

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE MARKS OF A TRUE CHURCH

The tremendous impact that our high-tech culture has had on the whole concept of *doing* church is simply mind-boggling. *The New York Times* recently explored the relationship between how mega-churches mimic big corporations. “Successful mega churches reflect American corporate history and management theory. Their architecture and organization ‘are best compared to those of the modern white-collar workplace.’ In an essay and slide show from Triple Canopy, Joseph Clarke [follow the links] says it may be tempting to compare megachurch pastors like Joel Osteen to arena rock stars, but a more apt analogy is C.E.O. And the modern megachurch is as much the cultural heir of the corporate Organization Man as it is of the revival tent. Clark notes parallels in the evolution of modern corporation and megachurch, in particular the similarity of their suburban campuses – ‘the mid-century embrace of car-friendly, Arcadian settings for work and worship.’ (As if to spur suburban development during the postwar atomic threat, some preachers like the Rev. Billy Graham warned their flocks in apocalyptic terms about the dangers of cities.) Both corporate managers and preachers alike found that ‘to minister effectively to suburbanites, they would have to be subdivided; they would have to adopt organizational and spatial frameworks capable of reducing their perceived size and conveying their appreciation for the individuality of workers and worshipers.’ The results today can be seen in the ‘remarkable’ correspondences between Google’s California headquarters, Googleplex, and the Saddleback Church of the Rev. Rick Warren (a friend of the late management guru Peter Drucker). Rigid building models were broken down into amorphous, disaggregated masses, screened from their parking lots by trees and artificial hills; both campuses include plush lounges, landscaped paths, beach-volleyball courts, and cafés (with ‘outdoor seating for sunshine daydreaming,’ Google’s Web site boasts). The architecture is meant to persuade church members or secular employees – especially younger people – to spend their most productive time there.”¹ One perceptive writer has described this as *the McDonaldization of the Church*. “For other evidences of the quick-fix pre-packaged ‘church’ we need go no further than the average Christian bookstore, where most of the stock is likely to be of this kind. There are ‘how-to’ books on every imaginable topic, including titles claiming to be able to teach us the ‘ten steps to spiritual maturity,’ or how to be a successful parent in sixty minutes, while anyone looking for curriculum materials for Christian education is faced with a bewildering choice, all of them claiming to offer biblical truth and changed lifestyles in even more easily accessible bite-sized chunks than their competitors. Many churches are expending inordinate amounts of energy to ensure that their worship (by which they invariably mean singing or what some call ‘music ministry’) is carefully programmed and regulated. Alongside this there is a corresponding focus on appointing people to ever more narrowly defined ministry positions, building up extensive programs, and ensuring that we have the right size of team to meet projected needs..... In such a context, pre-packaged church can easily seem to be an attractive option: Somebody else does the thinking for you, predigests it, and serves it up in an efficient manner. It is the spiritual equivalent of fast food, and unlike the home-prepared meal it requires no preparation, no cleaning up afterwards, and no involvement in cooking it. But – to continue the analogy – fast food comes in only very limited selections, and the novelty of those wears off (and who wants to eat burgers for every meal?) then the majority of people look elsewhere, even if they do not seek out establishments that are paid-up members of the growing international ‘Slow Food’ movement. Churches where everything is pre-packaged can often thrive for awhile, but eventually they too lose their appeal.”² Into this existing state of confusion about the Church we now have a new group of *progressive* evangelicals (often identified with what goes by the name *the Emergent Church* who are just as captivated by our postmodern culture, but in a different way. “The language of character formation, virtue, right and wrong has been supplanted by pseudo-psychological language about authenticity and feelings. With respect to decision making and evaluation, the rightness or wrongness of an action or an attitude is downplayed if the action itself is ‘authentic.’ When it comes to political decisions, policy, character, and experience take a back seat to whether the politician strikes us as a *real person*. The emphasis on authenticity is tied to the rejection of a doctrinaire and dogmatic Christianity that outsiders perceived to be hypocritical and artificial, and it results in an intellectual approach that is reticent to draw lines or provide definitive answers. The new evangelicals tend to frame their intellectual engagement with the world and with Christianity in terms of a journey or a path—conclusions do not matter nearly as much as questions and conversation. Being right is less important than asking authentic questions. In this way, Rick Warren’s Civil Forum with Barack Obama and John McCain perfectly encapsulated the new trend in

evangelicalism.”³ Whether it is the seeker-church crowd or the newly minted postmodern evangelicals, the whole notion of what constitutes a true church gets badly blurred. What is a true church? What distinguishes a true church from a false one? “First,” as Macleod noted, “what are the marks of the church? The Reformation threw this question into high relief both because the Church of Rome claimed to be the one and only Holy, Catholic Church and because numerous sects arose, all claiming to be pure expressions of the idea of the church. Over against both Rome and the sects, then, the Reformers had to ask, How do we know the true church of God? What are its marks? The full answer did not emerge overnight. Calvin indicated two great notes of the church: The preaching of the word and proper administration of the sacraments. The Scottish Reformers added a third mark: discipline.⁴ Mike Horton makes this helpful observation. “I suggest that by locating the visibility of the church in the public marks of the preaching of the gospel and administration of the sacraments, these emphases are more fully integrated. Furthermore, it ensures that the indicative (“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” [Matt. 28:18]) drives the imperative (Therefore, “go into all the world” [Mark 16:15]), instead of the reverse, which can only lead to another form of “holy egoism,” as well as spiritual exhaustion. The gospel not only determines the message, but also defines the ministry and mission of the church. In other words, Christ retains the sole authority to determine not only what we say in his name, but also what we do and how we do it, so that the mission is consistent with the message. The message determines the mission, but the mission delivers the message. We cannot choose between being doctrinal and being missional. Thus, the marks define the mission. Preaching, baptism, and the Supper are means of grace – that is, God’s acts of delivering Christ to us – rather than means of obedience. We certainly are also commanded as well as assured through these means, but obedience is the “reasonable service of worship” that we render “in view of the mercies of God” (Rom. 12:1 KJV). Indicatives come before imperatives. Prayer, offering our service and gifts, personal and family worship, Bible reading, fellowship with other believers, sharing the gospel with others – these are all important responses of gratitude, but they are not means of grace.”⁵ The marks of the church are treated in *The Confession of the English Congregation at Geneva* (1556), the *French Confession of Faith* (1559), articles 26-28; *The Scottish Confession of Faith* (1560), chapters 16 and 18, and the *Belgic Confession of Faith* (1561), articles 27-29; *Second Helvetic Confession* (1566), chapter 17.

Mark 1: Right Doctrine - The first mark of the church is the pure preaching of the Word of God and sound doctrine, for without this, the church could not possibly exist. Such a mark houses a certain amount of flexibility since some true churches are more pure or less pure than others. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* states, “The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error” (ch. 25, sec. 5). Though some churches have a purer understanding of the Word than others, the Scriptures demonstrate this mark as essential to the visible church from a host of passages. Here, the Word of God is of paramount importance to the life and vitality of the church. 1 Timothy 3:15 says, “...but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.” John 8:31, 47: “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. . . . He who belongs to God hears what God says.” John 14:23: “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching.” Galatians 1:8-9: “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned.” 2 Thessalonians 2:15: “So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.” 2 Timothy 3:16-4:4: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.” I John 4:1-3: “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.” 2 John 9-11: “Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work.”

Mark 2: Right Administration of the Sacraments - The second distinguishing mark of the true church is the right administration of the sacraments, which is birthed by sound doctrine and spills over into the unity of fellowship. It is certainly true that where right doctrine is found, there will be a necessary overflow of that right doctrine into the teaching of the sacraments, or means of grace. Berkhof says, “The sacraments should never be divorced from the Word, for they have no content of their own, but derive their content from the Word of God; they are in fact, a visible preaching of the Word.”⁶ The sacraments have been instated in the church by Christ and are presented in the Bible as to the manner in which they are to be dispensed. The sacraments are seals of the Covenant of Grace and intended for the partakers of the Covenant of Grace alone. As the *Westminster Confession of Faith* states, “Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ, and his benefits; and to confirm our interest in him: as also, to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the church, and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to his Word.” I Corinthians 11:23-30: “I received from the Lord what I passed on to

you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep."

Mark 3: The Right Administration of Discipline - The third distinguishing mark of the true church is the 'set apartness' (in the sense of being separated from worldliness) of her members which is directly related to the right administration of church censure and discipline. Notice how this is directly related to the first two marks. It is exceedingly important for the maintaining of sound doctrine and for the right administration of the sacraments. Matthew 18:17: "If [a sinning brother] refuses to listen to [two or three concerned Christians], tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector." Acts 20:28-31a: "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!" Romans 16:17-18a: "I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites." In light of Harold Camping's serious errors that we have addressed over the past few weeks (and his refusal to heed the counsel of a large number of people, including many highly respected Reformed theologians) he and his followers should be dealt with this way.

CONCLUSION: In addition to these three marks, a fourth, the proper worship of the church is sometimes added. Most Reformed Theologians, however, consider *worship* as an essential part of all three marks. Calvin declared, "this is the abiding mark with which our Lord has sealed his own: 'Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice' [John 18:37]. . . Why do we willfully act like madmen in searching out the church when Christ has marked it with an unmistakable sign, which, wherever it is seen, cannot fail to show the church there; while where it is absent, nothing remains that can give the true meaning of the church? Paul reminds us that the church was founded not upon men's judgments, not upon priesthoods, but upon the teaching of apostles and prophets."⁷ Our Reformed Confessions deal with the nature of a true church in the following ways: The Westminster Confession elaborates on the doctrine of the church when it 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" (25:5). This statement does not purport to tell us how we may "rate" churches in a dubious condition, nor does the Confession commend believers to "less pure" churches which have not yet fully degenerated into synagogues of Satan. Rather, the Westminster Confession lets stand the previous credal doctrine that calls upon men to seek out a true church A one clearly discerned by the right marks. French Confession of Faith (1559), article 27. The Belgic Confession (1561) says, "We believe that we ought diligently and circumspectly to discern from the Word of God which is the true Church, since all the sects which are in the world assume to themselves the name of the Church" (article 29). The Scottish Confession says, "Because that Satan from the beginning has laboured to deck his pestilent synagogue with the title of the kirk of God, and has inflamed the hearts of cruel murderers to persecute, trouble, and molest the true kirk and members thereof it is a thing most requisite that the true kirk be discerned from the filthy synagogue, by clear and perfect notes, lest we, being deceived, receive and embrace to our own condemnation the one for the other" (chapter 18). Belgic Confession, article 28. In some cases, there may not be a preexisting true congregation near a believer's home. Still, the imperative to separate from false churches remains. In such irregular circumstances, where there is not an acceptable preexisting church, the believer would be encouraged to help form one or, perhaps, move to a location near a true congregation. During the Reformation, Protestants formed numerous "house churches" sometimes called *privy congregations*, and often held "underground" meetings. (See Second Helvetic Confession, chapter 17.) Louis Berkhof made this observation, "Strictly speaking, it may be said that the true preaching of the Word and its recognition as the standard of doctrine and life, is the one mark of the Church. Without it there is no Church, and it determines the right administration of the sacraments and the faithful exercise of Church discipline." Calvin writes in this connection: "this is the abiding mark with which our Lord has sealed his own: 'Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice' [John 18:37]. . . Why do we willfully act like madmen in searching out the church when Christ has marked it with an unmistakable sign, which, wherever it is seen, cannot fail to show the church there; while where it is absent, nothing remains that can give the true meaning of the church? Paul reminds us that the church was founded not upon men's judgments, not upon priesthoods, but upon the teaching of apostles and prophets."⁸ This is a critically important topic because, as Trevin Wax has recently written, there is a major crisis in *many* of our self-professed *Evangelical* churches – a crisis created by counterfeit gospels. Wax highlights three elements.

- A lack of gospel confidence – we have lost our faith in the power of the gospel to change life.
- A lack of gospel clarity – we are unsure of what the gospel message truly is.
- A lack of gospel community – devoid of confidence and clarity, our churches have begun to lose their distinctiveness. We've lost what makes the church the church.

Against this crisis Wax proposes that the gospel is like a three-legged stool with each leg absolutely critical to a proper understanding of the message; without each of the 3 legs, the stool cannot stand. First, there is the gospel *story*, which is the overarching grand narrative we find in the Scriptures. Second, there is the gospel *announcement*, which is that Christ died for our sins and was raised. And third, there is the gospel *community*, the people who herald the grace of God and spread the good news of what Christ has done. In what becomes a very helpful grid that runs through the rest of the book, Wax first introduces one of the legs and then contrasts it with two related counterfeits. For example, in the book's first section he writes about the truth, the story of the gospel and he then contrasts it with 2 counterfeits: the therapeutic gospel and the judgmentless gospel. Each of these is perversion of the gospel story. The therapeutic gospel confuses spiritual symptoms with our spiritual disease while the judgmentless gospel insists that there will be no judgment of hell against sinners. In the second part he writes about the gospel announcement and contrasts it with the moralistic gospel and the quietist gospel. Then in the third and final part he looks at gospel community and contrasts it with the activist church and the churchless gospel. At the end of it all he circles back to where he began with a joyful celebration of the gospel and a call to tell the story, to make the announcement and to invite other people into this community. The counterfeit gospel produces counterfeit churches – churches devoid of the true marks of the church. The true marks of a Biblical church is shown to be beautiful while the counterfeits expose themselves as exceedingly ugly and vulgar. Ultimately truth triumphs.⁹

ENDNOTES

¹ New York Times website: <http://ideas.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/07/06/why-moved-my-cathedral/?hp>.

² John Drane *The McDonaldization of the Church* (Smyth and Helwys Publishing, 2001), 42-3.

³ <http://www.civitate.org/2009/01/the-new-evangelical-scandal/>

⁴ Donald Macleod, *A Faith To Live By: Christian Teaching that Makes a Difference* (Mentor, 1998) p. 222.

⁵ M.S. Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (WJK Press, 2008) p. 248

⁶ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1946) p. 577.

⁷ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* Book IV, Chapter 2, section 4

⁸ As cited by Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of The Christian Faith* (Thomas Nelson, 1998) p. 85. Reymond has a very good analysis of this subject.

⁹ T. Wax, *Counterfeit Gospels: Discovering The Good News in a World of False Hope* (Moody Press, 2011) cf <http://www.challies.com/book-reviews/counterfeit-gospels>