Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

In our last BCoF article we saw that we must become members of a local congregation. And this is because the church is the body of Christ; it is His primary gift to believers for the nurture and preservation of their faith.

But one thing we learn from life in general is that there is a difference between the genuine article and cheap imitations. For example, when you buy a $20 gojiproji from an online retailer, it just isn’t going to be anywhere near as good as the much more expensive but genuine Go-Pro. And a brown bag with LV all over it from the $2 store? Sorry, it is not Louis Vuitton and the zip will fail the second time you use it.

And sadly, the same is true with churches – just because a building has the word church on the sign does not mean that it is the genuine article. And because the church is the primary gift of the Lord for the nurture and preservation of our faith, we better be sure that we are in a genuine or true church *now,* and if we ever need to join a new church we better be sure that it too is a genuine or true church.

And as a summary of what the Bible teaches, our article says, This is what a genuine church looks like. Don’t settle for a cheap imitation. Look for these marks or criteria or normal functions of the true Church – the pure **preaching** of the gospel, the pure administration of the **sacraments**, and the exercise of church **discipline**.

And of course, the first and most obvious question is **Why these three marks**? Why not fifteen marks, as was suggested by one very respected Roman Catholic theologian back when this precise question was being debated with the Reformers? Well, this would be a useful study all by itself but, very briefly, think of **the Great Commission**; the command of Jesus is to make disciples, “*baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, [and] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you*.” So baptism and teaching are essential marks of the church. And from **1 Cor. 11** we see that members of the church must regularly partake of the Lord’s Supper. So teaching or preaching is essential for a church and the sacraments of baptism and Lord’s Supper are essential for a church. And as we shall see in the next few weeks, because preaching can be done badly, and because not everyone who seeks baptism or who wants to participate in the Lord’s Supper is worthy of doing so, there is a need for judgments to be made and for supervision. And that is why the exercise of church discipline is also essential for a church. So that is why we hold that the pure **preaching** of the gospel, the pure administration of the **sacraments**, and the exercise of church **discipline** are the marks of the true church.

Well, what we are going over the next few weeks is to look at each of these three marks, one at a time. And we begin, today, with the **pure preaching of the gospel**. And what we are going to see is that it is not enough that there just be some sort of sermon or message from someone in a church’s worship service. And I trust what we learn will give us reason to thank the Lord for what He has given us here at ARC but that we will also be helped to make God-honouring and faith-nurturing decisions should the time come when we need to join a new church.

And we are helped to understand what is meant by the pure preaching of the word by our text in 2 Timothy 4:2-4 where **the spirit tells the church that the chief work of ministers is to Preach the Word**. Who here knows the six WH questions that make up basic research or investigation? Who? Where? What? When? How? and Why? So we want to ask thee six WH questions of our text as we think about the pure preaching of the Gospel. And some of these six points will get more attention than others.

1. So first of all, the **Who**? of preaching the word.
	1. Who did Paul write this letter to, originally? **Timothy**. And we know from the letter and from Acts and other letters that Timothy was the minister of the church in Ephesus at this time. So it was to Timothy, as a minister, that Paul said, “*Preach the word*.” But this is not just a letter to Timothy. By the power of the Holy Spirit, this is also a letter to the whole church of Christ throughout history. So it follows then that it is the special task of ministers today also to preach the word. **But what is a minister**? What made Timothy a minister? Why am I a minister? Can anyone just call themselves a minister? And it is worth thinking about this for a few moments because it is an important part of the pure preaching of the gospel that doesn’t receive a lot of attention in much of the wider church today.
		1. Think back, first of all, to **Moses**. Boys and girls, did Moses make himself the leader of Israel? Did he just show up one day and say, Hey guys, I am going to be in charge. You have to do what I say now. No. Moses was called to that ‘office’ by the Lord at the burning bush. And later on, when other people challenged Moses’ office, the Lord judged them severely by opening the ground beneath them and they died.
		2. And **calling and office are prominent in the OT**; it is all about the prophets, priests, and kings of Israel. And none of them were self-appointed; they were all called and anointed into their office by an existing ‘office-bearer.’ Think of the prophet Samuel anointing David as King and Elijah anointing Elisha. And all of these were publicly recognized and received as officers from the Lord. And the word we use for all of this is **ordination** – the officers that the Lord provided for His people were ordained into their office.
		3. And this continued in the NT with the Apostles. After Jesus ascended to heaven, they were anointed with the Holy Spirit and ordained as His Apostles, which means Officially Sent Messengers. How does Paul begin most of his NT letters? Paul, Apostle of Jesus Christ. And this was not about vanity or personal pride; this was about ordination. Paul was saying, You must pay attention to my words because the Lord Jesus has called me to this office – these are official and authoritative words.
			1. It’s kind of like this: If I tell you that PM Jacinda Adern says this, you could take it or leave it, but if her press secretary that PM JA says this, it has authority because of the office that the PS.
		4. Now, we don’t have Apostles anymore. But from **1 Timothy 3** and **Titus 1** we see that in every local congregation there are to be elders – called, ordained, officers. They are God’s gift to the church, today. They don’t bring us direct or new revelation; they come with open Bibles to tell us what is written there and how it applies to us, but they come with the authority of the office that Christ has given them.
		5. And if you turn back to **1 Timothy 5:17**, it says there, “*Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching*.” So what do all the elders in a church do from the first half of that verse? They rule. And what do some of the elders do? They labour in preaching and teaching. And these are the ones we call ministers or teaching elders. The Lord calls some men to be ministers; it is they who must preach the word.
	2. And all of this is why the word “**preach**” is so important. Ministers do not share or give a talk; they preach. The Greek word that translates as “preach” means Herald/proclaim/Announce/ Declare – it is the divinely authorized proclamation of the message of God to men – it is to say, “Thus says the Lord.”
2. And before I say anymore about the significance of this point I want to move on to our second point, which is the **Where**? of preaching the word, because the Who? and the Where? are two sides of the same coin.
	1. Back in **1 Timothy 3:14-15**, Paul said to Timothy, “*I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God*.” So the instruction of 1 & 2 Timothy is life-in-the-church instruction. And that means that the Where? of preaching is the **church**. And that is not a location thing, as in preaching must only happen in this building on Sunday; what it means is that preaching is not an individual thing, it is a church thing. Let me explain:
		1. Who is the cornerstone or the foundation of the church? The Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:20). And in **Ephesians 4:11**, we read that Christ “*gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ*.” So there is Christ, then there was the Apostles and Prophets and evangelists, and now there are pastors and teachers. And for the sake of keeping it simple today, we are just going to stick with the term minister. But we today are in the realm of ministers. In terms of preaching, God’s gift to the church today is ministers.
		2. And the key point here is that there is a link from properly ordained ministers today, who were ordained by other ministers and elders, who were ordained by other ministers and elders, going all the way back to the Apostles and through them to the Lord Jesus Christ.
		3. Let’s see this from another angle: Turn to **Romans 10:13-15**. (p.946) There we read, “*For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." But how are they to call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?*” So God’s ordinary way of bringing people to call on the name of the Lord in faith is through preaching. But look at v15, “*And how are they to preach unless they are sent?*” And that word “**sent**” translates the Greek word ‘apostello.’ It is where we get the word ‘apostle’ from. It means someone commissioned to or called to a divine mission. So while we are all to tell others about Jesus and the forgiveness of sins, some men, like myself and other lawfully ordained ministers, have been ‘sent,’ which means we have an official calling *from the church* to preach the word.
	2. So what we have seen as we have considered the Who? and the Where? of preaching is that it is an official, authoritative, task of the church.
		1. And what this means is that no one can make himself a minister. Don’t ever join a church with a self-appointed minister; he must be lawfully called and ordained by other elders/ministers.
		2. We don’t pay much attention to this distinction here in the RCNZ but when I was a student for the ministry in the United Reformed Churches of North America, what I did in the pulpit was called **bringing a word of exhortation**, not preaching. And it sounds like semantics, but this was done because of what we have seen today about preaching being the special task of ordained ministers.
		3. Here in the RCNZ it is why when I am away, as was the case last Sunday, you hear elders read sermons prepared by ministers. And if an elder prepares his own sermon, it is checked by the minister.
		4. But what we have seen has implications also for our attitude toward preachers and preaching. After this sermon we will sing the hymn, **Speak, O Lord**.

*Speak, O Lord, as we come to You To receive the food of Your Holy Word.
Take Your truth, plant it deep in us; Shape and fashion us in Your likeness,
Speak, O Lord, and renew our minds; Help us grasp the heights of Your plans for us—Truths unchanged from the dawn of time That will echo down through eternity.*

And while this hymn is appropriate to anytime that we read the Bible, we usually sing it right before the sermon in our worship services because of what we have seen about the preaching of the word by the minister being official and authoritative.

* + 1. Now, congregation, what we have said about preaching being official and authoritative is true in so far as it is faithful to the word. You must never just accept whatever is preached as gospel truth because a minister said it. You must instead be like the **Bereans** in Acts 17 who listened to the preaching of the Apostle Paul and examined the Scriptures to see if what he said was so.
		2. So as this New Year begins, please pray for my work as the minister. Ask the Lord to make my preaching faithful to His word. And have your Bibles open to see if what you are hearing is so. But pray that the Lord would help you to receive the preached word not as the opinion of the bloke up front but as the word of the Lord.
1. But there is more for us to consider as we look next at the **What**? of preaching the word.
	1. And at first this seems simple – what must a minister preach? “The word.” And the word is, of course, the Bible.
		1. However, some of you might remember a charismatic phenomenon that swept around the wider church a few years back called being slain in the Spirit. Men like Benny Hinn would go round and point at people who would fall down on the floor, having been slain in the Spirit. And any charismatic minister worth his salt wanted the gift of being able to slay in the Spirit. At the time I remember seeing an article defending the practice. The proof text was Psalm 23 – “The Lord is my Shepherd, He makes me lie down”!!! So its is not enough that the Bible be quoted or referred to for the pure preaching of the word to occur.
	2. And the context of 1& 2 Timothy helps us understand what pure preaching is:
		1. **1 Timothy 1:3**  “…*charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine*.”
		2. **1 Timothy 1:10-11**  “(A long list of sins that ends with) *and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the glorious gospel of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.”*
		3. **1 Timothy 4:6**  *If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed.*
		4. **1 Timothy 6:3**  *If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is a false teacher*
		5. **1 Timothy 6:20-21**  *O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called "knowledge," for by professing it some have swerved from the faith.* This is what is at stake!!!
		6. **2 Timothy 1:13-14**  *Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 14 By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.*
		7. **2 Timothy 2:15**  “*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth*.”
		8. **2 Timothy 2:17-18**  “…*Hymenaeus and Philetus, 18 who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some*.” There is real danger in impure preaching.
		9. The gospel of God’s grace in Jesus Christ is very precious and very powerful. Preached rightly, it is how sinners are brought to salvation and how they grow in godliness and in the assurance of salvation. But preached wrongly, it will keep sinners away from the Saviour; it will stunt their growth in godliness. And we saw this in our Ezekiel 13 reading – the false prophets were telling the people, “Peace!” When they were actually in serious sin. So the prophets were going to be judged for misleading the people.
	3. And all of this is why:
		1. We have a **long and difficult process** of assessment and training and examination and ordination in our churches before a man begins to preach. As far as is humanly possible, we need to confident that a man is gifted and prepared to righty handle the word of truth.
		2. But it is also why we are a **confessional church**. We are not the first ones to read the Bible and the Spirit has been at work in previous generations of believers. So it is wise that hold to the confessions of the church to help us distinguish between truth and error. And this is why if one day we must join a new church, it should be a confessional church.
2. But there is more for us to learn also from the **When**? of preaching the word. “*Be ready in season and out of season*.”
	1. And there are two possibilities here:
		1. One is that these words were meant for **Timothy** who we know from Paul’s letters was a bit timid. So Paul would be saying, Timothy, there will be times when you do not feel like it or it’s hard or daunting – preach the word!
		2. But it’s more likely, given what Paul goes on to say in the next verse about people not wanting to hear sound doctrine, that these words were about **Timothy’s listeners**. So Paul was saying, Timothy, sometimes the congregation will love the sermons and be really engaged, but at other times they won’t want to hear what you say – preach the word! Stick at it!
		3. And we will say more about this in connection with our two final points.
3. But the next thing to consider is the **How**? of preaching the word. “*Reprove, rebuke, exhort, with complete patience and teaching*.”

* 1. Now, there was a problem with false teaching in the church of Ephesus. But the words of v1 make it clear that our text is about way more than a specific and local problem that Paul was addressing; these words are enduing words for every era of the church. And that makes these words very important.
		1. **Reprove** – correct – those who are in error and who continue in sin – point this out to them.
		2. **Rebuke** – warn – Those who do not heed correction need to be told to stop.
		3. **Exhort** – urge – Tell them the truth and call on them to respond with obedience.
		4. Now, the next praise, **with complete patience**, qualifies the first three phrases. It is not one warning and you are toast; no, you must be patient and you must repeat the warning and explain God’s way, again and again, because not everyone will listen, immediately, as vv3-4 make clear.
	2. And these words really are a perfect description of **Jesus’ ministry** on earth – whether it was His disciples or the people or the Jewish leaders, He repeatedly exhorted and corrected and reproved, with patience.
	3. And these words are a **necessary corrective** for so much of what passes for preaching today, which is all about how to live the good life/be successful/well-being/happiness/three steps for this/social justice, etc. No, we need to be reproved, rebuked, and corrected, with patience.
	4. And it’s also true that we live in **the age of therapy**. But what our text is telling us is that our best counsellor is the pulpit. Timothy was not commanded to set up a couch in his study and counsel individuals. He was told to preach the word!
	5. So I we are looking to join a church, we need to ask, What role does the pulpit have in the life of this congregation? Is it THE main counsellor? Will I be reproved, rebuked, and exhorted, with patience?
1. And all of this is important, sixthly and finally, because of v4, which is about the **Why**? of preaching the word. “*For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths*.”
	1. Now in one sense, there is nothing new with these words. This was a problem way back in Israel in the OT. **Ezekiel 33** talks about the people of Israel being fascinated by the words of the prophet. They loved listening to his preaching.They would tell others to come and listen. They likened him to an opera singer. But God said, “*They come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say but they will not do it*.”
	2. And this was a problem in Ephesus and it has been a problem in every era of the church but the context makes it clear that this will become a bigger problem in the church before Christ returns – people will not want to hear the pure preaching of the word.
		1. We have seen this among our ormer sister churches in the Netherlands/North America/Australia/South Africa – We don’t want the law and sin and judgment. Tell us stories. Give us uplifting stuff. Entertain us.
		2. And the general trend is to expect less of ministers in terms of training and to expect less of members in terms of catechism and doctrine. Do many of us regularly read theology? I expect not.

Brothers and sisters, young people and boys and girls, I believe that ARC is committed to the pure preaching of the word. And this is not a well done aimed at me or you or the elders; it is praise God for His grace toward us. It is also a call to prayer that the Lord would preserve and deepen our commitment to the pure preaching of the word.

And when the time comes for us to join another church, we must ***judge*** and ***make*** ***judgments*** about that church’s commitment to the pure preaching of the word. Sadly, all too often, people choose a church based upon their own standards instead of God’s standard. How does the church make me feel? Are they welcoming? Is their worship style compatible with what I like? Do they have personal testimonies because I really like personal testimonies? Do they have programs that suit where I am at in life? How big is the youth group?

But God’s word says, “*Test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world (1 John 4:1).”* **Matthew 7:15:** *Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.* **Matthew 24:4-5**: *Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Christ, and will deceive many.”* SO the questions we need to ask are:

* Does this church take ordination seriously?
* Is the gospel preached, faithfully?
* Are sermons full of sound doctrine?
* Do the elders supervise the pulpit to see that the minister rightly handles the word of truth?
* Will I be reproved, rebuked, and exhorted, with complete patience, when I want to hear it and when I don’t want to hear it, from Lord’s Day to Lord’s Day?

You see, the church is the body of Christ; it is His primary gift to believers for the nurture and preservation of their faith. And a chief way that He nurtures and preserves our faith is through the pure preaching of the word. So it stands to reason that the chief area that the devil will attack the church is in the pulpit.

May the Lord give each one of us a love for and a commitment to the pure preaching of the word, for Christ’s sake, for the sake of the Gospel, and for our own sake’s and the sake of our children and their children. Amen.