

“WHAT MAKES A CHURCH A TRUE CHURCH?”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Sermon Texts: Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 2:42-47

Belgic Confession Article 29

Introduction:

As we traveled to southern California and back we were thanked several times for flying Southwest airlines. They said they knew that we had many choices in airlines and they thanked us for flying Southwest.

We know you have many choices in churches these days and we thank you for choosing First CRC. Not all airlines are created equal, nor are all churches created equal. There are differences, some of the differences are minor, some of them are huge. There are true churches and false churches, churches that teach the Word of God and churches that teach heresy.

With the changing landscape in America it takes discernment to know which churches are being faithful to the Word of God.

Jesus said by their fruit you shall know them. But even the fruit is hard to judge sometimes. What about Joel Osteen's church in Houston, Texas? Is it a true church? It's huge, it's growing, can we say by that fruit that it must be a true church?

We can't use growth as a mark of a true church or fancy new buildings or success or great programs.

Article 29.

The problem in discerning a true church from a false church has been around for a long time and so Article 29 was written to help Christians discern between them.

Many people today would take offense at this article. Who are we to say which church is a true church or to judge between churches? What gives us the right or authority to judge who is right and who is wrong? Is there even such a thing as a truly true church?

Let's start by acknowledging that from the beginning of churches there have always been true and false churches just as there have always been wolves in sheep's clothing.

There has always been the line of Seth and Cain, the line of Abraham and Lot, the line of Isaac and Ishmael, the line of Jacob and Esau (see Augustine, *City of God*, books 15-18).

In the NT we read of false prophets (I John 4:1), false doctrine (Colossians 2:8, 20), and the synagogue of Satan (Revelation 2:9; 3:9). The NT repeatedly warns against false shepherds who are leading flocks astray.

Chapter 2 and 3 of Revelation lists seven churches in Asia Minor. Two of them are commended for being true and faithful, four of them get mixed reviews, and one of them, Laodicea, receives condemnation for being lukewarm. They were bad enough to make God gag.

From the beginning there have been sects and heresies.

II Peter 2:1 But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.

Wherever Jesus has planted a church, Satan has been busy sowing tares or weeds among the wheat.

There have always been true and false churches, meaning there has always been a need for Christians to exercise discernment and wise judgment. We can't remain naïve on this and we can't leave our children and grandchildren adrift as if it doesn't matter.

Every church describes itself as a true church, so what is one to do? Should we do what many people do and choose a church based on personal preference, or what the kids like or where their friends are?

It is incumbent on me and the elders to have as part of our role among you as your spiritual leadership to lead you and guide you and warn you, to point out error and heresy.

The Three Marks.

In Ephesians 5 we are given a clear picture of what Christ thinks of His Bride.

Ephesians 5:25-27 ... Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

Christ came to earth to establish the Kingdom of God and to build His church. From the time of the Reformation the reformers came to identify three key building blocks or three foundations stones that Christ uses to build His church and by which you can recognize if a church is a true church or not.

These three marks are the pure preaching of the Word of God; the right administration of the sacraments; and the right administration/exercise of church discipline.

The pure preaching of the Word of God, rightly dividing and preaching the Word.

Why is preaching the first mark?

Because Christ came to preach and establish the kingdom of God on preaching.
Because faith comes by hearing and hearing through the Word of Christ (Romans 10:17).

What did Christ preach? The true doctrine of God, the revealed will of God. It's His truth.

If the preaching is not faithful, the church will not be faithful. A true church is one that is governed under the authority of the Word. I am a man under authority and we are a people under authority. As Paul says:

I Corinthians 9:16 ... For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!

Galatians 1:8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.

What does it mean to rightly divide the Word of God?

Generally it means preaching and proclaiming the message of the Bible, with the Bible as our text and not other books or poetry or the latest pop psychology or self-help advice.

Specifically to rightly divide the Word of God means to preach both its parts, the law with its judgment and curse and exposure of our sin; and the gospel which does what the law cannot do, which saves us through justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone for the glory of God alone. It means to preach Christ and Him crucified (I Corinthians 1:23).

Do we preach and teach what Christ preached and taught? Or do we preach a counterfeit gospel? The church is not built up and advanced by making peace with every shift in doctrine and every compromise.

The CRC and the Banner are asking questions about why young people are leaving the church. They are suggesting that the CRC is too narrow minded, too rigid, too stuck in the past, too dogmatic about the issues of our day including abortion and homosexuality. The message is we need to get with the times.

Should we pursue results or righteousness?

Should we pursue tolerance or truth?

Should we pursue practicality or perseverance?

It's not just the liberal churches that have cast off any trust in the Bible as the true Word of God. Lots of evangelicals and post-modern emergent churches are casting off the preaching of the Word as outdated. They have lost confidence in the power of Word to change hearts and lives.

Look at the success of Joel Osteen. But consider this, he doesn't preach truth, he preaches what the itching ears want to hear.

You want a measure of how you know you are preaching the true word of God? Listen to the counsel of the Danish theologian and philosopher Soren Kierkegaard:

“Folios and folios have been written to show again and again how one is to recognize what true Christianity is. This can be done in a far simpler way.

So when in this world one preaches Christianity in such a way that the echo answers: "Glorious, profound, serious-minded Christian, thou shouldst be exalted to princely rank," etc., know then that this signifies his preaching of Christianity is ... a base lie. ... it is eternally certain that he who--by preaching Christianity!--wins all things earthly is a liar, a deceiver, who at one point or another has falsified the doctrine, ... it is eternally impossible to preach what Christianity is in truth without having to suffer in this world, to be repudiated, hated, cursed.

When one preaches Christianity in such a way that the echo answers, "He is mad," know then that this signifies that there are considerable elements of truth in his preaching, without its being, however, the Christianity of the New Testament. He may have hit the mark; but presumably he does not press hard enough, either by his oral preaching or by the preaching of his life, so that, Christianly speaking, he glides over too easily, his preaching after all is not the Christianity of the New Testament.

But when one preaches Christianity in such a way that the echo answers, "Away with that man from the earth, he does not deserve to live," know then that this is the Christianity of the New Testament. Without change since the time of our Lord Jesus Christ, capital punishment is the penalty for preaching Christianity as it truly is ...” (Soren Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon Christendom*, pp. 278-79).

The right and pure administration of the sacraments.

Baptism initiates us into the membership of the church and shows that we are saved only by the washing away of sin by Jesus. The Lord's Supper shows that we continue to live only through the body and blood of Christ offered as a sacrifice on the cross.

Why are the sacraments so important? Because they are Christ's ordinances, His gifts given to His church. Only the ones He instituted are to be observed and they are only to be administered in His name.

This is also twofold, general and specific.

First do we administer only two sacraments as our Lord instituted?

Roman Catholics added five more. Salvation Army administers none.

Second, do we administer them as Scripture gives them?

In baptism, do we use water and the triune name of God to a believer or the children of at least one believing parent?

In the Lord's Supper do we use bread and the cup with the fruit of the vine? Do we use the instruction of Jesus or Paul? Do we warn those taking the sacrament and close the table to those who are not baptized, who have not made public profession of their faith and who are not truly repentant and desiring to walk in paths of righteousness?

This is why at communion I say:

"All those who have been baptized and have made public confession of their faith in Christ, are members of a Christian church, and are truly sorry for and humbly repentant of their sins, are welcome at the Lord's Table. Come, for all things are now ready."

Right administration of Church Discipline.

Why is church discipline so important? For the same reason that discipline is important in our homes. Because doctrine is God's truth and the sacraments are Christ's sacraments, they are preserved and protected only by the authority and discipline of the officers of the church.

The best doctrine and the best preaching and the right administration of the sacraments won't help you in the long run if you don't guard them against error and from those who abuse or deny them. We must warn against error, confront the spirit of the age, and discipline the unrepentant.

What is church discipline and why must it be done?

It is to the church what discipline is to the family. Children who are not disciplined create chaos. It preserves the soul of the church and guards against foolishness.

It defends the holiness of Christ and His Bride.

Ezekiel 36:20-21 But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that people said of them, 'These are the people of the Lord, and yet they had to go out of his land.' 21 But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came.

It protects the church from infection.

I Corinthians 5:6 Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?

Titus 1:10-11 For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. 11 They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach.

It restores the rebellious and unrighteous.

I Corinthians 5:5 you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

This mark shows a church's heart to pursue holiness and purity. Peace is not maintained by tolerance, but by purity. When we acquiesce to false teaching we invite controversy, division and chaos. Are we reforming and purifying ourselves according to the Word?

This is the mark that leads to the death of denominations. When denominations cease to discipline its pastors and seminary professors, then doctrine begins to be compromised and watered down.

This is how the women's issue starts, by those who pushed against and refused to submit to Scripture and doctrine. This is how the homosexual movement gains a foothold, because denominations out of what they call tolerance or love, refuse to say no, to draw a line for the sake of the purity of Christ and His body.

Heb. 13:17 "obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you."

Conclusion.

Division is unbiblical and clearly a sign of our sinful and fallen nature. Even the purest church still has wheat and tares, sinners for members and leaders.

The church is full of sinners. The church is made up of nothing but sinners. The sinners are of two kinds. Those who deny or hide their sin or are two faced about it, one thing on Sunday and another thing the rest of the week.

Then there are those sinners who fall into sin but they don't remain in their sin. They hate their sin, they fight against it constantly, they trust in Christ alone to forgive and remove their sin and their sinful desires.

It's easy to point the finger at others. What about us? Are we a true church of Jesus Christ? I am sure we would all answer yes. So let me ask a harder question. Could we be a more faithful, or purer or truer church of Jesus Christ? Could our preaching and teaching here be more faithful to God's Word; could our administration of the Sacraments be more faithful and in keeping with Christ's intentions when He instituted them; could our discipline be more faithful?

We are reformed and we always need to be reforming. Too many of us as individual Christians are coasting along, not falling into gross sin, but not growing in grace and love either. We are content with our level of spirituality even though it doesn't reflect all that Christ by His indwelling Holy Spirit has for us.

Individuals and churches that accept everything just the way it is and don't ask questions or examine their hearts are in danger of the enemy's subtle attack. We must be constantly vigilant to watch our life and doctrine closely. This is an urgent plea to wake up and be watchful, to guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

It should matter to all of us and particularly the elders of this flock more than anything else that this church and the denomination of which we are a part rightly, faithfully and truly preaches the word, administers the sacraments and administers discipline.

There is nothing we should fear more than for our light to be extinguished. And there is nothing we should desire more than that we glorify Christ by being a true and visible beacon of light, truth and hope in our community, nation and world.

Jesus said, "I am with you always even to the end of the age. The gates of hell will never prevail against you."

Jesus has bound himself to his church forever. She is His Bride who is faithful in Word and Sacrament and obedient discipline.