

“Three Marks of a Good Church”
Romans 15:14
(Preached at Trinity, November 20, 2011)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. Beginning with **Verse 14** we begin the final section that will take us to the end of the Book of Romans. Paul's focus in this final passage will be his ministry as the apostle to the Gentiles, along with his travel plans, some greetings and final instructions.
 2. In **Verse 14** Paul opens with words of affirmation:
NAS – “And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced”
ESV – “I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers,”
KJV – “And I myself also am persuaded of you, my brethren,”
 - A. These words and those that follow may seem out of place, especially in light of the past chapter where Paul criticizes their judgmental heart towards one another. It might have been easy for the Romans to have misunderstood Paul's intention or of his view of the Roman church.
 - B. John Gill says Paul is writing in answer to the possible Roman reaction to Paul's words: “What does the apostle mean by all this? What does he think of us, or take us to be? Men that live in malice to one another, devoid of all humanity, and mutual respect? A parcel of fools and ignorant men, that know nothing of divine things. And though there may be some that are much to be blamed for their conduct, are there none among us fit to give advice and admonition?”
 3. In this verse Paul gives words of encouragement. To the contrary of such negative conclusions Paul had a high view of this church. Paul was never negligent in giving correction, but always quick to give encouragement.
Although he had never personally visited this church their reputation preceded them and Paul held them in high esteem.
In fact what we find in this verse might be seen as three marks of a good church.
This morning I want to set these before you for consideration:
 - I. A good church contains people full of goodness
 - II. A good church contains people filled with knowledge
 - III. A good church contains people who are willing to instruct and admonish one another
- I. A good church contains people full of goodness
 - A. On one hand there are none that fit this description
 1. By nature there is nothing good in man

2. Paul described that which is natural to humanity in **Chapter 3**
Romans 3:10-18 – “There is none righteous, not even one; ¹¹There is none who understands, There is none who seeks for God; ¹² All have turned aside, together they have become useless; There is none who does good, There is not even one. ¹³ Their throat is an open grave, With their tongues they keep deceiving, The poison of asps is under their lips; ¹⁴ Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness; ¹⁵ Their feet are swift to shed blood, ¹⁶ Destruction and misery are in their paths, ¹⁷ And the path of peace have they not known. ¹⁸ There is no fear of God before their eyes.”
 3. If a good church is one filled with good people then there are no good churches
 4. On the other hand, the Christian life is characterized by the fruits of righteousness. Paul described this transformation in the Roman Christians clearly in **Chapter 6**
Romans 6:17-18 – “But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸ and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.”
 5. Again, we read in **Chapter 8**
Romans 8:9-10 – “However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. ¹⁰ If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness.”
- B. What does such a church look like?
1. It is interesting that this verse immediately follows **Verse 13** where Paul writes about abounding in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. The two other graces in this verse are “Joy” and “Peace.”
 Like hope, these too come through the power of the Holy Spirit. Now Paul speaks of their “goodness,” which is also comes through the Holy Spirit.
 2. So what does such a church look like—a church characterized by goodness?
 It is a church characterized by the fulness of the Holy Spirit upon them.
 - a. The fruit of the Spirit includes goodness – Galatians 5:22:23
KJV **Galatians 5:22** – “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance”
 - b. The Greek word here is ἀγαθωσύνη – uprightness of heart and life. Such goodness is manifested as we treat one another with love and kindness.
 - c. They were full of the grace of goodness because of the power of the Holy Spirit in them.
 3. Such uprightness of heart characterized this church, even if not universal
 - a. It would seem that there were some in the Church of Rome who were guilty of over judging one another harshly and causing division. But they apparently were not the majority.

- b. There were also those who were caring for one another in love. In **Chapter 16** Paul sends his greetings to many of the faithful saints at Rome.
But all in the church were not living righteously.
 - c. Such is sadly true in most churches, even the most faithful churches. There are some who grieve the Holy Spirit and weaken the church. In the midst of Paul's commendation of so many he also sends warning:
Romans 16:17 – "Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them."
 - d. But the great characteristic of this church was that of goodness.
 - 4. Paul had traveled far and wide and this church had a good reputation.
Romans 1:8 – "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world."
 - a. The word can mean "faithfulness."
It is the same word also used in **Galatians 5:22**
 - b. Jesus used it to describe "faithfulness" in the Parable of the Talents
Matthew 25:21 – "His lord said unto him, Well done, *thou* good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord."
 - c. The vast majority of the Christians in Rome were pressing on in faithfulness. Paul is able to commend the fruit of goodness in their lives.
 - D. Can we say that this describes our church?
 - 1. That the vast majority of us are characterized by the fullness of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives.
Can we see the fruit?
^{KJV} **Galatians 5:22** – "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance"
 - 2. Are you contributing to the good reputation of our church?
- II. A good church contains people filled with knowledge
- A. The Church of Rome was characterized by great understanding of the truths of the Christian faith
 - 1. Paul uses two words here to stress the greatness of their understanding
πληρόω – which means to make full and πᾶς which places an all inclusive element
 - 2. They were not lacking in their knowledge.
 - a. Paul isn't speaking of general knowledge—scientific knowledge, philosophical knowledge. He is talking about a knowledge of the Word of God.
 - b. Such understanding comes only by great energy in study and seeking the truth.

- c. There must be an emphasis on preaching
2 Timothy 4:2 – “preach the word; be ready in season *and* out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction.” – KJV – “doctrine”
 - d. Paul wrote in **Chapter 12** about renewed minds whereby we might be given to properly discerning the will of God.
Romans 12:2 – “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”
3. There is a great disdain for doctrine among some in Evangelicals today. Many among Southern Baptists speak loudly against confessions and creeds.
 - a. Notice the early church:
Acts 2:42 – “And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”
 - b. There is no such thing as faith without content. The Church is referred to as the “Pillar and ground of the truth.”
This means the Doctrines of Christ have been entrusted to the church to be preserved and defended against error.
 - c. God’s people must be lovers of truth
 4. B.H. Carroll, Baptist leader from the 19th Century wrote: “A church with little creed is a church with little life. The more divine doctrines a church can agree on, the greater its power, and the wider its usefulness. The fewer its articles of faith, the fewer its bonds of union and compactness.”
 5. Paul is saying the Church of Rome was characterized by a rich knowledge of the truth.
- B. Again, this wasn’t universal in the church.
1. For example, we saw in **Chapter 14** that there were some who had a faulty understanding regarding the proper understanding of the ceremonial laws
 2. This is true in every church. There will always be weak and immature Christians. That’s why we need teachers, and why a solid confession of faith is so important.
 3. Paul saying that the overwhelming characteristic of this church was sound doctrine and good teaching. Christians were growing in their understanding of the truth.
 4. Notice in **Verse 15** Paul is merely reminding them of things they already knew.
Romans 15:15 NAU - "But I have written very boldly to you on some points so as to remind you again, because of the grace that was given me from God,"
 5. This has been Paul’s presumption throughout this epistle:
Romans 8:28 NAU - "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose."

- C. Our church must maintain a high doctrinal emphasis as well
1. We must never diminish the importance of doctrine.
 2. We must never forget what would eventually happen to the Church of Rome. Their doctrine would eventually become so corrupted as to be no church at all.
- III. A good church contains people who are willing to instruct and admonish one another
- A. The Roman Church was filled with those who were able to instruct
1. Paul's criticism in **Chapter 14** was not that the mature members were holding to their position of truth. It was *how* they were doing it. There were some in the church who were condemning rather than teaching.
 2. Every believer should be maturing and should be able to instruct in the doctrines of the faith
Paul's condemnation of the Hebrew Christians:
Hebrews 5:12 – "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food."
 3. Most important, we need to have a high regard for one another and a great desire to glorify Christ.
 - a. Our motive for obedience is the honor of Christ, the desire to declare His glory upon the earth—to live in holiness—to reflect Him. We obey because we love Christ and desire to glorify Him.
 - b. We should also desire to help others in this great pursuit. As they become more like Christ they exalt Him more and more before others.
 - c. It is also true that we share a corporate unity. When one is weak it weakens all of us.
- B. This admonishment sometimes includes correction or even rebuke
1. Paul used this same word in 2 Thessalonians
2 Thessalonians 3:14-15 If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame. ¹⁵ Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.
 2. This is an important aspect of a good church. Our own covenant reads: "I further promise, therefore, to watch over my brothers and sisters in Christ in brotherly love, and faithfully warn, exhort, and admonish them as occasion may require."

3. A good church will be one that desires pastors who will faithfully admonish the congregation and they will properly admonish one another. **1 Thessalonians 5:11-14** – “Therefore encourage one another, and build up one another, just as you also are doing. ¹² But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, ¹³ and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work (i.e. *pastors*). Live in peace with one another. ¹⁴ And we urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all men.”
The words “instruction” and “admonish” are the same Greek word and the same word in **Romans 15:14**.
4. This quality was important for the Church of Rome. They were having issues involving the fellowship of the church but they had Godly members who would quickly rectify the situation.

Conclusion:

1. These are things that should characterize every good church. They aren't the only things, but they are essential.
 - A good church must be characterized by people led by the Holy Spirit, manifesting the fruit of the Spirit (goodness).
 - They must be a people with a hunger for the Word of God, a people characterized by sound doctrine.
 - They must be a people who teach and build up one another. This is the essence of being a part of the Body of Christ.
2. May God bless us to be such a church.