of God so that he may repent.

That is why churches like ours “fence” the Lord’s Table. At the start of each Lord’s Supper I indicated who may and who may not participate in the Lord’s Supper. The Lord’s Supper is not for everyone present in the sanctuary that day. No. The Lord’s Supper is given to only to those who are church members in good standing of any true church, which we call an evangelical church.

So, the first mark of a true church is the true preaching of the word. The second mark of a true church is the proper observance of the sacraments.

III. The Faithful Exercise of Church Discipline

And the third mark of a true church is the faithful exercise of church discipline.

John Calvin defined only the first two marks in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, but included discipline in the proper observance of the sacraments.

As a mark of the church, the sacraments flow from the word. Church discipline flows from the word and the sacraments together.

The true preaching of the word does not merely explain doctrine to impart biblical information. True preaching demands a response and holds men and women accountable before God. The preacher reproveth, rebukes, and exhorts, with complete patience and teaching (2 Timothy 4:2). Discipline exists therefore in the very act of preaching the word of God.

And as the sacraments are celebrated further discipline is necessarily involved. The sacraments are not simply made available by the church. They are administered in Christ’s name. People call the church wanting to get their children baptized, but they have no relationship with Christ or his church. Baptism requires the profession of Christ’s name by the convert or by the parent of the child. And the “fencing of the table” means that the

requirements that Christ makes for participation in the Lord's Supper must be clearly stated.

So, the first mark of a true church is the true preaching of the word. The second mark of a true church is the proper observance of the sacraments. And the third mark of a true church is the faithful exercise of church discipline.

Conclusion

To apply the marks of the church to specific congregations and denominations is sometimes very easy and sometimes very difficult.

We may not reject a church for every deviation of doctrine of life. If we did, the church of Corinth in Paul's day would have been found apostate. In fact, if Jesus were to do an evaluation of our church, he may very well assess that we are like the church at Sardis and say to us, "I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die. . ." (Revelation 3:1-2).

A church is a true church that holds to the essential truths of Scripture, such as the nature of God, the fall of man, and the person and work of Christ.

Calvin himself struggled with the question of the Roman Catholic Church. He concluded that "the form of the legitimate Church is not to be found either in any one of their congregations, or in the body at large." At the same time, he did not deny that there were vestiges of the church that remain, so that he could speak of churches that are among the "Papists."³

Even though it is not always easy to determine what a true church is, at least now you know how to determine what a true church is. A true church is one which has the true preaching of the word, the proper observance of the sacraments, and the faithful exercise of church discipline. Amen.

³ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1980), IV:2:xi; xii.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAYER:

Our Father, we thank you that Jesus is building his church. Thank you that Jesus is building his church here at the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church.

We thank you that a true church is one that has the true preaching of the word, the proper observance of the sacraments, and the faithful exercise of church discipline.

I pray that no one will ever be deceived by those who are not members of a true church. I pray that you will take away the blinders from those who are blinded by false churches. Grant them a right understanding of your truth.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.