

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH AS A MARK OF THE CHURCH

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This paper attempts to bring together the theme of this conference, the mission of the church, and an important theme in the history of ecclesiology, the marks of a true church. It will begin by surveying and evaluating three important formulations of the marks of the church that have been developed over the years. It will then argue that there is a need for a fourth formulation today, and that such a formulation centers around the mission of the church, understood as the church's mandate to provide certain ministries to bodies of believers.

THE PATRISTIC FORMULATION: “WE BELIEVE IN ONE, HOLY, CATHOLIC, AND APOSTOLIC CHURCH.”

The single most influential statement concerning the church from history comes in the line from the Nicene Creed¹ quoted above giving the four classical *notae* of the church: unity or oneness, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. These four marks are the starting point for many discussions of the church, and are widely accepted by both Protestants and Catholics.² We note that this confessional formula emerged in the context of the church's struggle to define itself against a variety of challengers.³ This origin raises some questions.

¹ This line is taken from what is usually referred to as the Nicene Creed, though this line was not in the creed developed at Nicaea in 325, but from an addition to the creed attributed to the Council of Constantinople in 381. Some therefore want to call this form of the creed the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, but the shorter title has prevailed in popular usage.

² See for example the recent affirmation by three evangelicals, including one Baptist, in Richard D. Phillips, Philip G. Ryken and Mark E. Dever, *The Church: One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2004), and the utilization of the four marks in Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 114-126. Interestingly, Catholic Richard McBrien only notes the four marks in connection with pre-Vatican II Catholic ecclesiology, suggesting a de-emphasis of the marks in contemporary Catholic ecclesiology. See Richard McBrien, *Catholicism*, new ed. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 659.

³ Glenn Hinson says, “This formula took shape chiefly in efforts of the churches to define themselves in relation to the Montanist, Novatianist, and Donatist schisms.” E. Glenn Hinson, “Introduction” to *Understandings of the Church*, trans. and ed. E. Glenn Hinson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 4.

Are these four marks as prominent in Scripture as they are in the creed? In other words, did the historical circumstances lead the early church to emphasize the importance of these four adjectives (one, holy, catholic, apostolic) beyond their importance in Scripture? How sufficient or comprehensive are these marks in identifying a true and valid church? Are there other marks that need to be added?

While a full investigation of these four marks is beyond the purpose of this paper, a few evaluative comments by way of response to the questions just raised will be offered. First, I do think the historical circumstances materially affected the elevation of these four marks to the status of identifying marks. While unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity all have some importance for churches, there seems no biblical warrant for seeing them as indispensable to the validity or ecclesiality of a church. In fact, in spite of their widespread acceptance throughout the history of the church, the four classical marks, while helpful, do not seem to be comprehensive or definitive in understanding what the church is, for a number of reasons.

First, the bare words themselves are quite ambiguous. That is why both Protestants and Catholics have been able to affirm them; they fill them with quite different meaning. Yet even when viewed in ways that seem to mesh to some degree with biblical teaching, these four marks do not seem to highlight all of the aspects of the church that are most central in biblical teaching. Howard Snyder echoes these criticisms and advocates adding “many, charismatic, local and prophetic” as supplements to “one, holy, catholic (or universal), and apostolic.”⁴

Furthermore, the marks all seem to be related at least as much to the gospel as to the church. The doctrinal truths inherent in the gospel set at least a minimal boundary of the church’s **unity**. The gift of imputed righteousness received through the gospel gives the church its **holiness** as part of the gift of salvation. The universal scope of the gospel to “whosoever will” gives the church its **catholicity**, and the gospel is the heart of the **apostolic** teaching that the church is to preserve.⁵ Thus, perhaps it is more accurate to see the gospel as marking the church more than unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity. Millard Erickson says the gospel is “the one factor that gives basic shape to everything the church does, the element that lies at the heart of all its functions.”⁶

In addition, the classical marks seem less clearly applicable to the local church than to the universal, but the local church is more the emphasis of Scripture and is how believers experience the church. Even in terms of the universal church, the church is not yet fully catholic. These four marks are possessed today only partially by local churches, yet such

⁴ Howard Snyder, “The Marks of Evangelical Ecclesiology,” in *Evangelical Ecclesiology: Reality or Illusion?*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic), 81-88.

⁵ This seems to be the underlying theme throughout Phillips, Ryken, and Dever, *The Church: One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic*.

⁶ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 1069.

bodies are still churches, even though not yet perfected in unity, holiness, catholicity, or apostolicity.

THE REFORMATION FORMULATION: THE WORD AND THE SACRAMENTS

The Reformation precipitated the division of the church into various groups, and with that prompted the question, How may I find a true church? This was more than an academic exercise for believers of that era; it was a matter of the utmost practical importance. Many assumed that there could only be one true church and that outside that church there was no salvation. Thus, there could be no appeal to marks that only identified some invisible or universal church. These people needed to know if the church in their neighborhood was aligned with the one true church in which they might find salvation.

On this question, the magisterial Reformers (Luther, Zwingli and Calvin) gave much the same answer. Calvin's response is often quoted: "Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists."⁷ At times, Calvin adds a third mark, that of church discipline, and Luther in one place lists seven marks of a true church, but Luther also says that all the marks boil down to the one mark of the Word: "even if there were no other sign than this alone, it would still suffice to prove that a Christian, holy people must exist there, for God's word cannot be without God's people, and conversely, God's people cannot be without God's word."⁸

These signs relate directly to the struggle the Reformers had with the Catholic Church of their day. The identifying slogans of the Reformation (*sola Scriptura*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*), are all encompassed in their marks. The **pure** word must be preached, Scripture alone. For the Reformers, the preaching of the word was almost synonymous with the preaching of the gospel. The gospel message found in the word of God was salvation by grace alone, not grace plus one's best efforts. And that saving grace was received by faith alone, not via the sacraments as understood by the Catholic Church.

This first Reformation mark, the pure preaching of the word, is close to the classical mark of apostolicity, as it has been understood by Protestants. The church is apostolic when it listens to the apostolic teaching, found in the written word of God. That mark is fully true only of the church in heaven, for on earth the church is still struggling to understand and

⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 21 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1023 (4.1.9).

⁸ Martin Luther, "On the Councils and the Church," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy Lull (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989), 547. The complete list of seven signs is the Word, baptism, the Lord's Supper, church discipline, called and consecrated ministers, public praise and thanksgiving, and the sacred cross of suffering.

rightly preach all of God's pure word. Here the narrower meaning of the word as the gospel is important. Calvin was willing to call a group a true church, even if they did not understand all of God's word aright, as long as they preserved and preached the pure gospel message.

Here I think we encounter a true *sine qua non* of the church. If it loses the gospel message, a group of people is no longer a true church. It may be a religious society or a club, but it is not a church, for God's called out people are called out by the gospel and come in response to the gospel. The power of the gospel is what reconciles them to God, unites them to Christ and allows them to be indwelt by the Spirit. There can be no people of God, body of Christ, or temple of the Spirit without the gospel.

The second mark, the proper administration of the sacraments, is more problematic. Can a true church exist if the sacraments are not rightly observed? The Reformers saw the Catholic observance of the mass, involving the claims that Christ was re-crucified, that it was necessary for salvation, and that it conferred grace apart from faith, as a repudiation of the gospel. But what of the differences raised by the Anabaptists and later, the Baptists, over baptism? Does the baptism of infants, which Baptists say is not according to the institution of Christ, sufficient to make a group no longer a true or valid church? In nineteenth century America, some Baptists thought so. The Landmark Baptists took the Reformation marks, measured the neighboring Methodists and Presbyterians, and found them wanting. They termed their assemblies religious societies but not gospel churches, because these groups did not practice the ordinances as Jesus had instructed. They would not practice pulpit exchange with the ministers of such groups, nor do anything that could be construed as a tacit acceptance of them as true churches.

The claims of the Landmark Baptists are open to question on a number of points, but their most basic problem, I think, is a failure to make a distinction between what is essential to a church's nature, and what is important but not essential. In other words, they fail to distinguish between issues of being and well-being. The gospel itself does pertain to the essential nature of the church, but ordinances are, in Baptist life, seen as symbols of the gospel. In fact, one of the criteria by which we have deemed an act to qualify as an ordinance has been its appropriateness as a symbol of the gospel.⁹ Thus, Miroslav Volf suggests that baptism and the Lord's Supper "belong to the essence of the church, for they have to do with faith and its confession. . . . But the sacraments are an indispensable condition of ecclesiality *only if they are a form of the confession of faith and an expression of faith.*"¹⁰ It seems

⁹ Stanley Grenz says that an ordinance, or sacrament, "must be so closely linked to the gospel message . . . that it becomes a symbol for the truth of the good news it embodies." Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 676.

¹⁰ Miroslav Volf, "Community Formation as an Image of the Triune God," in *Community Formation in the Early Church and in the Church Today*, ed. Richard Longenecker (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 217-18. Emphasis added. Elmer Towns and Ed Stetzer, *Perimeters of Light: Biblical Boundaries for the Emerging Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2004), 68, also say that baptism and the Lord's Supper are "essential elements without which a true

therefore that if a church's theology or practice of the sacraments (or ordinances) amounts to a repudiation of the gospel or an expression of a false faith, then it would strike at the being of the church. But if an observance of baptism is not as Jesus instituted, but is not a threat to the gospel, the practice may hinder the well-being of the church, but not constitute a threat to its being. It may be a valid church, but, like all churches on earth, imperfect in some respects.

I think this corresponds with the nature of biblical teaching on baptism and the Lord's Supper. They are clearly an important part of the church's life, but they do not go to the heart of its being, for they are symbols of the gospel and not the gospel itself. In fact, there is surprisingly little biblical teaching regarding the ordinances, much less than their prominence in ecclesiological discussions would suggest. I believe the Reformers included proper administration of the sacraments in their marks of the church due to the seriousness of their disagreement with Catholic teaching on the mass. The Catholic view of the mass did amount to a repudiation of the gospel. But the sacraments *per se* are not as prominent in biblical teaching as are other elements that do belong to the very being of the church. An improper administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper will hinder a church's health and weaken its ministry. Thus I think Baptist distinctives concerning the ordinances are important and worth preserving. But improper observance of the ordinances does not necessarily invalidate a church, unless the impropriety compromises the message of the gospel.

THE BAPTIST MARK: REGENERATE CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

While not as well known as the classical or Reformation formulation of the marks of the church, I think it can be argued that regenerate church membership has been a mark of the church for Baptists, in at least a limited sense. By this, I mean that while human weakness and fallibility of judgment may lead to the inadvertent admission of some unregenerate persons into the membership of the church, biblical teaching throughout the New Testament assumes that the church is composed of believers. Baptists originated out of a desire to make that assumption a reality as far as humanly possible. Central to the Baptist vision of the church is the insistence that the church must be composed of believers only. That is the distinctive mark of the church for Baptists and others who fall within the stream of those who advocate what is sometimes called the gathered church, or more often today, the believers' church.¹¹ This mark may also be called the principle of regenerate

church cannot exist," but they do not comment on whether a particular view of baptism and the Lord's Supper is also requisite.

¹¹ Donald Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968), ix, traces the origin of the phrase to Max Weber's classic work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, in which he used it to describe the Anabaptists and Quakers. It gained more currency with the revival of Anabaptist studies about fifty years ago, and in two conferences that organized around the phrase. The first was held in 1955, the Study Conference on the Believers' Church held by Mennonites. The second was larger and more broadly based, with 150 participants from seven denominational families, and was held at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in

church membership. At the first Baptist World Congress in 1905, J. D. Freeman said of Baptists, “This principle of a regenerated Church membership, more than anything else, marks our distinctiveness in the Christian world today.”¹² More recently, Justice Anderson has affirmed its centrality for the Baptist doctrine of the church: “The cardinal principle of Baptist ecclesiology, and logically, the point of departure for church polity, is the insistence on a regenerate membership in the local congregation.”¹³ This ideal of regenerate membership has been central to Baptist ecclesiology.¹⁴

Charles Dewese argues that the importance of regenerate church membership for Baptist ecclesiology is even more far-reaching: “A direct relationship exists between a regenerate church membership and five other areas of Baptist life – church covenants, the ordinances, church discipline, evangelism, and small groups.”¹⁵

The following table attempts to summarize and make evident the connection between regenerate church membership and other major components of a Baptist doctrine of the church, and so justify regarding regenerate church membership as the central Baptist mark of the church.¹⁶

Louisville, Kentucky in 1967. The papers from that conference were published in James Leo Garrett, Jr., ed., *The Concept of the Believers' Church: Addresses from the 1967 Louisville Conference* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1969). There have been seven additional such conferences since 1967, with the most recent in 1990, on the campus of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Ft. Worth, Texas.

¹² J. D. Freeman, “The Place of Baptists in the Christian Church,” in *The Baptist World Congress. London, July 11-19, 1905. Authorized Record of Proceedings* (London: Baptist Union Publication Department, 1905), 27.

¹³ Justice C. Anderson, “Old Baptist Principles Reset,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 31 (Spring 1989): 5-12.

¹⁴ For a fuller discussion of regenerate church membership and Baptist ecclesiology, see John Hammett, *The Doctrine of the Church: A Baptist Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), chs. 4-5.

¹⁵ Dewese, *A Community of Believers*, 13.

¹⁶ The linkage between regenerate church membership and these aspects of Baptist ecclesiology are found in numerous historic discussions of Baptist ecclesiology. See J. L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology. Second Part. A Treatise on Church Order* (Charleston, SC: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1858; reprint edition, Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books, 1982); A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Griffith and Rowland Press, 1909); and many of the “historic Baptist documents” included in Mark Dever, ed., *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001).

Regenerate Church Membership as Central to Baptist Ecclesiology

Regenerate Church Membership . . . is preceded and safeguarded by believer's baptism.

is the basis for congregational church government.

is reflected and preserved in the Baptist practice of closed communion.

is a prerequisite for effective church discipline and is protected by church discipline.

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH AS A MARK OF THE CHURCH

All three formulations of the marks of the church from the past seem to have been formulated in a more or less polemic situation, and served to distinguish the true church from false or, at least, less biblical churches. The classical marks enabled one to distinguish between the true church and heretical or schismatic groups. The Reformation marks separated true gospel churches from those who had perverted or distorted the gospel. Baptists emerged among those who followed the premise of *sola Scriptura* to its logical conclusion and saw Scripture as teaching the gathered church or believers church model. They thus sought pure churches of believers only.

Today, however, there is a need for distinction not between different denominations of churches, but between churches and parachurch groups. Parachurch groups number in the thousands and form one of the most pervasive features of American Christianity in the post World War II period. Groups such as Focus on the Family, Campus Crusade for Christ, and World Vision International have staffs numbering in the thousands, with budgets in the millions of dollars, and are well known to millions of American church members. And while not rivals of the church, parachurch groups have existed in some tension with churches.¹⁷ On the side of the churches, the tensions are often associated with the

¹⁷ See for example, the title of the study of this topic by Jerry White, *Church and Parachurch: An Uneasy Marriage* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1983). For a more detailed treatment of the relationship of church and parachurch, see John Hammett, "Selected Parachurch Groups and Southern Baptists: An Ecclesiological Debate" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1991). For two varying assessments of the relationship of church and parachurch, see Philip Jensen and Tony Payne, "Church/Campus Connections: Model 1" and Mark Gauthier, "Church/Campus Connections: Model 2," in *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 199-213. Jensen and Payne think parachurch groups are churches, if they gather to proclaim God's word to a group of God's people; Gauthier advocates a partnership between churches and parachurch groups.

perception that parachurch organizations take money and workers away from churches; on the side of the parachurch groups, the charge is sometimes made that churches are dead and that there would be no need for parachurch groups if churches did their ministries as they should.¹⁸

At least in the case of evangelical churches and parachurch groups, both share a commitment to the same gospel. What then distinguishes the two? I think the answer lies in the mission of the church, seen as a distinguishing mark of the church. The church possesses a mandate to provide certain crucial ministries to all types of believers. That is how I am defining the mission of the church for the purposes of this paper. As they fulfill their mandate to provide all the ministries entrusted to them to all types of believers, churches distinguish themselves from parachurch groups.

Basically, the distinction between the church and the parachurch organization is that of generalist and specialist. The church has an assignment from God to provide teaching, fellowship, worship, service and evangelism to people of all ages, sexes and races. I see these five ministries as constitutive of the church, and draw them from the intentionally paradigmatic description of the life of the early church in Acts 2:42-47.¹⁹ A church cannot just do teaching, or just do missions, or just work with prisoners, or just work with college students. A distinguishing mark of the church, especially *vis a vis* parachurch groups, is its mission to minister in a holistic way to all types of believers. The church is called to be a generalist. The parachurch has the luxury of specializing in a particular type of ministry to a selected group of people. As Rick Warren observes, “most of the parachurch movements begun in the past forty years tend to specialize in one of the purposes of the church. . . . I believe it is valid, and even helpful to the church, for parachurch organizations to focus on a single purpose. It allows their emphasis to have greater impact on the church.”²⁰

The church should not envy the parachurch their ability to specialize nor feel inferior if they cannot do a ministry as well as the parachurch group. Specialization does allow a

¹⁸ See the discussions in Wesley Willmer, J. David Schmidt with Martyn Smith, *The Prospering Parachurch: Enlarging the Boundaries of God's Kingdom* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), 170-180, and International Commission on Evangelical Co-operation, *Co-operating in World Evangelization: A Handbook on Church/Para-church Relationships*, Lausanne Occasional Paper no. 24 (Wheaton, IL: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1982.)

¹⁹ I find it interesting that what I see as the church's five constitutive ministries are essentially the same as the five purposes identified by Rick Warren in *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), though our views developed independently. Warren initially derives his five purposes from the Great Commandment (Matt. 22:36-40) and the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20), but sees them as reflected in Acts 2:42-47 as well. I think the Acts 2 passage is a better basis, as it seems specifically intended as a pattern for churches.

²⁰ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 126.

higher degree of proficiency, but requires a narrower breadth of ministry. A medical general practitioner is not threatened by the heart specialist. On the contrary, she is happy to be able to refer a patient with a heart problem to him. The heart specialist, on the other hand, should not look down on the general practitioner nor think that he is able to care for all the needs of the patient. Rather, he should send the patient back to the general practitioner for ongoing care. Both cooperate for the health of the patient.

I think this supplies a helpful metaphor for the relationship of church and parachurch. A pastor need not feel threatened if his men get more excited about going to a Promise Keepers conference than going to the men's prayer breakfast; the parachurch group has the benefit of specialization. But neither should the college student in Campus Crusade conclude that the church is dead and that the Campus Crusade meeting is where real spiritual life is found. If that is so, why are there no senior adults or families with pre-schoolers there? No, Campus Crusade has the luxury of catering to the type of worship college students enjoy. Churches are called upon to minister to all types of people with all types of needs. Where possible, churches should freely take advantage of the specialized services offered by parachurch groups, and even seek to recognize church members who work for such groups as extensions of their church's ministry. At the same time, the church cannot abdicate any ministry to a parachurch group, for Christ has entrusted it to the church. For their part, parachurch groups should "understand the primacy of the church in the day-to-day spiritual lives of most Christians,"²¹ and thus seek to operate as genuine arms of the church. John Stott has said we may grade parachurch groups on this basis: "independence of the church is bad, co-operation with the church is better, service as an arm of the church is best."²² The ideal would be for parachurch groups to operate consciously in a servant partnership with churches.²³

For the purposes of this paper and this conference, the most important point to make is that churches must provide all these ministries to all types of believers. That is their mission, and an essential aspect of their being. A church that has no teaching ministry, or that has no evangelistic impact, or whose members never experience fellowship, is an

²¹ Willmer, et al., 178.

²² John Stott, "Theological Preamble," to *Co-operating in World Evangelization: A Handbook on Church/Para-church Relationships*, by International Commission on Evangelical Co-operation, Lausanne Occasional Paper no. 24 (Wheaton, IL: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1982), 13.

²³ For more detail on what such a model would involve, see Hammett, "Selected Parachurch Groups," 235-240, or John S. Hammett, "How Church and Parachurch Should Relate: Arguments for a Servant-Partnership Model," *Missiology: An International Review* 28, no. 2 (2000): 199-207.

unhealthy church, one whose well being is severely damaged, and one whose very being as a church is called into question. As Elmer Towns and Ed Stetzer have said, “a church is no longer a true church when it abandons the functions of a church.”²⁴

Moreover, churches are called to provide such ministries to all types of people. The only qualifications a church can make for membership is regeneration and a life lived in conformity with a profession of faith in Christ.²⁵ Beyond that, churches are called to welcome all types of people. Students of church growth tell us that churches grow most rapidly when they attract people who are like those already members. That may well be so, but if it is, it is a mark of our fallenness, for in Christ there “is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female” (Gal. 3:28). A distinguishing mark of the church in the world today is its mission to minister to all types of believers, and its provision of the whole broad variety of ministries these believers need. That is the mission Christ has entrusted to churches.

²⁴ Elmer Towns and Ed Stetzer, *Perimeters of Light: Biblical Boundaries for the Emerging Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2004), 70. They specifically mention preaching and observing the ordinances as mandatory biblical functions of the church.

²⁵For Baptists, a life lived in conformity with a profession of faith in Christ would include baptism in obedience to Christ’s command, and thus is typically a requirement for membership in a Baptist church.