



Systematic Theology

A study of the major doctrines of Scripture

TOPIC 6 – THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH
LESSON 110 – MARKS OF A HEALTHY CHURCH – PART 1
WRITTEN BY PHILLIP M WAY

LOUIS BERKHOF, SUMMARY OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE (GRAND RAPIDS, MI: EERDMANS, 1938), 153
CONRAD MBEWE - [HTTPS://WWW.CROSSWAY.ORG/ARTICLES/3-DISTINGUISHING-CHARACTERISTICS-OF-A-TRUE-CHURCH/](https://www.crossway.org/articles/3-distinguishing-characteristics-of-a-true-church/)

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A Sound Church

- ▶ Often when we think about the subject of the church, we have an image in our mind of a building with beautiful stained-glass windows and a tall steeple with a cross on top. Sometimes we imagine the grand cathedrals or other such images of a building set aside for the worship of God. There are many denominations and many building types all across our land and around the world with just as many forms of religious expression.
- ▶ But what is it that makes a church a sound church? We need to know this for one simple reason – as believers in Jesus Christ we are expected, yes, even commanded to join ourselves together with other believers in a local assembly or fellowship, referred to as a church (1 Cor. 11:18-20; Hebrews 10:25). And we must know what a church is and how it functions, for not every group that identifies itself as a Christian church is a sound or true church.

A Sound Church

- ▶ While it is right to want to join a church, it is wrong to join any group because they call themselves a church. Just as we are commanded to join a local body of believers, we are also warned not to identify or fellowship with those who would proclaim false doctrine or place personal preference, and things like form and function above the truth of God's Word.
- ▶ 1 Tim. 6:3 If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, 4 he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, 5 useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself.

A Sound Church

- ▶ 2 Tim. 3:1 But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: 2 For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, 3 unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, 4 traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, 5 having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!
- ▶ What then are the marks of a sound church according to the Bible? We will summarize them into seven points over the next few weeks. These seven things must be present for a church to claim rightly that they are a church that is obedient to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Seven Marks of a Healthy Church

- ▶ A sound church is an assembly of believers in Jesus Christ where:
- ▶ 1. God is worshipped in spirit and truth – Rom.12:1; Philip.3:3; John 4:5-26
- ▶ 2. Prayer is central – Acts 2:42, 1Thes.5:17
- ▶ 3. Love for Christ and the Brethren is demonstrated – 1 Pet.1:22, Jam.1:22
- ▶ 4. The Word of God is faithfully preached, taught, and heard – Acts 6:4, 13:44; Rom.10:17; 2Tim.4:2
- ▶ 5. The Ordinances of Baptism and Communion are administered – Acts 2:42; Mat.28:19
- ▶ 6. Discipline of the membership is Biblically administered – 1 Cor.5:10-13; Mat.18:15-17
- ▶ 7. Church government and leadership as instituted by the Apostles is established – Acts 14:23, 6:2-3; 1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9

Health Claims

- ▶ If these seven marks are present, the church can rightly claim to be a sound church. If none of these are present, nothing else in the world qualifies them to be a church. They are pretenders, a social gathering or a religious country club playing church if they are without these characteristics to some degree.
- ▶ The New Testament church presented in the pages of Holy Scripture gives us the blueprint to follow in allowing Christ to build His church through us. After all, we do not grow the church one bit, and anything we add to His building is frail and weak and will serve only to pollute the work He is doing. Again, let me stress this point. It is Jesus who builds His church (Matt. 16:18).

True Churches

- ▶ A true church can never be qualified by its size, location, budget, or by the building in which it meets! None of these factors makes it more or less a true church. In fact, in the pages of the New Testament, we see churches that fill whole cities while others consist of a handful of believers that met in individual houses. Some met in synagogues and others on the front porch of the temple in Jerusalem. Still others met in catacombs and underground caves. But they all had these seven marks in common and so were considered by God to be His church.
- ▶ Historically, in its simplest form, this list is reduced to three marks of a true church:
- ▶ 1. The Preaching of the Word of God – Sound Doctrine
- ▶ 2. The Right Administration of the Ordinances – Sound Practice
- ▶ 3. The Right Administration of Church Discipline – Sound Relationships

True Churches

- ▶ The Belgic Confession – Article 29
- ▶ We believe that we ought to discern diligently and very carefully, by the Word of God, what is the true church— for all sects in the world today claim for themselves the name of “the church.”
- ▶ We are not speaking here of the company of hypocrites who are mixed among the good in the church and who nonetheless are not part of it, even though they are physically there.
- ▶ But we are speaking of distinguishing the body and fellowship of the true church from all sects that call themselves “the church.”
- ▶ The true church can be recognized if it has the following marks: The church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel; it makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them; it practices church discipline for correcting faults.

True Churches

- ▶ In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and holding Jesus Christ as the only Head. By these marks one can be assured of recognizing the true church—and no one ought to be separated from it.
- ▶ As for those who can belong to the church, we can recognize them by the distinguishing marks of Christians: namely by faith, and by their fleeing from sin and pursuing righteousness, once they have received the one and only Savior, Jesus Christ. They love the true God and their neighbors, without turning to the right or left, and they crucify the flesh and its works.

True Churches

- ▶ Though great weakness remains in them, they fight against it by the Spirit all the days of their lives, appealing constantly to the blood, suffering, death, and obedience of the Lord Jesus, in whom they have forgiveness of their sins, through faith in him.
- ▶ As for the false church, it assigns more authority to itself and its ordinances than to the Word of God; it does not want to subject itself to the yoke of Christ; it does not administer the sacraments as Christ commanded in his Word; it rather adds to them or subtracts from them as it pleases; it bases itself on humans, more than on Jesus Christ; it persecutes those who live holy lives according to the Word of God and who rebuke it for its faults, greed, and idolatry.
- ▶ These two churches are easy to recognize and thus to distinguish from each other.

True Churches – Conrad Mbewe

- ▶ Distinguishing Characteristics of a True Church
- ▶ Not every institution that calls itself a church is really a true church. In the Bible, some such institutions are called “synagogues of Satan” (Rev. 2:9; 3:9). So, how can we tell if a church is really a church? When the New Testament church began in Acts 2, it was described this way: “So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:41–42). There was the preaching of God’s word, the sharing of the common life, the ordinances, and prayer. From this list, I want to draw out two distinguishing characteristics of true churches and then add another one that became part of church life later. A true church can be distinguished by three primary characteristics:

True Churches – Conrad Mbewe

- ▶ 1. The Preaching of the Word of God
- ▶ That this is an essential characteristic of a true church is evident from what Jesus said in Matt. 28:19: “. . . and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” The preaching of the word of God must be central to the very definition of the church. This is why one of the very first achievements of pioneer missionaries who came to Africa was to translate the Bible into the language of the people. They knew how important the preaching of the Bible was to the health of Christians and of churches. Sadly, in too many of our churches in Africa, preaching does not occupy a central position anymore. Rather, we have many choirs that take turns on the same day—children’s choir, men’s choir, women’s choir, the main choir, and so on. By the time all these choirs have finished singing, everyone is ready to go home. Drama has also begun to feature quite prominently in some churches. This must change.

True Churches – Conrad Mbewe

- ▶ With regard to preaching, Louis Berkhof says, “This is the most important mark of the Church. . . . It does not mean that the preaching must be perfect and absolutely pure, but that it must be true to the fundamentals of the Christian religion and must have a controlling influence on faith and practice.”
- ▶ Closely connected with the preaching of the word of God should be the proclamation of the true gospel. This is the heart of the word of God. The church should be one place where men and women are constantly reminded of the way in which God reconciles sinners to himself. The person and work of Christ should be taught in all its fullness. Where salvation is being taught as achieved through works of righteousness—whether in part or in whole—you will not have the church of Christ there, even if the place is called a church. The true gospel must be an essential component of the definition of the church.

True Churches – Conrad Mbewe

- ▶ 2. The Provision of the Ordinances
- ▶ This refers to the administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper (see Acts 2:41–42, referred to earlier). The latter is sometimes called Communion. Whereas churches may differ on the right recipients and mode of baptism, this religious rite should be part of the activities of local churches as a means by which individuals enter into the church. While inside the church, they should participate in the Lord's Supper, which typifies the death of the Lord Jesus for his people. Again, there will be differences in the frequency and the precise way in which this meal is celebrated, but it must be part of the church's life.

True Churches – Conrad Mbewe

- ▶ 3. The Practice of Discipline
- ▶ The church is meant to be a place where godliness and truth are upheld. Where either of these is missing in the life of a person, they should be warned and urged to repent so that they are restored to a healthy spiritual life. However, where they stubbornly continue living a life of sin or holding on to and teaching heresy, they should be disciplined in terms of public rebuke or excommunication (Matt. 18:15–20; 1 Cor. 5:1–13). In the book of Revelation, Jesus warned those churches where stubborn sinners are not disciplined that he was going to do it himself (e.g., Rev. 2:16). Where that happens, often entire churches end up being closed down. We must all take this matter seriously. Discipline is part of the very definition of the church.

True Churches – Conrad Mbewe

- ▶ Conclusion: The only people who should remain in the church are those who show genuine faith and obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ, the great head of the church. This is seen when individuals are doing everything possible to flee from sin and pursue a righteous life. This is also seen in their love for fellow believers and for the God whom Christians worship. Where you have individuals like this filling up the membership of a local church, you can safely say that you have a true church on earth.
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True Churches

- ▶ The Second London Baptist Confession: All people throughout the world who profess the faith of the Gospel and obedience to Christ on its terms, and who do not destroy their profession by any errors which contradict or overthrow Gospel fundamentals, or by unholy behaviour, are visible saints and may be regarded as such. All individual congregations ought to be constituted of such people.
- ▶ The purest churches under Heaven are subject to mixture and error, and some have degenerated so much that they have ceased to be churches of Christ and have become synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless Christ always has had, and always will (to the end of time) have a kingdom in this world, made up of those who believe in Him, and make profession of His name.
- ▶ Matthew 7:21 “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. 22 Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ 23 And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’