

# CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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## When a Church is Not a Church

**W**e have been examining how important it is to have a true understanding of the Gospel as one of the distinguishing marks of a true Church. The primary meaning of the word *church* in Scripture has reference to an assembly of God's people – a society of believers who identify themselves as Christians. What is it, however, that bonds this society together? First and foremost it has to be their distinctive beliefs, particularly as it has to do with the Person and Work of Christ. Note that these believers are bound together, met together and identify themselves as a Church.

Note the following texts:

Colossians 4:15: "Salute the brethren which are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the Church which is in his house." There the term is applied to a *society of Christians* so small as to be able to find accommodation in a private dwelling-house.

Acts 11:22: "Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the Church which was in Jerusalem." There it means a *society of Christians* residing in the same city, and including, as we know on excellent authority, several thousand persons.

Acts 7:38: "This is he (Moses) that was in the Church in the wilderness with the angel which spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us." Here the word signifies a *society of believers* – an assembly of God's people so large as to include a whole nation, consisting at the time of at least two millions in number. The term is also applied to the people of God in the days of David, when residing in Canaan, spread over a great extent of territory, and amounting to many millions. Hebrews 2:12, compared with Psalm 22:22-25.

I Corinthians 12:28: "And God hath set some in the Church, first, apostles; secondarily, prophets; thirdly, teachers; after that miracles; then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues." Here the term means the *society of Christians* residing on earth; for it was among them, not among the saints in glory, that God raised up men endowed with apostolic and prophetic gifts.

Ephesians 5:25: "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the Church, and gave Himself for it." The word is here used to signify the *society of Christians* in the largest sense---all for whom Christ died---the whole family of God---all saints in heaven and all believers on earth, viewed as one great company. Thomas Witherow, one of Ireland's noted Presbyterian ministers concluded, "Let it be observed, however, that, amid all this variety of application, the word Church never alters its sense. Its meaning in every occurrence is the same. However applied, it never ceases to signify a *society of Christians*; but whether the society that the inspired writer has in view is great or small, general or particular, is to be learned, not from the term, but from the circumstances in which the term is used. In every instance it is from the context, never from the word itself, that we are to gather whether the society of Christians, intended by the writer, is to be understood of the collective company of God's people in heaven and earth, or only of those on the earth, in a nation, in a city, or in a private house. The practice---into which the best expositors of Scripture are occasionally betrayed---of taking up some idea conveyed by the context only, and regarding that idea as entering into the meaning of some particular word, has been shown by a late eminent critic to be the origin of those numerous significations---perplexing by their very multitude---appended almost to every word in our classical dictionaries, and the prolific source of errors in the interpretation of the Word of God. This is obviously what has led many to suppose that the word Church has two meanings---signifying something different when referring to the universal body of believers, from what it does when denoting the body of believers connected with a particular locality. The truth is, that the word Church has only one meaning, but it has a variety of applications. The term of itself never conveys any idea but a society of Christians; it is the context that invariably determines its general or particular application: it is manifestly inaccurate, therefore, to maintain that an idea, invariably conveyed by the

context, enters into the meaning of the term; when, as all must admit, the term, apart from the context, does not suggest either a limited or universal application.”<sup>1</sup>

One of our confessional documents, the Belgic Confession (which is part of the Three Forms of Unity), addresses this in Articles 28 and 29. Before examining the particulars, let’s look at how this important Reformed Confession came into being. Three early Protestant Christian documents are referred to as the Three Forms of Unity and serve as the basis of Faith for many Churches, particularly Reformed Churches. The Belgic Confession is historically the first of the three, the others being the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort (or Dort). It is called the Belgic Confession because it was written in the southern Lowlands, now known as Belgium. Its chief author was Guido de Bräs (sometimes spelled de Bres), one of a number of itinerant preachers. Due to religious persecution, he died a martyr’s death in 1567.<sup>2</sup> Philip II, of Spain, severely persecuted Reformed believers in the Lowlands as revolutionaries. The Belgic Confession was written by de Bräs in 1561 primarily as a testimony to the Spanish king to prove that the Reformed believers were not rebels, as was charged, but law-abiding citizens who professed only those doctrines which were the teachings of Holy Scripture. In 1562 a copy was sent to the Spanish king, accompanied by a petition for relief from persecution, in which the petitioners declared that they were ready to obey the government in all lawful things, although they would “offer their backs to stripes, their tongues to knives, their mouths to gags, and their whole bodies to fire,” rather than deny the truth of God’s Word. The Confession and the petition had no effect on the Spanish authorities. However, it served well as a means of instruction of Reformed believers and thus became an expression of the faith of a people enduring suffering for Christ’s sake. This is also reflected in its language. For while this confession follows the objective doctrinal order in its articles, its profoundly personal element is evident from the fact that every article begins with such words as, “We believe...,” “We believe and confess...,” or, “We all believe with the heart and confess with the mouth....” In its composition, de Bräs availed himself to some extent of a confession of the Reformed churches in France, written chiefly by John Calvin, published two years earlier. The work of de Bräs, however, is not a mere revision of Calvin’s work, but an independent composition. In 1566 the text of this confession was revised at a synod held at Antwerp. In the Netherlands it was at once gladly received by the churches, and it was adopted by national synods held during the last three decades of the sixteenth century. The text, not the contents, was revised again at the Synod of Dort (Dordrecht) in 1618-19 and adopted as one of the doctrinal standards to which all office bearers in the Reformed churches were required to subscribe. The confession stands as one of the best symbolical statements of Reformed doctrine.<sup>3</sup>

## I. HOW IMPORTANT IS THIS?

The believer confesses in Article 29 that “*we ought to discern diligently and very carefully from the Word of God what is the true Church.*” Two reasons may be given for this need to “discern diligently and very carefully.”

A. The first has already been confessed in Article 28. That article had given expression to the teaching of the Lord that “*all and everyone are obliged to join [the church] and unite with it.*” Two reasons in turn had been given in Article 28 as to why one needed to join the church:

1. “*Since this holy assembly and congregation is the assembly of the redeemed, all the redeemed ought to join it;*
2. “*There is no salvation outside of it.*”

We have today literally *thousands* of churches all claiming to be *real* churches. As Article 29 says it: “*all sects which are in the world today claim for themselves the name of Church.*” How then do we determine *which* church to join? Article 28 states that the individual believer must join the Church, how then, from all these ‘churches,’ do I discern which is THE church I must join? In order to do that, I need the instruction of the Word of God. On the basis of the Word of God alone am I able to discern what the Church is, and so determine where it is that I belong and to which Church I must therefore join myself. I cannot overstate the fact that Church membership is *not* optional. It is a question of obedience. But the first step is determining *what* church I should be a part of and *why*.

## II. THE THREE MARKS OF A TRUE CHURCH

We briefly examined this in lesson number 4, but let us examine in some detail how this is spelled out in the Belgic Confession. As noted, the Belgic Confession is one of the earliest Reformed Confessions. It was especially during the Reformation that the discovery was made and the insight gained that, though outwardly the Church might (at least formally) conform to the attributes, it might still not be the true Church. And so there arose the problem: how to test the Church’s authenticity? It is, of course, essentially and ultimately only God who knows who are his children and where his Church is to be found – and no man may seek in any way to rob him of this right. On the other hand, everyone who is called to form the Church and to keep it pure must know the criteria for a true Church. Because the empirical Church is not *ipso facto* the true Church, the Reformers introduced a critical yardstick known as the *notae ecclesiae*. This is not to imply that Rome did not also feel the need for criteria, but there the Church’s attributes also fulfilled the corrective function of the *notae*, and on this basis the false, so-called “Churches” of the schismatic communions could be distinguished.

Whichever was not *one* with the Church of Rome; whichever did not share with Rome the *holiness* of, say, its doctrine, its sacraments, and its official authority; whichever was not included in the *catholicity* of the Church that extended all over the world; whichever was not governed by the sole and lawful successors of *the apostles* – the religious community that did not meet these requirements and display these attributes was not a Church, and therefore not the true Church. And so the empirical Roman Catholic Church was regarded as the true Church. This, of course, the Reformers could not accept. In any pure biblical vision of the Church attributes and norms, the conditions for and the consequences of being the Church, forms of revelation and constituting elements cannot be synchronized. As to what ought to be regarded as the *notae ecclesiae*, for all their differences the Reformers were unanimous regarding the pure – i.e., the official – ministry of Word, sacraments, and discipline.<sup>4</sup> Article 29 describes the marks of that very same Church:

*“The true Church is to be recognized by the following marks:*

- 1. It practices the pure preaching of the gospel;*
- 2. It maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them.*
- 3. It exercises Church discipline for correcting and punishing sins.”*

#### **A. The pure preaching of the gospel**

Note well that the true Church is not characterized by preaching, but by **PURE PREACHING**. Candidly, the kind of popular preaching that is so typical today (Joel Osteen for example) is NOT preaching in the Biblical sense. To hear the pure preaching of the Gospel is the equivalent of hearing the voice of Christ. The voice of Christ will not twist, omit, or add to what is written in the Bible. If Christ speaks, one hears *what is found in the Bible*. Why is it important for me to be in the Church where Christ speaks? It is because that is where salvation is available to me; that is where I hear pure preaching of the gospel. Simply distilling “practical principles” for successful living and omitting what the Bible has to say about uncomfortable subjects like sin, the Holiness of God, the judgment to come, etc., is an abomination. The Apostle Paul declared that preaching ought to confront people with the sobering reality of God’s wrath (II Cor. 5:11-15). Riddlebarger rightly notes, “This is the foundation for everything else. Get this one wrong and nothing else matters! If this mark is not present then a church cannot possess any of the other marks (since, for example, the sacraments draw their efficacy from the gospel, not from the church or the minister). The pure preaching of the gospel entails what Paul calls the public placarding of Christ (Galatians 3:1). It involves the faithful proclamation of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ on behalf of sinners as defined in 1 Corinthians 15:1-8. To preach the gospel is to speak of God reconciling sinners to himself in the person of his Son (Romans 5:8-11; II Corinthians 5:18-21). It is to proclaim that through the cross, God manifests his love and his justice, satisfying his just anger toward people who deserve his wrath (Romans 3:20-25). According to Romans 10:14-17, faith comes about through the hearing of the proclamation of that gospel. The pure preaching of the gospel involves very specific content: proclaiming Christ’s saving work for sinners through his active and passive obedience, his death and resurrection. To talk about Jesus in some vague way in a sermon is not preaching the gospel!”<sup>5</sup>

In John 10:1-18, the shepherd and the hireling are contrasted, the one concerned for the well being of his sheep (even to the point of sacrificing his own life for the sheep), while the other’s primary concern is his own well being. Said Jesus, *“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them.”* It is imperative therefore for the sheep to be able to discern between the shepherd and the hireling. How do the sheep know that they are indeed following the shepherd and not the hireling? Said Jesus, *“I am the good shepherd’ and I know My sheep, and am known by My own”* (John 10:14). How do the sheep know the Shepherd? *“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me”* (John 10:27). Here Jesus repeats what He said in the verses 3 and 4 of the same chapter, namely, *“...and the sheep hear (the shepherd’s) voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.”* Leon Morris helpfully observes that unlike sheep herders in the West who use dogs to shepherd their sheep, the Eastern shepherd often has an individual call for each of his sheep and it is this that is in mind here. The sheep know their shepherd and they recognize the call he gives his own. More, they respond to it, and in this way he leads them out. The word AKOUE (hear) is used with genitive of the thing heard (as in John 5:25). It denotes that the sheep hear the shepherd’s voice with understanding and appreciation. Of equal importance, the Greek word IDIA (his own), underscores that the shepherd does not call sheep in general. He calls his own sheep, and he has a call that they recognize.<sup>6</sup>

Where is the Good Shepherd’s voice heard? It is heard in the Church. To hear the preaching of the Word of God is to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd. This Word calls me to join that Church where Christ the Good Shepherd is the Head of the Church, where His Word is the final authority.

**B. The pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them**

Whereas the preached word is *audible*, the sacraments are the *visible* proclamation of the Word of God; preaching made clear to the eyes in order to underline, and to illustrate the message that is heard. Pure administration of the sacraments, then, points also to Christ's presence. (The Belgic Confession deals with the sacraments in Articles 33-35).

**C. Church discipline is exercised for correcting and punishing sins**

The Good Shepherd, motivated by love for His sheep, reaches out to His sheep when they go astray. He seeks them out so that He might lead them back to His fold. The Shepherd loves His sheep so much that He even laid down His life for them. If I don't listen to Christ my Shepherd, if I don't want to hear His voice, He disciplines me out of love. His motive is to bring me back to Him so that I may live within the safety of His fold, His Church, for that is where He offers me salvation.

All together, then, the three marks speak of the Christ's pastoral care for His people. Article 29 summarizes these three marks of the true Church as follows, *In short, (the true Church) governs itself according to the Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and regarding Jesus Christ as the only Head.*" The presence of these three marks in a church testifies to the fact that Christ is the Head of that Church. If Christ is there, then His whole Word will be the final authority in every question.<sup>7</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** USA Today recently announced that once again Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church in Houston, TX., is the largest Church in American with over 43,000 in weekly attendance. Well, it may be called a "church" but it bears *none* of the marks of a true church. Listen once again to Riddlebarger. "If the marks of a true church are easily seen—the faithful preaching of the gospel, the proper administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline—then the false church also can be easily recognized. 'The false church 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.'" These words are clearly aimed at the Roman church, which, at the time our confession was written, was ordering all Reformed Christians in France and Holland to be put to death. But these marks of the false church are not limited to Rome. They certainly apply to all cults and sects (which spring from Christian roots), and they apply to virtually all mainline Protestant denominations (but not necessarily to all the congregations within them). Just as some churches may have only one mark of a true church, so too, many churches may manifest one or more (if not all) of the marks of the false church. This is often a matter of degrees...While this discussion is never easy, it is a necessity. Because the marks of both true and false churches are objective and easily determined, our confession concludes, 'these two churches are easily recognized and distinguished from each other.' Does a church faithfully preach the gospel as the saving work of Jesus Christ on behalf of sinners? Are the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper administered as God commands in his word? Are unruly and unrepentant members of the church disciplined? If the answer to these questions is 'yes,' then, you have a true church—and it is easily recognized! And such a church is the visible manifestation of Christ's invisible body. It is that place where we join with others of like mind, together under the yoke of Jesus Christ, one in heart, mind, purpose and faith. Amen."<sup>8</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Witherow, The Apostolic Church (rpt. Free Presbyterian Publications 1990) p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> See the insert by Wes Bredenhof.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the article by J. Van Engen in Elwell's Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, ed. W. A. Elwell, (Baker 1990) p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> J. A. Heyns, The Church (NGKB, 1980) p. 107

<sup>5</sup> Kim Riddlebarger, "Easily Recognised" A Sermon on Article Twenty-nine of The Belgic Confession. Available at <http://www.Riddleblog.blogspot.com>.

<sup>6</sup> L. Morris, The Gospel of John (Eerdmans 1965) p. 502.

<sup>7</sup> This outline is adopted with modification from C. Bouwman, available at <http://spindleworks.com/library/bouwman/belgic/ART29.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Riddlebarger, op. cit.