**Finding a true church**

Text: Revelation 2:1-7

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**Scripture:** Revelation 2:1-7

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 371, 501, 160, 407, 73c, 273, 32, 279, 530

**Series:** Doctrine of the Church (#3) – Belgic Confession (Article 29)

**Occasion:** Lord’s Supper

**Theme:** The marks of the true church are pure preaching of the gospel, pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them and church discipline. The marks of true Christians are belief in Jesus Christ as the only Saviour, fleeing from sin and pursing righteousness, loving the true God and ones neighbours, crucifying the flesh and its works.

**Proposition:** Look for the centrality of God’s Word in the life of a local church when seeking to find a true church.

**Introduction**

If you are a new Christian how do you find a good church? Or if you have walked with the Lord for some time, but have moved to a new city or town, how do you find a good church? Perhaps you like a certain kind of worship music, a strong youth group, a wide range of activities, a powerful preacher, or a place where you can easily make friends with others at your age and stage of life.

In this message we’ll look at Scripture, with the aid of the Belgic Confession, to see what is **centrally important** when we are looking to find a good church. It is important to remember that the Word of God is very clear: God’s people assemble together (Heb 10:25). Christians are called to live lives in fellowship with one another, not in isolation (that is why the COVID alert level restrictions have been so difficult for us as a congregation). The main fellowship centre for the Christian is a local church where the ‘one another’ commands of Scripture are lived out by an assembly of believers who have committed to share a ‘common life’ together. However, not all churches are suitable environments for a believer to grow in Biblical faith and grace. This morning we’re going to consider the topic of ‘finding a true church’ under three headings:

1. The essential Word of God
2. The marks of the true church
3. The marks of the true Christian
4. **The essential Word of God**

If you Google ‘church’ and the name of any city, you’ll see that there are many different types and flavours of local churches and denominations. This is very different to the situation at the time of the Protestant Reformation in the mid-16th century, where in the Western world, there were really only two churches: the Roman Catholic church and the ‘break-away’ protestant church

The Belgic Confession article 29 identifies the characteristics of the false church who: “*assigns more authority to itself and its ordinances than to the Word of God. It does not want to submit itself to the yoke of Christ. It does not administer the sacraments as Christ commanded in his Word, but adds to them and subtracts from them as it pleases. It bases itself more on men than on Jesus Christ. It persecutes those who live holy lives according to the Word of God and who rebuke the false church for its sins, greed, and idolatries*”. When it was written in 1561 by Guido de Brès, the Belgic Confession was accurate in its statement that the true and false churches ‘*are easily recognized and distinguished from each other*’.

However, this situation changed over the coming decades as different reformers took various alternative approaches to Scripture. In the Westminster Confession of Faith the following statement describes the situation 86 years later in 1647: “*Particular churches….are more or less pure to the extent to which the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, the ordinances administered, and public worship is performed more or less purely in them*” (WCF 25:4).

Today local churches vary; they are more or less ‘pure’ (that is true to the characteristics of the Body of Christ laid down in Scripture). In the letters to the seven churches as recorded in the book of Revelation, Christ addresses each local congregation according to their particular needs with encouragement, rebuke, exhortation and promises. For example, in the letter to the church in Ephesus (Rev. 2:1-7), which we heard earlier, Christ commends this local body for the following (v3): their hard work; their patient endurance; their testing of would-be teachers and their doctrine in the church {The ‘false apostles’ may have been Judaisers from Jerusalem (cf. 2 Cor 11:13-23 or Nicolaitans (v6)); their intolerance of evil. However, the church is rebuked by the Lord for having abandoned the love they had at first (v4). This love includes both love for God and for humanity in general.

Many commentators suggest that the emphasis is on the love of Ephesian believers for one another (cf. 2 John 5). {It is possible that their hatred of heresy and their zeal for works of service in ministry had diminished their love for the Lord and His people}. Without love, a congregation ceases to be a true church. From this short letter to the church in Ephesus we learn that the characteristics or ‘marks’ of a true church include:

1. Love for God and for fellow believers
2. Patient endurance
3. The testing of teaching against Scripture
4. Rejection of evil practices

In addition we could add additional ‘marks’ from other parts of Scripture, for example: prayer, fellowship, personal devotion, hospitality, encouragement, compassion, forgiveness, humility.

In the 16th century, against the background of the medieval church who claimed that church tradition, councils and popes were as authoritative as the Bible, the Reformers insisted that the Word of God is the only authority for faith and life. It’s not surprising then that the Reformers taught that the centrality of Scripture, is the key characteristic, or ‘mark’ of the true church because **the essential element of the true Church is the Word of God.** As Belgic Confession Article 29 describes it this way: “*The true church … governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and regarding Jesus Christ as the only head*”. The supreme importance of the church being governed according to Scripture finds expression in the three ‘marks’ of the church:

1. ‘pure preaching of the gospel’
2. ‘pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them’
3. The exercise of ‘church discipline for correcting and punishing sins’

In defining these three marks which describe official functions within the church, the Reformers were **not** saying that **all** a good church needs is to have these three characteristics. If the Word of God is faithfully preached and we, as a congregation, respond in faith, trust and obedience to Christ then the church will be a community who:

1. Loves God and one another
2. Endures difficulty patiently
3. Tests all teaching against the standard of Scripture
4. Rejects all evil practices
5. Is fervent in prayer, active in close fellowship, faithful in private devotion, does not neglect hospitality
6. Encourages one another, is compassionate towards others both within and without the church
7. Forgives one another as we have been forgiven in Christ
8. Are a humble people who ‘*count others more significant than themselves*’ (Phil 2:3).

Let’s look now at the three official ‘marks’ of the true church:

1. **The marks of the true church**

In the 16th century,The Roman Catholic Church taught that Christ preserved the true church through the work of the Pope, the bishop of Rome. With this view, the true church is easy to recognise because it is the church under the authority of the Pope. Any church that does not submit to the Pope is, by this understanding, a false church.

The Protestant Reformers did not accept this papal mark of the ‘true church. From Scripture alone, they taught that the true church is recognised by her acceptance of apostolic truth – the truth that we see the Apostles teaching in the Bible. The true church is therefore marked by submission to the Word of God. This obedience to the teaching of Scripture is seen in three visible official ministries of the church: preaching, the way the sacraments are celebrated, and in church discipline. We’ll consider each of these in turn now.

1. **Pure gospel preaching**

Preaching is the official proclamation of the Word of God to a gathered congregation. Jesus said,"*If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free*." (John 8:31-32). “*Whoever is of God hears the words of God*” (John 8:47). Paul said to Pastor Timothy in Ephesus (the same church to whom the first of the seven letters recorded in Revelation is written): “*preach the Word*” (2 Tim 4:2). The phrase ‘pure gospel preaching’ does not imply that preaching will be perfect, but that there is a heartfelt effort to preach the whole counsel of God.

This is why we put such emphasis on preaching in this local church. Ministers in our churches are carefully educated and tested so that they can preach through the whole Bible, carefully expounding the truths which the Lord has graciously deposited in His Word. Our preachers are trained to accurately preach the particular truths of each specific text of Scripture as they proclaim whole books of the Bible working through them week by week in a series of sermons.

You should expect to hear the gospel, (the good news of salvation in Christ), regularly in a true Christian church. If you hear a sermon from an Old Testament passage that would be fully acceptable to a group of worshippers in a Jewish synagogue then there’s somebody missing: Christ! Faithful preaching is the first of the three marks of a true church because it is in preaching the Word that God’s truth is most directly brought to God’s people collectively.

Reformer Martin Luther spoke of four forms which the Word takes:

1. The eternal divine Word, the second person of the Trinity
2. The incarnate Word, the man Jesus Christ
3. The inscripturated Word, the whole Bible
4. What he termed ‘the shouted Word’, that is preaching

Reformed John Calvin noted that faithful preaching (‘the shouted Word’) is not just about a man standing talking loudly, perhaps on a street corner. Calvin said that in true preaching, the Word must not only be proclaimed, but also faithful heard and received by the church gathered. This is why Reformed Worship is sometimes termed a ‘dialogue’ (a ‘conversation’ between two parties) – God speaks, and His people respond. Let’s now look at the second ‘mark’ of the true church:

1. **Faithful administration of the sacraments**

The sacraments were a major concern for the protestant Reformers. The Roman Catholic church had seven of them (baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist, penance, holy orders, matrimony, and anointing of the sick) whereas the Reformers saw from Scripture that there are only two signs and seals which have been instituted by God (Lord’s Supper and baptism).

However, the emphasis on sacraments was more than just a point of distinction from the Roman Catholic church, it was also a recognition that the sacraments are a fifth ‘form’ of the Word which the early church leader Augustine called ‘the visible Word’. In the sacraments we see with our eyes the central truths of the Gospel. Baptism shows that we are saved only by the washing away of sin in Jesus. Lord’s Supper shows that Christians are truly alive only through the body and blood of Christ offered as a sacrifice on the cross.

It is important that the sacraments do not replace the ‘shouted Word’ of preaching, but rather are always accompanied by it. This is the pattern clearly revealed in Scripture (e.g. Matt 28:19,20; Mk 16:15,16; Acts 2:42; 1 Cor 11:23-30). When the spoken Word informs the meaning of the ‘visible Word’ in the sacraments, then the risk of viewing the sacraments as a way in which God’s grace is automatically conveyed to people, irrespective of whether they believe in Christ, can be removed.

Church architecture can reveal much about church theology. Contrast the central and elevated position of the ‘altar’ where the eucharist is performed by a Roman Catholic priest with the central and elevated pulpit, where the sermon is preached by a Minister of the Word and sacraments in a faithful protestant church. These sacraments of baptism and Lord’s Supper are an observable mark of the true church. In a true church the biblical sacraments are faithfully administered and received. Let’s now look at the third and final ‘mark’ of the true church:

1. **The exercise of church discipline**

The need for church discipline is clearly prescribed in Scripture. For example, when Paul writes to the Corinthian church about an unrepentant man who was continuing to sin (1 Cor 5:1-5), he instructs the church to ‘*purge the evil person from among you*’ (1 Cor 5:13).

The Word of Christ to the church about someone who refuses to repent (when called to do so for sin which has been justly established on the evidence of two or three witnesses) is revealed in Matthew 18:17: “*If he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector*”. In Christ’s letter to the church in Thyatira, we read His strong admonition. “*But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols*” (Rev 2:20).

The true church does not tolerate ongoing unrepentant sin in her midst for three reasons

* To tolerate such sin is damaging to the honour of her Lord, Christ Jesus.
* To tolerate such sin undermines the purity of the church and is damaging to the lives of her members when the church does not respond faithfully to the command of Christ.
* To tolerate such sin is damaging to the unrepentant sinner who needs to turn back to Christ for forgiveness and restoration

The Belgic Confession identifies the purposes of church discipline as ‘*correcting and punishing sins*’. This language can be confusing and even unhelpful today. Church discipline does seek to ‘correct’ unrepentant sin by exhorting the sinner to come to Christ to seek forgiveness. There is also a sense in which a sinner who is put out of the church (that is ‘excommunicated’) is punished by having the privileges of church membership withdrawn from them. However, the church does not punish sins in the sense that God alone does as the perfect righteous Judge (e.g. Gen 18:25). The faithful exercise of church discipline is an evidence of the church’s resolve to pursue holy living before her Lord and to be used of Him to ‘*turn sinners back from their wandering*’ (James 5:20). Having looked at the official marks of the true church, we’ll now consider the marks of a true Christian.

1. **The marks of true Christian**

The ‘invisible church’ was mentioned in the first sermon in this series focusing on the Bible’s teaching about the church. This phrase refers tothe whole catholic (that is universal) church worldwide and down through history, scattered amongst various denominations who truly confess Christ to be who He is. This ‘invisible’ church is the whole number of those who are saved. In the Belgic Confession Article 29, we read that ‘those who are of the church may be recognised by the marks of Christians’. These ‘marks’ are then listed as follows:

* They believe in Jesus Christ as their only Saviour (John 1:12; 1 John 4:2).
* They flee from sin and pursue righteousness (Rom 6:2; Phil 3:12).
* They love the true God and their neighbour (1 John 4:19-21).
* They cru­ci­fy their flesh and its works (Gal 5:24).
* Al­though great weakness remains in them, they fight against it by the Spirit all the days of their life (Rom 7:15; Gal 5:17).
* They appeal constantly to the blood, suffering, death, and obedience of Jesus Christ, in whom they have forgiveness of their sins through faith in him (Rom 7:24-25; 1 John 1:7-9).

These ‘marks’ reveal the faith and life of those who are true Christians. In light of these truths**,** I have some questions for you today: Do **you** have the ‘marks’ of a true Christian?

* Do you believe in Jesus Christ as your only Saviour?
* Do you strive to flee from sin and pursue righteousness?
* Do you love the true God and your neighbour?
* Do you desire to put to death your old sinful nature and its works?
* Do you trust in the blood, suffering, death, and obedience of Jesus Christ, in whom you have forgiveness of your sins through faith in him?

If you do, then you are saved, you belong to Christ, and you are part of the ‘invisible church’. Do you belong to a local church? We saw in the sermon in this series about church membership that whilst Christians do share in a bond with their brothers and sisters all over the world and throughout all the ages, we are called to mainly function together as local church congregations. If you have the marks of a true Christian, but you are not a full (communicant) member of a local church, may I humbly ask you: why not?

We heard in the recent sermon on church membership, that some people put off committing themselves to a local church for reasons including:

1. Thinking that church membership of a local congregation is not necessary because as a true Christian they are already part of the invisible church.
2. Not wanting to commit themselves to a particular congregation because of problems they see in local churches or because they are hoping that they might find a better church than the one they have grown up in.
3. Being wary of being under the oversight of church leaders.

There are a number of people here today who have all the marks of a true Christian, but who have not, as yet, committed themselves to a true church. I want to encourage you today to seriously, prayerfully consider publicly professing your faith in **this** local church so that you become a full (communicant) member. This church is not perfect (no church is or will be until Christ returns), but we do believe that the essential element of the true Church is the Word of God. Our Biblical conviction is seen in the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments and the exercise of church discipline.

I hope that you can also see other ‘marks’ of a Biblical church here in the life of our congregation, including: prayer, fellowship, personal devotion, hospitality, encouragement, compassion, forgiveness, and humility. Together these ‘marks’ glorify the Lord of the Church, Jesus Christ. They are the marks of a true church in which the Word of God is central.

AMEN.