



THE MARKS OF THE TRUE OR PURER CHURCH

The sixteenth century Protestant Reformation was essentially a God-inspired endeavor to recover the first-century purity of the Christian church. In the intervening centuries there had occurred two relevant developments.

First: A developed understanding of the church.

As early as the second century, the church had sought to define her purity in terms of certain attributes or characteristics. Beginning with Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, she was described as “one, holy, [and] catholic.”¹ These three attributes made it into the Apostles’ Creed, an early baptismal creed. The *Apostolicum* as it is otherwise known, dates back as far as to 200 A.D., to questions posed to catechumens (converts to Christianity being prepared for baptism). Yet, by the Second Ecumenical Council of 381, the Council of Constantine, the church had settled on four attributes.

First, the church is one: The church, states the apostle Paul, has “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4:5). Baptism only amounts to such when it is administered by water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and, it seems to me, by those ministering in the apostolically recognized ministry of the Word (cf., Matt. 28:18-20 and Eph. 4:11).²

¹ The life of Ignatius prior to his arrest and execution by Rome is unknown. He died at some point during the reign of Emperor Trajan, 98–117 A.D.

² In mind here is the more recent debate within Protestantism as to whether Roman Catholic baptism is admissible in Protestant churches. John Calvin (1509–1564) argued that since baptism does not depend on the merit of him who administers it, baptism in the Roman church is admissible (*Institutes 4:15:16*). Yet Calvin, as a Protestant reformer, was conscious of the need to evade the charge of schism. He may, then, have felt pressure to maintain with Rome whatever visible continuity he could notwithstanding the illegitimacy of the office of priest. Later, Southern Presbyterian, James Henley Thornwell (1812–1862), denied the validity of Roman Catholic baptism since acceding to it would give credence to

Second, the church is holy: She is sanctified or set apart from the world by Christ and is a “communion of saints [or, holy ones].”

Third, the church is catholic (or universal): Her message is to go to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). The church is not to be bound to any one time, place, or ethnicity.

Fourth, the church is apostolic: She follows the inspired teaching and witness of the apostles (Acts 1:21-22; 2:42) and follows those traditions they made binding on the church through the infallible leading of the Holy Spirit (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:2, 23; 2 Thess. 2:15, 3:6).

Second: The deterioration of the purity of the church.

No matter how much scholars today scale back on claims about the unhealthiness of the church and of society in the Medieval Period, by the time of the Protestant Reformation there was a groundswell of belief that the church needed significant biblical reform. Biblical authority had become smothered by a build-up of conflicting manmade traditions, a resultant doctrinal confusion, moral scandals, and political corruption. Despite the great efforts of the Roman Catholic Church to produce a united Christendom, by 1350 the dream was vanishing. Beside facing famine, plague, warfare, and the intrusion of Islam into the Balkans,

Rome’s false gospel: “Be baptized and be justified” (*Collected Writings*, reprint ed. [Edinburgh and Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1986] 3:283-412). Princeton theologian Charles Hodge (1797–1878) took a mediating position, believing Roman Catholic baptism to be valid but irregular. Of these three positions, I lean for multiple reasons towards Thornwell’s. Pastorally, though, it is the path of wisdom, given the differences between such giants of the faith, to offer Roman Catholic converts to Christ the choice as to whether to be baptized. If they consider their baptism in Roman Catholicism to be valid, then it would be inadvisable to enforce a baptism which, in the conscience of the new convert, would amount to a rebaptism and contradict Ephesians 4:5: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”



there developed the Western (or Papal) Schism (1378–1417). It produced two popes, two courts, and two sets of cardinals in Avignon and Rome, respectively. The schism ended but not without damaging the papacy. Not only did it reveal the fallacy of a direct line back to Peter, it was succeeded by much meddling in Italian politics, the secularization of the office through preoccupation with the arts, and significant immorality with half the popes between 1417 and 1517 (the year Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the church door at Wittenberg) fathering illegitimate children.³

Against such a backdrop, God raised up the Protestants to reform the church according to his Word. Recognizing that the delineation of the attributes of the church had guaranteed neither the doctrinal nor behavioral purity of the church, the reformers began distinguishing the true church from the false church. Only the true church could legitimately be said to be the church. Listen to the Belgic Confession of 1561. Article 29 is titled, “The Marks of the True Church, and Wherein it Differs from the False Church.” It begins:

We believe that we ought diligently and circumspectly to discern from the Word of God which is the true Church, since all sects which are in the world assume to themselves the name of the Church. But we speak not here of hypocrites, who are mixed in the Church with the good, yet are not of the Church, though externally in it; but we say that the body and communion of the true Church must be distinguished from all sects that call themselves the Church.

To identify the true church, the reformers gradually assembled a list of marks or *notae* (Latin). The Belgic Confession in the same Article identifies three of them: (i) the preaching of the pure gospel; (ii) the pure administration of the sacraments, as instituted by Christ; and (iii) the

exercise of church discipline in the punishing (better, chastening) of sin. Summarizing these, the Belgic Confession says that a church is true, “if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto [are] rejected, and Jesus Christ [is] acknowledged as the only Head of the Church.” From the true church, no Christian has a right to be separated.

Eighty or so years later, with the immediate advances of reform behind them and with errors creeping into Protestantism, Protestant theologians became more circumspect in describing the true church. In chapter twenty-five of the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), “Of the Church,” the commissioners to the Westminster Assembly wrote of particular congregations of the catholic or universal church being *more or less pure*. The degree of purity depends on the gospel preached and embraced, the sacraments administered, and the public worship permitted (25:4):

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. Nevertheless, there shall be always a church on earth, to worship God according to his will. (25:5).

The stance of the Westminster Assembly is humble and more realistic. The church shall ever exist (Matt. 16:18, 28:20) for, despite her many shortcomings, she is preserved and receives ongoing grace to persevere. Yet, since the church shall only possess eternal perfection once the day of Jesus Christ is come (Eph. 5:25-27) she always falls short in this age of that stainless and unending purity promised her in the age to come.

Accordingly, our Protestant churches are to shun complacency and a self-confident boasting in the greatness of the Reformation. That mighty

³ R. Tudur Jones, *The Great Reformation: From Wyclif to Knox—Two Centuries that Changed the Course of History* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 9-14. Jones refers to the “Great Schism” but that occurred earlier in the eleventh

century and is known as the East-West Schism between the Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodoxy.



movement of God challenges us rather to reflect on the degree to which our congregations follow the Word of God today and are ready to reform, where necessary, their faith and conduct according to its teaching.

THE FIRST MARK OF THE TRUE OR PURER CHURCH:
THE PREACHING AND EMBRACING OF THE PURE GOSPEL

The Reformation was in many ways a recovery of the writings and theology of the apostle Paul. The resurgent interest in him paved the way for much of the reformers' discussion of the doctrine of salvation, of the sacraments, and of the church. We recall in this regard French theologian Jacques Lefevre d'Etaples (c.1455–1536 [Latin, Johannes Faber Stapulensis]). His commentary on the letters of Paul (1512) proved to be an influential source for reformers like Luther and Calvin. Although there are many places in Scripture to which we could go to prove the essential importance of the gospel preached for the existence of the church (note Matt. 4:17, 28:18-20; Mk. 1:38 for a start), we turn here to Paul, to his second letter to Timothy.⁴

The reformers were familiar with the difficulties of these last days (2 Tim. 3:1-9). They understood the need of the apostle Paul to lay on Timothy the importance of holding fast to the doctrine of Scripture and of proclaiming its good news. Indeed, Paul's counsel became vital to the reformers' call to the church to return to God's Word and to the gospel of Christ found therein.

We, too, need to heed the apostle's counsel and the reformer's call. Not only do we belong to the same age as them, we are also faced with innumerable departures from God's Word. It is imperative, then, that we appreciate how nonnegotiable remains the church's preaching of the pure gospel. Consider, then, Paul's charge to Timothy, his young apostolic representative.

In 2 Timothy 4:1-2 Paul writes:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with complete patience and teaching.

The apostle's words raise two major issues: Paul's authority and his charge. Without authority his charge to Timothy would amount to very little. Given this, and the great prominence of the question of authority in our own day, we consider in what follows both the legitimacy of Paul's charge and its substance.

Paul's authority: "I charge you" (2 Tim. 4:1).

Paul was given by God great authority in the church. Previously a feared persecutor of Christians, Paul had not only been saved by God but given increasing prominence in his service. By the time of his pastoral letters to Timothy he could accumulate numerous reasons why Timothy should listen to him. Note the four we come across as we make our way through 2 Timothy.

First, Paul draws on his apostleship (1:1): He refers to himself not only in his customary way as "an apostle of Christ Jesus," but adds "by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope" (1:1). His "sight" of Christ on the road to Damascus had constituted both his conversion and his commission to the office of apostle (cf., Acts 9:3-4; 19:6-7, 11; 26:13-14, 16; and 1 Cor.9:1). It is, then, as a man under divine authority that Paul charges Timothy.

Second, Paul draws on his relationship to Timothy (1:2): Paul refers to Timothy as his "beloved child" and alludes to the influence he had had on Timothy's conversion to Christ (Acts 16:1-5) and on his development as a

⁴ There are other places to which we could also turn in Paul's writings: Rom. 10:14-17; 1 Cor. 1:18-31; Gal. 1:8-9.



minister of the gospel. This mentoring was especially significant given that Timothy's earthly father was a Greek and, it appears, an unbeliever (1:5).

Third, Paul draws on the caliber of his life: Paul reminds his "beloved child" how he had followed him—his teaching, conduct, aim in life, faith, patience, love, steadfastness, and been mindful of his persecutions and the sufferings he had endured at Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra (3:10-11). Paul was not boasting for he knew that what he had become was attributable to God's grace alone (cf., 1 Cor. 15:10). Mention of his apostolic example served rather to underline to Timothy the seriousness of the coming charge to preach the Word.

Fourth, Paul draws on his Lord: Timothy was to follow Paul not *in lieu* of following Christ, but only in so far as he remained faithful to his Savior and Lord. Paul supplies two reasons why Timothy should hear him out. First, there was Paul's awareness that Jesus is going to judge the living and the dead (4:1). Second, Paul was conscious of his imminent meeting with his Savior and Lord:

I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing (4:6-8).

Paul's authority is now transmitted through Holy Scripture. Thus, we, too, must feel Paul's sense of urgency and be conscious of God's all-seeing presence in our lives and ministry. As Calvin states in one place: "The best of men have need to be awed into the discharge of their duty. The eye of God is on us!"

Paul's charge: "preach the word" (2 Tim. 4:2).

Paul's charge to Timothy implies both the message ("preach *the word*") and the means by which it is communicated ("*preach the word*").

First, the message. Paul understood the Word not as an end in itself (as if the Word is a valuable entity but lacks a specific purpose), but as God's revelation of the gospel of our salvation. The Word is significant, then, because it calls us to trust for time and for eternity the Christ revealed therein. This much is clear from what Paul wrote just prior to the text before us. The preceding chapter closes with his directive that Timothy must continue in what he had learned from "the sacred writings" and in which he had firmly believed since childhood (vv. 14-17). Indeed, the sacred writings (the Hebrew Scriptures in the context) had made Timothy wise for salvation through Jesus Christ.

Implied in this is Paul's belief that Christ is a sufficient Savior. So sufficient in fact that God's saving grace is found in him alone. Paul, though, does not unpack this thought in 2 Timothy to the degree that he does elsewhere. After all, Timothy was already versed, both experientially and vocationally, in Christ's sufficiency as our Mediator. We, though, would fail to do justice to this first mark if we did not remind ourselves of the gospel that true churches preach.

It revolves around Christ. In Scripture he is the answer to Job's fundamental question, how can one be in the right before God (Job 9:2)? Well, in resting on Christ we receive his perfect life and the merit of his atoning death. The former constitutes our righteousness before God and the latter, bespeaking Christ's punishment in our place, signals our freedom from condemnation. What is more, the Spirit who inspires our faith in Christ, unites us to Christ. In that union we are freely—

- Justified before God: e.g., Romans 3:9–5:21; Galatians 2:15–3:14.
- Adopted as God's sons: Eph. 1:4-5; Rom. 9:4; Gal. 4:4-5; Rom. 8:15-16, 22-23.



- Sanctified or set apart for God: e.g., Romans 6:1–7:25; 1 Corinthians 1:2.

Justified in Christ we are acquitted of our guilt, adopted in Christ we are raised from slavery to sonship, and sanctified in Christ we are cleansed for divine service.

A true church embraces this message unashamedly. More than that, her members seek to respond in sincere gratitude to God for the grace of which it speaks. The form our gratitude takes is of God’s choosing and not our own. It is governed by the sacred writings which he has breathed out. Writes Paul, “all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (3:16).⁵ Our gratitude is constituted, then, not of superficial platitudes but of concrete obedience. We bear no cost for our salvation—Christ has borne it all!— but there is a cost to our discipleship. We die to self so as to live unto God.

Second, the means. The Word, says Paul, is to be preached. Literally, to be heralded or proclaimed. His brief directive draws, then, an unbreakable connection between the message (the gospel of Christ) and the means whereby it is communicated (the preaching of the Word of God). The means is not to overshadow the message, and yet the message can mean little to us unless we are, as the church, excited, proactive, and forthright in preaching it.

When we think of preaching an array of homiletical methods (theories of preaching) come to mind. They are all on offer today. Each claims a high view of Scripture, but they do not guarantee a high use of it.

⁵ In a forthcoming piece on the *solas* of the Reformation I shall have more to say of 2 Tim. 3:16 in regard to the principle of *sola Scriptura*.

⁶ The saying has been attributed to G. Campbell Morgan (1863–1945), but I have not found a reference for his use of it nor can I vouch for whether it originated with him.

First, there is the *anecdotal approach*. Dominated by personal stories, anecdotal preaching has but the vaguest connection to the Word and does not convey sufficiently either the glory of God or the richness of the gospel. Second, there is *the topical approach*. It seeks to do greater justice to Scripture but where the topic degenerates into proof-texting, there the integrity of the Word is compromised in the service of our interests. As the saying goes, “A text without a context is nothing but a pretext.”⁶ In other words, without a commitment to the rigorous exposition of Scripture topical preaching lends itself to the manipulation of individual texts of Scripture so that they say what we want them to say for the sake of the topic at hand. Third, there is *catechetical preaching*. This method seeks to do justice to the essential heads of biblical doctrine, notably in the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563, but, in varying degrees, limits the preaching to:

- The schedule set by the catechism.
- The content of the catechism.
- The genre of the catechism.

In so doing, catechetical preaching sets up, unwittingly no doubt, a rival between the catechism and the Word of God.⁷

There is a fourth method—*expository preaching*. Fundamentally, the expositor explains texts in their context, typically teaching through Old and New Testament books and covering each genre. The expositor seeks thereby to preach “all Scripture” representatively, capturing thereby its primary emphasis on God and on each of the doctrines he has revealed, ideally in biblical proportion. Expository preaching may also take up themes, but the expositor, dealing rigorously with Scripture, seeks to keep the gospel front and center, expounding it within the overall framework of biblical content and theology. After all, Christ is found in all the Scriptures (Jn. 5:39).

⁷ For more on catechetical preaching, see Tim J. R. Trumper, “Catechetical Preaching: A Reform Too Far” (<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5eb057e01a983d1fe83dbf78/t/5f15c681834d4c77629090ef/1595262596198/Catechetical+Preaching+%5BA+Reform+Too+Far%5D.pdf>, accessed September 25, 2020).



It is the expository method, then, which best utilizes all Scripture “for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” Done well, it not only furthers the gospel, it promotes the health of the church.

Preaching, though, is not just about methods but about preachers. That is why Paul returns throughout his letter to Timothy’s spiritual condition. First, he writes that Timothy must “fan into flame the gift of God which [was] in [him] through the laying on of [Paul’s] hands” (1:6). Moreover, he must become competent and equipped for every good work (3:17). Here in 2 Timothy 4, Timothy must show perseverance by preaching “in season and out of season” (4:2). In other words, he must preach when his preaching is popular and when it is not, and when the fruit of the Word is visible and when it is hidden. Timothy must be ready to reprove and to convict, for the last days are godless. They are characterized by a love of self and of money, of pride, arrogance, abuse, filial disobedience, ingratitude, unholiness, and heartlessness, etc. (3:2-9).

From Paul’s expectations of Timothy’s ministry, we learn that the responsibility for being the true church lies not with preachers alone, but with those who sit under the Word preached. A church can only be true, argues Calvin, where the preached Word is heard obediently. “Calvin’s point,” explains Robert Godfrey, “is that if God speaks through the preaching of His Word and no one is listening and responding, then no church exists. But where the Word is faithfully preached *and* received, there the mark of the true church can be seen.”⁸ Article 29 of the Belgic Confession concurs:

With respect to those who are members of the Church, they may be known by the marks of Christians; namely, by faith, and when, having received Jesus Christ the only Savior, they avoid

sin, follow after righteousness, love the true God and their neighbor, neither turn aside to the right or left, and crucify the flesh with the works thereof. But this is not to be understood as if there did not remain in them great infirmities; but they fight against them through the Spirit all the days of their life, continually taking their refuge in the blood, death, passion, and obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom they have remission of sins, through faith in Him.

In the true church, then, there coexists faithful preachers and faithful hearers of the Word. The church is true not only where the pulpit resonates the doctrine of Scripture and the grace of God in Christ, but where the membership is growing spiritually under the Word and by means of the gospel. Accordingly, there cannot be a true church where authentic preachers of the Word are rejected by their hearers. That is why Paul abandoned the synagogue in Ephesus, opting thereafter to preach from the hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:8-10). Nor can a church stay true for long where the membership accepts a preacher who brings to them anything less than, additional to, or different from the pure gospel of God’s free grace revealed throughout Scripture.

Now there is more to the true or purer church than the preaching of the gospel, but there is not less than that. The preaching of the pure gospel is fundamental—the *sine qua non* (the non-negotiable) of a true or purer church.⁹

THE SECOND MARK OF THE TRUE OF PURER CHURCH: THE PURE ADMINISTRATION OF THE SACRAMENTS

God has given us not only his audible Word (that is to say, the preached Word) but his tangible Word (the sacraments). The reformers contended that if the church were to return to Scripture, then the sacraments of

⁸ W. Robert Godfrey, “The Marks of the Church,” www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/the-marks-of-the-church/, accessed August 25, 2020 (italics inserted).

⁹ For more on the importance of the Word, see my article at <https://fromhisfullness.com/articles>, “The *solas* of the Reformation,” specifically the piece on *sola Scriptura*.



Scripture must be both understood and administered according to what it teaches. Of special concern to them was the number of the sacraments and their meaning. To get to these issues we take up four matters.

The terminology of the sacraments.

The term *sacrament*, like those such as *trinity*, *providence*, *rapture*, and *the second coming*, does not appear in Scripture. It is extra-biblical (from outside of Scripture). While we prioritize biblical terms to describe and to discuss biblical matters, extra-biblical terms are also legitimate when used appropriately.

Ideally, we want to use those terms whose etymology (root meaning) and context resembles the biblical idea or doctrine we seek to summarize or to explain. Regardless, the extra-biblical terms we employ must be defined by Scripture, for we have no liberty to import into it new meaning. If anything needs to be redefined or reconfigured, it is our extra-biblical terminology. We may go further. Those extra-biblical terms which take us beyond Scripture, confuse a theological framework already found in Scripture (and therefore “die the death of a thousand qualifications”), or which mislead us as to the meaning or theology of Scripture, surely qualify to be jettisoned.¹⁰

Where does this leave us as regards the use of the term *sacrament*? Although originating with the Romans as a military oath (*sacramentum*), it succeeds in depicting the Christian’s public commitment to his or her Lord. *Sacrament* works, then, because the rituals to which it refers, namely baptism and the Lord’s Supper as we shall see, carry the same idea

¹⁰ Examples of terms which might qualify for jettisoning, are *infra* and *supralapsarian* (for addressing questions related to the unrevealed internal workings of the mind of God); a *covenant of works* and of *grace* (since they obscure the biblical framework of old and new [or better] covenant); *limited atonement* (for giving the impression of downplaying the value of Christ’s atonement [setting the value by the number for whom Christ died instead of by

of belonging and fidelity. Moreover, the one term acts suitably as an umbrella encapsulating the idea fundamental to both rituals.

The defining of the sacraments.

Thus, satisfied with the term *sacrament* we now consider the data in Scripture which helps us to discern what rituals qualify as sacraments. If we relied solely on the original Roman use of *sacramentum* then we would pack our theology of the sacraments with anything generically related to oaths and fidelity. Yet, since there is agreement across the church that we use the term *sacrament* of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, we draw from Jesus’ instituting of these rituals the principles they share which help us to discern why other rituals which have arisen in church history cannot be considered sacraments. Some cannot even be considered biblical.

First, biblical sacraments were directly instituted by Christ. We read of Jesus’ instituting of baptism in Matthew 28:18-20 and of the Lord’s Supper in Luke 22:14-23. Our Lord instituted them in two ways. First, by his example. He underwent baptism (Matt. 3:13-17) and partook of the Lord’s Supper (Lk. 22:19-20). Second, note his directives. As regards baptism, Jesus said, “Go . . . make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .” (Matt. 28:19). When instituting the Supper, he declared, “Do this in remembrance of me” (Lk. 22:19).

Since the five additional Roman Catholic “sacraments” of confirmation, penance, extreme unction (anointing of the sick), marriage, and ordination (or holy orders) were not directly instituted by Christ nor

the Christ who did the dying]); and awakening (when used of the resurrection of the spiritually dead). In a forthcoming book, I argue that *awakening* retains its legitimacy as a euphemism for revival (God’s extraordinary works in his church) but that *awakening* would be more appropriate when speaking of God’s extraordinary works in society (Eph. 2:1).



necessarily commanded by him, they fail as sacraments at the first hurdle whatever other biblical justification they may claim.

Second, biblical sacraments clearly picture Christ: In Mark 10:35-45 Jesus responds to the request of James and John that they sit on either side of him in his glory: “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” (v. 38). Here Jesus refers to his atoning work in terms of the two signs, baptism and the meal (at least the cup), which he would institute as sacraments by the end of his earthly ministry.

Confirmation is not intended to picture Christ. Said to be the ratification of baptism, confirmation is viewed in Roman Catholic teaching as a completion of Christian initiation and a strengthening of baptismal grace. Even supposing, then, that the Roman Catholic doctrine of salvation were sound, and a strong exegetical case could be made for confirmation, the ritual speaks not of Christ and his sufferings but of the Spirit and of Pentecost.

Penance or satisfaction, known in Roman Catholicism as a sacrament of healing, has more to do with our response of gratitude to the love of God in Christ than of how that love has played out in the life and ministry of Christ.

The anointing of the sick, which is the second sacrament of healing, drawn from James 5:14, is celebrated within the Eucharist and serves to underline the union between the sufferer and the Christ in his passion and death. Even if it were instituted by Christ, its enactment by an unwarranted priesthood and shrouded in a false gospel hardly gives a clear picture of Christ.

Not only was marriage not instituted by Christ, its stated purpose at the outset was to ensure that Adam had a helpmate (Gen. 2:18). Paul however, having quoted the institution of marriage in Genesis 2:24, says that “it refers to Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:32). If then, the only qualification of a sacrament is that it clearly portrays Christ there would be a case for understanding marriage to be a sacrament.

We could say the same of holy orders, since holders of the episcopate, presbyterate, and diaconate are to reflect Christ in some way. Yet, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* gives us pause for thought. Holy orders and matrimony “are directed toward the salvation of others; if they contribute as well to personal salvation, it is through service to others that they do so.”¹¹ Marriage and holy orders bespeak, then, not Christ’s work but ours in pointing people to Christ. And given that marriage and holy orders are thought, by their service, to contribute to personal salvation, we cannot say that the Roman Catholic understanding of marriage and holy orders give us a clear of picture of Christ.

Third, biblical sacraments are open, in principle to all the church. When Jesus instituted baptism and the Lord’s Supper, he intended that every believer and their children (see below) should be baptized as evidence of belonging to the visible church. Moreover, he intended that all those in the church resting on Christ for salvation should come to the Lord’s Supper. Although those holding out against doing so fail to qualify to come to the table, while those living in willful sin are warned against doing so, we nevertheless view the Lord’s Supper, like baptism, as open to all the church.

We may say the same of confirmation, penance, and the anointing of the sick. Yet, neither commanded by Christ nor offering clear pictures of him, their availability to all the church is a moot point so far as biblical sacraments are concerned. This is especially the case with confirmation, which is likely the least corroborated of all Rome’s “sacraments” and the

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, reprint ed. (London: Geoffrey Chapman, July 1994), 343.



most interwoven with the errors of baptismal regeneration. And the sacrifice of the Mass. See below.

Theoretically, marriage and holy orders are also open to the entire church. Yet, whereas there is sin involved when parents refuse to bring their children for baptism or when new converts from outside the church refuse to submit to it, and where the Lord's Supper is neglected contrary to the command of Christ, there is no sin necessarily involved in not entering into marriage or holy orders, since we may not be called to these stations in life. Vocationally, then, marriage and holy orders are only open to those members of the church called and gifted to enter them. They are not for all the church then, and, once more, cannot be said to be sacraments.

Fourth, biblical sacraments loudly proclaim Christ. Notice how Jesus, in instituting baptism, couples the sacrament with the teaching of all that he had commanded. When instituting the Lord's Supper Jesus broke the bread to proclaim what was to happen to his body, and he poured out the wine to proclaim what was to happen to his blood (Lk. 22:19-20). Thus, in partaking of the Lord's Supper we participate in the sacrament's heralding of Christ's work on the cross. States the apostle Paul, "as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). The sacraments do not replace, though, the preaching of the Word. Rather, they have been ordained by God and instituted by Christ to confirm its teaching.

Since the Roman Catholic "sacraments" of confirmation, penance, and the anointing of the sick do not necessarily picture the core of the gospel of Christ, let alone clearly so, they cannot loudly and unmistakably proclaim Christ. Even if they are intended to proclaim Christ, they are undermined by their association with the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification (faith plus works of supererogation [to accumulate merit with God]) and the office of the priesthood (for confession of sin is made to the priest).

Holy orders are more to do with the work of proclamation but suffer from the same undermining of the clarity of the gospel of Christ.¹² Meanwhile, marriage only proclaims Christ in so far as the husband dies for his wife and the wife lives for her husband.

Fifth, biblical sacraments directly call for an appropriation of Christ. While sacraments speak objectively of his work, they remain empty signs unless the Spirit works faith in those receiving them. Only through faith in Christ can the recipient be said to be washed spiritually (in baptism) or fed spiritually (in the Supper). In both, the Spirit enlightens the mind as to the grace of God in Christ, and funnels grace to those resting on Christ.

Doubtless, Rome claims that each of her seven sacraments speaks objectively of Christ, whether directly or indirectly. In reality, as we shall see below, the notion of sacramental grace, teaching an automatic flow of grace through the sacraments, diminishes the need of faith, as does the injection of meritorious works into the Roman portrayal of the gospel. Biblical sacraments call us, rather, to trust in the Christ they visibly represent.

The administration of the sacraments.

For the pure administration of the sacraments, the church must not only limit her eucharistic theology to the two sacraments Jesus instituted, but must ensure they are administered aright. In what follows, then, we zoom in on baptism and the Lord's Supper, tracing the essential differences between Roman Catholic and Protestant views of them, before considering the nonessential differences of perspective found among Protestants.

The essential differences: Those rooted in alternative views of the gospel.

As regards *baptism*, Protestants and Roman Catholics differ over whether the sacrament saves. States *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, "Baptism is the

¹² For more on this lack of clarity see the article on the *solae* of the Reformation.



sacrament of the mystical union with Christ, which creates a new society, the “glorious church.” It goes on to quote from Vatican II that, “Baptism constitutes a sacramental bond of unity linking all who have been reborn by means of it.”¹³ In Roman teaching, then, the sacraments constitute the grace of God to sinners, so long, that is, that the administering priest possesses good intent.¹⁴ Listen to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

... the two principle effects [of baptism] are purification from sins and new birth [i.e., regeneration] in the Holy Spirit.

By Baptism *all sins* are forgiven, original sin and all personal sins, as well as all punishment for sin.

Baptism not only purifies from all sins, but also makes the neophyte [new to the world or to exposure to the church] “a new creature”, an adopted son of God, who has become a “partaker of the divine nature”, member of Christ and co-heir with him, and a temple of the Holy Spirit.¹⁵

Rome teaches accordingly that “The Most Holy Trinity gives the baptized *sanctifying grace*, the *grace of justification*.”¹⁶ Baptism is, thus, essential for salvation. Indeed, in Roman Catholic teaching baptism saves without personal faith and yet personal faith in Christ is unable to save without baptism.

In biblical or authentic Protestantism by contrast, baptism is held to be a sign of the washing of regeneration and of admission to the visible church. While it is possible for a covenant child to be regenerated prior to baptism (cf., Lk. 1:15) the sacrament signifies how the child may come into the reality of cleansing before God, namely through faith in Christ’s finished

work on the cross, and seals unto the child the promise that if he or she believes on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ then forgiveness of sin is granted him or her from heaven (Acts 2:38-39). It is, then, always and ever through faith alone in Christ alone that covenant children are saved. Thus, the sacrament only becomes a means of grace to covenant children once they have entrusted themselves to Christ.

Protestants upholding infant baptism do not believe, then, that the sacrament of baptism constitutes God’s saving grace. It is God who saves and not the sacrament. Indeed, our puzzlement with the teaching of Rome leads us to ask how it can be said that baptism is essential for salvation when the thief on the cross was assured of paradise without it? We ask, furthermore, how it can be said that baptism is a sign if it confers the salvation signified in the sacrament? What then would be the purpose of the sign? Moreover, how can baptismal regeneration be said to remove original sin if some baptized as infants do not come to believe on the name of the Lord Jesus?

As regards *the Lord’s Supper*, the Roman Catholic Mass and the Protestant Eucharist are, in the popular mind, thought to be essentially the same, but they are not. Beside the role of priests, there is, first, a difference over how the work of Christ is present in the sacrament. Protestants have insisted all along that Christ died once-for-all for sin on the cross. Interestingly, the Roman Catholic Church is now using that same language based on Hebrews 7:25-27, but with an odd double speak:

When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, she commemorates Christ’s Passover, and it is made present: the sacrifice Christ offered once for all on the cross *remains ever present*. “As often as the sacrifice of the Cross by which ‘Christ our Pasch has been

¹³ *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Robert C. Broderick, Fourth printing (Nashville, et al.: Thomas Nelson), s.v. “Baptism, Sacrament of,” 65.

¹⁴ The possibility that a Roman Catholic priest may administer baptism without good intent is surely another reason to question the automatic acceptance in Protestant churches of Roman Catholic baptism. If the Roman Catholic Church

can raise questions over the validity of a baptism, then for a further host of reasons so may we.

¹⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 286.

¹⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 286.



sacrificed' is celebrated on the altar, *the work of our redemption is carried out.*"¹⁷

So, according to Rome, the Mass is a eucharistic sacrifice, formally called "the sacrifice of the Mass," because it re-presents (makes present) the sacrifice of the cross. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* goes on:

The sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are *one single sacrifice*: "The victim is one and the same: the same now offers through the ministry of priests, who then offered himself on the cross; only the manner of offering is different." "In this divine sacrifice which is celebrated in the Mass, the same Christ who offered himself once in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross is contained and is *offered in an unbloody manner.*"¹⁸

The language may, then, have been toned down from pre-Vatican II days, but has there been a substantial reform of the Mass? For so long as the Roman Catholic Church describes the Mass as a sacrifice rather than as a meal the answer is no. The wording of the *Catechism* of "Blessed Peter Canisius, S.J." is apparently as relevant now as prior to Vatican II: "The Sacrifice of the Mass is really the holy and living representation and at the same time the unbloody and efficacious [powerful] oblation of the Lord's Passion and that blood-stained sacrifice which was offered for us on the cross."¹⁹

The second difference pertains to the Roman Catholic teaching of transubstantiation. It dates back to the twelfth century. To quote *The Catholic Encyclopedia*:

As defined by the Council of Trent, transubstantiation is "a singular and wondrous conversion of the total substance of bread into the body and of the total substance of wine into the

blood of Christ, the external appearances only remaining unchanged. It is by this transubstantiation that the body and blood of Christ are present in the Holy Eucharist (Mk. 14:22-25).²⁰

In other words, in transubstantiation the elements of bread and wine change in substance but not in appearance. This transubstantiation elevates the sacrament of the Mass above all other sacraments.

In confirmation of this, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* quotes from the Council of Trent (1545–1563): "In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist 'the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, *the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained.*" As if to underline the claim to Christ's substantial presence in the Mass, the *Catechism* goes on to speak of genuflection and bowing deeply during the sacrifice of the Mass as a sign of adoration of the Lord.²¹

Third, there is between Protestants and Roman Catholics a difference over the dispensing of grace through the sacrament. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that the sacrament of the Mass automatically bestows grace on the recipient. "Since Christ is present under each of the species, communion under the species of bread alone makes it possible to receive all the fruit of Eucharistic grace."²² Protestants by contrast believe the Lord's Supper to be a meal rather than a sacrifice—one that is laid on by our God to celebrate Christ's once-for-all death at Calvary, the merits of which are received solely through faith in the Christ the sacrament depicts. Grace, then, is not automatically received through the Lord's Supper. Talk, then, of sacramental or eucharistic grace is, at best, misleading.

¹⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 307 (italics inserted).

¹⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 307 (italics inserted).

¹⁹ *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 375.

²⁰ *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 583.

²¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 309-310.

²² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 314.



Nonessential differences: those found among true or purer churches.

Baptism: The nonessential differences in regard to baptism pertain to its subjects and its mode. We take these up in turn.

First, the subjects of baptism. Thanks in part to Rome's gross overstatement of the role of baptism, many Protestants reject the baptism of infants altogether. Baptists believe their rejection of infant baptism continues the protest of the reformers, since those of the magisterial Reformation did not take their reforms far enough. Having conceded at the outset that Calvin's acceptance of Roman Catholic baptism is, in my view, an example of this, I sympathize with the Baptist line of argument but do not believe, biblically speaking, that we have a warrant to throw out the baptism of covenant children. Let us discuss this for a moment.

While a secondary issue, the baptism of covenant children remains an important matter since it involves how we read Scripture, how we understand the church, and how we view the children of believers (whether they are belong to the visible church). Those following the magisterial reformers in affirming the practice of baptizing infants believe the command to apply to the infants of believers the sign and seal of the covenant (Gen. 17:9-14) has never been terminated. This is because the new covenant, while being a better covenant (Heb. 8:6), is not brand new as our Baptist brethren believe. It is a renewed covenant, retaining major continuing emphases such as the election of a people, salvation by grace alone, and the church (replete with her new covenant counterparts to circumcision and the Passover, namely baptism and the Lord's Supper).

²³ John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 66.

²⁴ Speaking personally, I came to affirm infant baptism on the understanding from Scripture that we do as much justice to the responsibilities of the covenant child as to his or her privileges. To be a child of the covenant is not the same as being a

Had the new covenant brought to an end the application of the sign and seal to covenant children we would read endlessly in the New Testament of the termination, for the sign and seal had been applied for 2000 years! While Paul goes to great lengths to counter those fellow Jews insisting that circumcision and the Mosaic law contribute to our justification before God, at no point does he declare that the application of the sign and seal of the covenant to children of the covenant ended with the closure of the old covenant. Rather, the New Testament links circumcision with baptism in Colossians 2:11-12 and by the record of household baptisms leads us to presume that infants of the church are to be baptized under the new covenant just as they were circumcised under the old.

Note most clearly the baptism of the household of the Philippian jailor (Acts 16:33-34), as also that of the household of Stephanas (1 Cor. 1:16). Given that there are only twelve instances of baptism in the New Testament notwithstanding the great influx into the church during the first century, we regard these instances as representative. In the case of the household baptisms, writes Professor John Murray (1898–1975), "it would be practically impossible to believe that in none of these households were there any infants. It would be unreasonable to believe so."²³ The infants were baptized because, Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 7:14, the children of believers are holy; that is to say, they are set apart from the world as members of the visible church. That membership is formalized through their baptism.

What the Reformation needed then, and in fact undertook, was a biblical reform of the meaning of the baptism of infants. That said, there remains room today for an accumulation of treatments of infant baptism which do justice to the responsibilities as well as the privileges of covenant children.²⁴ The case for infant baptism has, it must be said, been as marred

child of God. The former is a privilege of birth, the latter of rebirth. Yet, the miracle of the rebirth (what we call regeneration) always results in faith in Christ for salvation. Particularly influential in my journey to this position were Pierre Ch. Marcel, *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism: Sacrament of the Covenant of Grace*, transl. by Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, 1953; reprint ed. (Cambridge, England:



by presumptive regeneration (the presuming that covenant children are children of God) as by baptismal regeneration. This presumptive regeneration has not only diminished the purity and vibrancy of those Protestant churches theologically or practically wedded to the error, it has created a satisfaction in church life with the baptism of infants. This contrasts with Christ's New Testament institution of baptism which clearly had in view the reaching of the nations and the influx of adult converts. Where classic Protestant churches have lost the vision of reaching their communities and of rejoicing in the baptism of adults as first-generation believers, they are in serious danger of becoming unfaithful to the gospel and of losing their status as true churches.²⁵

Second, the mode of baptism. For most of church history the mode—whether by sprinkling, pouring, or immersion—was seen as secondary. Typically, for Baptists immersion is nonnegotiable. This is made clear by the increasingly frequent renaming of the sacrament as “baptism by immersion.” There are, however, three problems inherent in this insistence on immersion. First, the relevant Hebrew and Greek verbs of Scripture do not require immersion. Indeed, John Murray says that only in Leviticus 11:32 does the Greek verb *baptō* (used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures) clearly refer to immersion.²⁶ Second, the circumstances of New Testament baptism do not necessitate immersion. Many Baptists make plenty of John 3:23—John baptizing at Aenon near Salim because “water was plentiful there” (ESV). But the Greek speaks of “many waters” (*hudata polla*) implying not depth of water but water spread over an expansive area. Third, Christ was not buried

under ground but sideways in a tomb. ²⁷The necessity of immersion as a symbolic replication of death and burial with Christ does not follow.

The Lord's Supper. The nonessential differences pertain to the nature of the supper and the frequency of its administration.

Undoubtedly, there is much in the nature of the Lord's Supper. Besides being a proclamation of the gospel, it is a eucharist (from the Greek verb *eucharisteō*, “to give thanks”), a demonstration of Christian unity, and a memorial. Recall Jesus's directive “Do this in remembrance of me . . .” (Lk. 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24). In the Lord's Supper, we remember:

- What our Lord has suffered for us.
- The benefits of Christ that we appropriate through faith in him: “this is my body *for you*.”
- That Jesus is now alive, having risen from the dead.
- That we, too, must offer our *sacramentum* (oath of loyalty).²⁸

This memorialism is historically connected with the outlook of first-generation reformer, Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531). Yet, many Protestants have gone further, as is evident in the teaching of Calvin and in such codifications of Protestant theology as the French Confession (1559), the Scots Confession (1560), the Belgic Confession (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and the Westminster Standards (1647). In short, there has, since the earliest generations of Protestantism, been the belief that when we partake in faith we commune with Christ. We do more, then, than simply remember that he who was among us is now in heaven, we rise to heaven to feed on Christ and thus to be strengthened in our faith for worship and service here below.

James Clarke, 1981; Allan M. Harman, “Infant Baptism” in *Hold Fast Your Confession: Studies in Church Principles*, edited by Donald Macleod (Edinburgh: John Knox Press, 1978), 195-216; and John Murray, *Christian Baptism*.

²⁵ For more on evangelism, see the conclusion.

²⁶ Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 11. Murray says the meaning of immersion is also highly probable in Job 9:31, although the verse is irrelevant to the present discussion.

²⁷ For more, see Jay E. Adams' excellent brief study, *The Meaning and Mode of Baptism* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1975).

²⁸ William Barclay, *The Lord's Supper* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), 107-113.



This teaching is historically associated with Calvin and draws notably on the promises of John 6:26-27, 44-51, and 53-58. There Christ tells us that he provides his people with an imperishable food which endures to eternal life. This true food and true drink is found, metaphorically speaking, in his flesh and blood. Hence Christ's declaration that he is "the bread of life." Those, he says, who feed on him live forever. Later, the Westminster Confession of Faith, 29:7 articulated and unpacked our Lord's meaning:

Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements, in this sacrament, do then also, inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally, but spiritually receive, and feed upon, Christ crucified, and all benefits of his death.²⁹

Second, the frequency of the Lord's Supper. Jesus made no stipulation as to how often it is to be celebrated. Paul touched on the issue but was no more prescriptive than our Lord: "Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me" (1 Cor. 11:25). We know, though, that the breaking of bread was regularly observed in the church of the first century and that the disciples of Christ were committed to the new institution (Acts 2:42, 46). The Lord's Supper was prominent in church gatherings, but we are not told how regularly it occurred.

Congregations have, then, some latitude in arranging the frequency of the Lord's Supper. In the Westminster Standards, *The Directory for the Public Worship of God* opens its section "Of the Celebration of the Communion, or Sacrament of the Lord's Supper" as follows:

The communion, or supper of the Lord, is frequently to be celebrated; but how often, may be considered and determined by the ministers, and other church-governors of each congregation, as they shall find most convenient for the comfort

and edification of the people committed to their charge. And, when it shall be administered, we judge it convenient to be done after the morning sermon.³⁰

The frequency has been settled variously, sometimes by convenience and sometimes by how the Lord's Supper is regarded. Those of the view that the sacrament is predominantly a memorial likely feel less need of frequent participation than those believing it to be a means of fellowship with Christ for the strengthening of our faith. It is curious then, that Scottish Presbyterianism, committed historically to the teaching of the Westminster Standards, has been known for its annual or bi-annual communion seasons. The scheduling is in all likelihood attributable to the need to preserve our estimate of the Lord's Supper, for, as the saying goes, "familiarity breeds contempt." Surely, though, those seeking more of Christ will yearn to be frequently feeding from him through the sacrament as well as the Word.

The promotion of the sacraments.

In reacting against the distorted understanding and hyper-elevation of the sacraments in Roman Catholicism and Eastern orthodoxy, many evangelical Protestants have, it is feared, gone the other way and unwittingly played them down. Some Protestants, reacting to this, have departed for Roman Catholicism and Eastern orthodoxy. It is worth asking ourselves, then, how, as Protestants, we can promote the value of the sacraments without claiming too much for them.

First, we should preach their importance. The significance of the sacraments lies in their vivid portrayals of the gospel. God seeks to communicate to us his good news in Christ not only through our hearing but through our other senses too. Moreover, Christ commands that we submit to baptism and partake of the Lord's Supper. Our obedience evinces our submission to him.

²⁹ Quoted from *The Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2005), 141.

³⁰ Quoted from *The Confession of Faith* (The Publication Committee of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1958), 384.



Believing parents are, to bring their newborn to the font for admission to the visible church, and new converts are to submit to instruction in the faith in readiness for their baptism. The church family, however, has an important role in encouraging such obedience and can do so by the forming among her members of the godly habit of so ordering life as to be present for baptisms. Young parents, seeking to establish godly homes (Mal. 2:15), need emotional and spiritual support and ought to hear their church family vow publicly that support, and to hear thereafter of how they and their children are being brought to God in prayer. Likewise, fresh converts, forsaking the world, need the love and care of their new church family. Second to Christ, the church family is their lifeline.

Likewise, every member of the visible church should make much of the Lord's Supper. Baptized members do so by putting their faith in Christ, thereby qualifying to come to the table. Communicant members do so by arranging their schedules to be present at the table as often as is possible. It is there that we, together, bring our thanks to God, demonstrate the unity of Christ's body, proclaim his death until he comes again, and remember Christ and the benefits granted us in him.

Second, we should call on the Lord's people to prepare for the sacraments. Christian parents must know from Scripture and their pastors that they are commanded to bring their children for baptism. Through the sacrament their little ones are admitted to the visible church, have the promise, conditional on faith, of cleansing and union with Christ in his death and resurrection. Additionally, congregations are, as we have noted, to offer new converts classes of instruction prior to baptism so that they become grounded in the gospel, understand the sacraments, and the life in Christ and his church into which they have entered. This instruction, at the very least, should involve the teaching of the statements and implications of the Apostle's Creed.

Then there is our preparation for the Lord's Supper. In planning to be present, we carve out time beforehand to prepare our minds and hearts

for communing with Christ. This preparation includes confession of our sins and bringing closure to any unfinished business with others (Matt. 5:24). To be fair, this is the upside of Scottish communion seasons. They take seriously the idea of preparing for participation in the Lord's Supper, for the time for devotion during the distribution of the bread and the wine is no substitute for preparation of heart and mind beforehand.

Third, we should rely on the Holy Spirit for his blessing of the sacraments. After all, the Spirit is the inspirer of the very faith needed for them to become means of grace. Parents, pray accordingly for your baptized infants that they may, through the Holy Spirit's gift of faith in Christ, come into the cleansing symbolized in their baptism. First-generation converts, pray for the strength of the Holy Spirit to commit publicly to Christ in your baptism and to remain faithful amid times of doubt and Satanic assault.

Likewise, in the Lord's Supper, communicant members look to the Holy Spirit to raise them to heaven for fellowship with Christ. There, in the mystery of the Spirit we feed on Christ and draw from him the strength we need to press on here below.

Neither sacrament, then, should be considered an empty ritual. Baptism and the Lord's Supper invite us, each in their own way, to seek earnestly the face of God that he might meet with us in them.

THE THIRD MARK OF THE TRUE OR PURER CHURCH THE EXERCISE OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Finally, we come to what is the most ignored of the three marks. Perhaps for that reason this third mark is the least controverted.

Some general observations.

First, a word about the meaning of discipline. The term can be used in two senses.



Broadly speaking, *discipline* refers to the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life—prayer, Bible study, the means of grace (Word and sacrament), and the like. The more the honor of Christ and the purity of the church are to the fore in our thinking, the greater our attention to the spiritual disciplines. We shall never be sinless in this life, yet the use of the disciplines signal our intent to keep our eyes on Christ and to practice repentance. They help us to keep short accounts of our sins with God.

Narrowly speaking, *discipline* refers to the censures God has established for our restoration whenever we fall into scandalous sin. Scandalous sins are heinous sins inconsistent with the Christian life and which are sufficiently public as to set a poor example in the church and before the watching world.

The processing of scandalous sin requires the organizational structures of the church. Wrote the apostle Paul, “all things should be done decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40). At the time of the Reformation, Scottish reformers John Knox and Andrew Melville wrote Books of Discipline which had to do with church structures. They sought not to squelch the spiritual passion of God’s people but to glean from Scripture how we are to channel it toward the life and mission of the church. As Scottish theologian Donald Macleod reminds us, “Structures serve the gospel, not the gospel the structures.”³¹

Matthew records for us in his Gospel the process our Lord has given his church for handling offenses (Matt. 18:15-20). John Calvin calls the procedure “the middle way” between the ignoring of sin in others and an excessive bitter reaction resulting in malicious, politicized, and weaponized uses of Christ’s disciplinary process. When we ignore sin, we flatter those committing it and inadvertently empower them to sin more egregiously. When we abuse, poison, or coopt for our own ends Christ’s

disciplinary process, we fall short of his balance of grace and truth and can end up driving from the church those whom God intends to restore.

It is important to make this point here for the abuse of this mark of the true church is far more common than we might imagine and is as damaging to individuals and to the reputation of the church as is the forgoing of discipline in an unhealthy tolerance of sin. Certainly, we are to lament when the church looks no different from the world, but does she look any different when church discipline degenerates into a personal take down or political imbroglio? We have been too dilatory in holding to account those soiling the disciplinary process by jealousies and envies, by bullying and harassment. Such people are menaces. They undermine the peace of the church and make the following process all the more difficult to implement. Instead, though, of abandoning church discipline, we seek to reform its abuses and to submit to it when warranted. The directives of Christ and the adherence of the Protestant reformers are our inspiration.

The specific steps of discipline.

Let us turn, then to the successive steps of discipline outlined by our Lord in Matthew 18:15-20:

¹⁵ If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed^[a] in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in

³¹ Donald Macleod, *A Faith to Live By: Studies in Christian Doctrine* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor [Christian Focus Publications], 1998), 227.



heaven.²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.

The first step of discipline: The private approach (v. 15). Jesus envisions a scenario in which one of his followers is aggrieved by the actions of another. The initial attempt to resolve the matter is private because the issue that has arisen is between them alone. Accordingly, the disciplinary process is initiated not by the eldership but by the offended party. Says Jesus, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.” The words “against you” (*eis se*) are omitted from some manuscripts, yet their addition in our English translations rightly interpret the text. We initiate the disciplinary process not when anyone else is sinned against, but when we personally feel sinned against. Jesus is not encouraging busybodies who, typically, require no encouragement in meddling in the affairs of others. Rather, by advocating that we address the alleged offender personally, Jesus calls us to avoid gossip among his people. He counters, then, the widespread practice of involving a third party about a grievance instead of going to the person we believe to have inflicted it.

Before going, we determine whether the sin against us is actual, identifiable, and provable. Jesus has not designed the process for hunches, rumor, hearsay, paranoia, insinuation, or mere allegation. We initiate the process when the sin against us can be pinpointed, and when, try as we might, we are unable to shrug it off. Quite the opposite, we fear that a root of bitterness is developing within us. Note in this regard that the word “fault” in the English Standard Version is not found in the original. Literally, Jesus says, “If your brother sins against you, go prove it between you.” The word “to prove” (*elegxon*) has more in view than an abstract demonstration of the offense. The proving involves exposing the sin so as to convict or to chasten the offender.

During the private meeting, the grievance must be either confessed and repented of or disproven (likely by some alternative explanation). A confession of sin must elicit forgiveness from the offended, but an alternative explanation calls for the matter to be dropped. Writes Calvin, “He who explicitly denies the fact [of sin], and declares that he is falsely accused must be left alone; for it would be vain to press him by calling witnesses.”³²

One way or another, then, the parties are to reconcile. Where sin has been committed, it does not follow that the relationship must return to what it was before. Trust broken may never be restored. That said, reconciliation is authentic where the tension ends. In this reconciliation, the privacy of the meeting plays an important role. First, it emboldens the offended in working toward peace. Second, it safeguards the alleged who is innocent for so long as the offense is proven. Third, it encourages a swift reconciliation since it limits the damage to personal pride. Indeed, the offender may be won over by the effort of the offended to keep the matter private.

The second step of discipline: The attested approach (v. 16). The disciplinary process only advances when the first step proved the sin but failed to obtain the repentance and the consequent reconciliation. At this juncture, the offender, stuck in his or her stubbornness, loses the opportunity for a private resolution. Now one or two witnesses are enlisted, consistent with the overall teaching of Scripture (Deut. 19:15; Jn. 8:17; 2 Cor. 13:1). Consider first their enlistment and then their role.

In his *Handbook of Church Discipline*, biblical counselor Jay Adams helpfully counsels us to omit the name of the alleged offender when approaching those to join us in this second stage of the discipline. If they decline the role of witness, then we have safeguarded the identity of the

³² John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, volume 1, transl. William Pringle, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 354-355.



alleged offender. This is especially important since his guilt is yet to be attested outside of the mind of the offended. Additionally, Adams counsels us against attempting to get the witness or witnesses to side with us beforehand.

This brings us to their role. They are enlisted not necessarily because they saw or heard the offense. Rather, they are needed as neutral observers, first, to weigh our warrant for being offended. They attend the scheduled meeting to adjudge whether we can establish that an offense was committed. Second, they assess the response of the offender when presented with reliable evidence.³³ At this juncture, the witnesses may join the offended in appealing to the offender to confess the sin and to seek forgiveness for it. Says Jesus, he or she is “to listen *to them*” (v. 17 [italics inserted]). Third, if the sin is not proven, the witnesses attest whether the offended is committed to dropping the matter. If not, then he or she is liable to become the offender and could become the subject of a fresh disciplinary process.

The third step of discipline: The formal approach (v. 17a). Where the charge is established, the offender ceases to face a mere allegation. He or she is now understood to be guilty. The disciplinary case therefore proceeds, not on account of the size of the offense but because the offender has refused to repent.

With any sort of conscience he or she will be feeling by now the weight of the matter, for Jesus says, “if he [or she] refuses to listen to them [the offended who bears the hurt and has proved the case, and the witnesses who have made their judgment], tell it to the church.” Our Lord’s statement raises two matters.

³³ Jay E. Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline: A Right and Privilege of Every Church Member* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 61-62. Adams’ study is worthy of close consideration in its entirety.

Pastorally, it makes sense to offer the offender between each step what the Bible calls “space for repentance” (Heb. 12:17; Rev. 2:21). There may be resistance to repentance in each meeting, and yet the time given to reflect following each step provides the offender with the opportunity to climb down from his or her obstinacy. This space should not drag on, leaving the process and the prospects of restoration to languish. Jesus says that the matter must now go to the church. An incomplete process serves well neither the offender nor the offended.

Note, *ecclesiastically*, that Jesus assumes the church already exists (cf., v. 17 with Acts 7:38). This is significant, for many assume that the church was not born until Pentecost. No, at Pentecost the church came of age (Gal. 3:23–4:7). That aside, when Jesus says that the disciplinary matter must go to the church, he surely means that, immediately, it is to go to the elders. Writes Calvin: “Among the Jews the power of excommunication belonged to the elders, who held the government of the whole *Church*.”³⁴ They remained, under Christ, the shepherds of God’s flock and the overseers of the spiritual welfare of their congregations. It is, then, for the elders to weigh the evidence of both the offense and the impenitence. I imagine that they would also review the degree to which the process has followed the will and the spirit of Christ.

If the case stands and the offender remains impenitent, the elders communicate the matter to the church. After all, the pastoral connection between the undershepherds of Christ and the sheep of his pasture is incredibly important. Thus, having heard from the aggrieved and the witnesses, and having provided further space for the offender to repent (which should include reaching out in love to him or to her), the elders communicate to the church the history of the case, appealing to the members to pray for his or her restoration. Rightly overseen, this latest step of the process should be suffused with genuine sorrow for sin, sympathy for the offended, and a yearning for the offender.

³⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 1:356.



The fourth step of discipline: the final approach (v. 17b). If the offender still does not seek forgiveness, then the church must sadly deduce that he or she never belonged to the Lord. Again, this deduction is not influenced by the size of the sin so much as it is by the offender's refusal to repent. The Christian life, after all, is one of continual repentance. The offender is, therefore, excommunicated (put out of fellowship) from the church. Says Jesus, the offender is to "be to [you] as a Gentile and a tax collector." In other words, the offender is no longer a member of the covenant community of God's people. He or she is now deemed as much in need of the gospel as those who have never professed faith in the Lord Jesus. If this excommunication does not encourage the return of the offender, then nothing will.

The apostle Paul alludes to this stage of the process in commenting on a serious situation in the church at Corinth. A man had taken to himself his father's wife. Paul thus directed the church, when gathered in the name of the Lord Jesus, to deliver the man to Satan for the destruction of his flesh and the salvation of his soul (1 Cor. 5:1-5). The deliverance to Satan implies excommunication, but the mention of his soul's salvation suggests that even in excommunication the goal remains the restoration of the offender. If the offender still does not come to his or her senses, then it is not going to happen.

Some assurances in disciplining.

As unpalatable as this process must sound to today's church, it is worth remembering the importance Christ placed on church discipline and the detail he has given us pertaining to its exercise. But there is more. To encourage discipline in the life of his church, Christ has given us two assurances.

The first assurance: The agreement of heaven (v. 18). The impenitent cannot appeal to heaven against the action of the church. God, Christ tells us, agrees in heaven with what his church settles on earth. If the offender

is bound by his or her impenitence to Satan, that binding is recognized and affirmed in heaven. If, alternatively, the offender is loosed from the disciplinary process by explaining the supposed offense or by seeking forgiveness for it, then that, too, is settled in heaven. Interestingly, Jesus does not limit the correspondence between the decisions of earth and heaven to those of the latter stages of the process (the decisions of the elders and of the church at large). Rather, he says that if two or three agree on earth about anything—a reference back to step two of the process—it will be done for them by their Father in heaven. Thus the whole process, undertaken with grace and truth, is owned in heaven by God.

Second assurance: The presence of Christ. Jesus understood that the disciplinary process is daunting. It can be messy, fearful, and controversial. Nevertheless, Christ seeks the purity of his church, hence the promise of his presence to those endeavoring to exercise discipline faithfully. The fact that his promise is typically understood to refer to small prayer gatherings attests the degree to which this third mark of the true or purer church is neglected. We are not surprised, then, that the church has, presently, little impact on the world. Neither the absence nor the polluting of church discipline will change this. There is needed an increase of true or purer churches wherein there is both obedience to the will of Christ and a reflection of his love.

CONCLUSION: MORE THAN THREE MARKS?

These historic marks reflect what was needed during the Protestant Reformation. Had the Christian church been more mindful of them we would not be in such need of reformation today.

That said, in today's biblical reform of the church we must see what else the Scriptures teach about the true or purer church. We seek not to add so many marks that it is difficult for any church to be perceived as true or pure, but we do believe that due weight given to other emphases in Scripture can serve to keep Bible-believing Protestants from the



complacency that first occasioned the supplementing of the attributes of the church with the marks.

What about prayer?

Can there be a true church without prayer? We may assume prayer in connection with the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments and the exercise of church discipline, but the Bible seems to accord prayer its own attention.

Recall that Jesus left us with the pattern prayer. It begins not “My Father,” but “Our Father in heaven” (Matt. 6:9). In clearing out the moneychangers from the temple, Jesus quoted Isaiah 56:7: “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you have made it a den of robbers.” (Matt. 21:13). Remember how, following ascension of Jesus, his apostles waited in Jerusalem praying for the promise of the outpouring of the Spirit to be fulfilled (Acts 1:14). The three thousand converted on the day of Pentecost gave themselves, literally, to “the prayers”. Not only to personal prayer but to the continuation of the public times of prayer inherited from the temple worship (Acts 2:42; 3:1). Yet, prayer also figured prominently in synagogue worship among the dispersed Jews. Indeed, synagogues were also called places of prayer. In Philippi, Luke accompanied Paul in search of “a place of prayer” and considered they had found it when they came across a group of women gathered by the river. It was there, on that day, that the Lord opened Lydia’s heart (Acts 16:11-15).

This New Testament emphasis on prayer comports with the fact that Christians have not only been given Christ as an atonement for their sins, but the Spirit of Christ for conversing with their heavenly Father (Mk. 14:36; Gal. 4:4-6; Rom. 8:15-16). While that communication is fundamentally personal, it is also communal. Prayer is a major expression of the communion of the saints. We pray to the Father through the Christ to whom we are jointly united. In the Son we have become sons of God and brothers and sisters of Christ and of all those of faith. That is what

enables us to rejoice with those who rejoice and to weep with those who weep (Rom. 12:15). There is much, then, to the remark of J. C. Ryle (1816–1900): “Happy is that church that has a praying ministry as well as a preaching ministry.”

Many Protestant churches nowadays are weak because they seek to be true churches without becoming praying churches. Some churches lack prayer because they lack the Word. They are more like social clubs. Others have the Word, externally at least, but, reminiscent of the church at Ephesus, they have lost their first love (Rev. 2:1-7). If there is a heresy trial to organize or a fallen brother or sister to “stone,” they are right there. Their prayers, however, are likely stale or nonexistent since their hearts are hard. Other congregations are like the church in Laodicea, complacent and feeling in need of nothing, and yet Christ is on the outside yearning to enter for fellowship with his people. That fellowship occurs through Word and sacrament, amid an atmosphere of prayer.

What about evangelism?

Can there be a true church where there is no reaching out with the pure gospel preached among the Lord’s people? A ghetto is not the same as a church, for the church exists, by the command of Christ, to go out to make disciples (Matt. 28:19-20). In part the church exists, then, for her non-members.

True or purer churches possess a holy dissatisfaction with a lack of adult (first-generation) baptisms. Where the church is reaching out personally and communally in a day of small things as in the time of Noah (Gen. 7:1) and Isaiah (6:8-13), that is one thing, but where a congregation boasts of her faithfulness to the gospel but has no burden for the lost, being content to leave the community to drift toward hell, that is another. The congregation is in disobedience to the Lord’s command and has less purity than either the Lord envisions for her or she imagines herself to possess. Without repentance, the congregation will wither away, sooner or later.



The leadership must set the example in reaching out. Paul, who directed Timothy to preach the Word in season and out of it, distinctly told him that he must do the work of an evangelist (2 Tim. 4:2 and 5). Interestingly, he did not subsume evangelism under the preaching of the Word. Neither must we, as if evangelism begins and ends in the church with the preaching of the pure gospel and the administration of the sacraments.

What about care for the poor?

While care of the poor does not replace the ministration of the gospel (Mk. 14:7), can our congregations be true or pure if we neglect them? Note God's provision of deacons to care for those less well off (Acts 6:1-7). Recall also the strong statement of James, the half-brother of our Lord: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this; to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world." (Jas. 1:27). The church is not simply to react to need, but to be proactive in addressing it. Listen to the apostle John: "If anyone has the world's goods *and sees his brother in need*, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?" (1 Jn. 3:17 [italics inserted]).

Care for the poor was urged by the Protestant reformers. Wrote John Knox in his First Book of Discipline: Every church "must provide for the poor within itself; for fear and horrible it is, that the poor, who not only God the Father in his law, but Christ Jesus in his Evangel [gospel], and the Holy Spirit speaking by Saint Paul, hath so earnestly commended to our care, are universally so contemned and despised."³⁵

Certainly, this care begins with the household of faith (Gal. 6:9-10), but it does not end there. Indeed, care for the poor is a worthy element of our outreach, for, as the saying goes, "They don't care how much we know, until they know how much we care." A true church manifests a benevolent heart and operates with a policy connecting the benevolence of the church

to the ministry of the gospel. A congregation ought to stop short, however, of empowering material dependence on the church. The purpose of gospel-driven benevolence is to share the love of Christ by Word and deed, and in such a way that the poor have fresh hope for both their souls and their standard of living. The work of Christ for their salvation addresses the former but their response in sanctification aids the latter.

This leaves us with just one final thought to share. No church in this world is perfectly true or absolutely pure. We press on, then, as unto the purity which the church is promised unto the ages of eternity to come. We are confident of the day when our Lord shall present the church to himself in glory without spot or wrinkle or any such thing. She shall be holy and without blemish (Eph. 5:27). For this perfection we yearn, sighing with our brothers and sisters across the millennia, "Come Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:20).

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<sup>35</sup> Quoted from Macleod, *A Faith to Live By*, 228-229.