

Marks of a True Church, Part 1 Various Scriptures

Intro – In 1517 Martin Luther banged his 95 Theses to the door of his church. It was the religious equivalent of changing his Facebook “relationship status” to single while he was still married. He was supposed to be a loyal priest in the Roman Catholic Church, instead he was now going rogue. As you guys know, I love reading about Martin Luther and the Reformation.

In many ways, we could say that the Reformation was about salvation. The reformers rediscovered the Biblical teaching that salvation is by grace through faith. Martin Luther's 1st thesis in his 95 Theses was basically that repentance has to do with the heart and lifestyle, and it is not the doctrine of penance that the Catholic church had made it. It is not a way of earning forgiveness through repetitive prayer or giving money.

In other ways the Reformation was about the church. The reformers rediscovered the Biblical doctrine of the priesthood of the believer. They realized that the unbridled power of the Pope was not Biblical, the mandate that priests be celibate was tradition not Bible, and that every believer had a right to come before God in prayer through Jesus Christ. There was no need for a secondary mediator.

And in another way the Reformation was about money. (Ah... in our economy crazed society, we knew that it would come down to that!) The Catholic church was selling tickets to heaven. Actually, that's not what they called them. They called them “indulgences”, but they were basically thought to be tickets to heaven by those who bought them. The Roman Catholic Church was selling them because they needed money to build, or more accurately, rebuild St. Peter's Basilica. The reformer, in particular Martin Luther, highly objected to this system!

But one thing that we can say for sure is that after the Reformation, everything changed. The Roman Catholic church was the very foundation of society for centuries, and now that foundation was shaken and in many places lost altogether. For us, we tend to think of something like that in terms of “changing churches”. But it would be more comparable to changing church, and changing your entire social circle, and having a new system of government all at once; and wondering all along wondering if God might send me to hell because of it all.

So because of that, the leaders of the Reformation had to very carefully go back to the Bible to make sure that they were right! Everything rested on that. And they wrote about all kinds of things. They wrote about government from a Biblical perspective. But they also wrote about the church, especially about the church. And because the Roman Catholic church had been so ingrained in the minds of people, they had to demonstrate from the Scriptures what the church was really all about. And different ones of them came up with somewhere between 2 and 4 “Marks of a True Church”. Here they are...

- Faithful preaching of the Word
- Right administration of the ordinances
- Biblical leadership
- Right discipline

And that sounds about right to me. And they started out right too, with the preaching of the Word. Without the Bible, and clear, faithful preaching of it, you don't have any authority to include the others. So today and next week, I'm going to simply go through these characteristics of a church and show how they come from the Bible and why they are important. They are important to being a faithful church. But they are also important to your very soul.

So today, we are only going to have time to deal with the first one, faithful preaching of the Word of God. And I'm going to deal with this one by seeking to answer several questions...

1. What's the big deal about preaching?

- a. Preaching is commanded... There are 3 books in the New Testament called the Pastoral Epistles. They are letters from Paul basically instructing two young pastors on how to do their jobs. In each one of these three letters, there are instructions to preach!

1 Timothy 4:11-16 - ¹¹Command and teach these things. ¹²Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. ¹³Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. ¹⁴Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. ¹⁵Practice these things, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress. ¹⁶Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.

- A couple of things to notice in this passage...
- Of course, preaching is commanded here.
- Also preaching and pastoring takes dedicated effort. Paul tells Timothy to "devote himself to these things".
- We should also notice that preaching and teaching and pastoring must be backed up by a faithful lifestyle. Paul instructed Timothy to "keep a close watch on yourself."
- And finally, the preaching itself requires careful guarding. Paul says that Timothy should "keep a close watch on" not only on himself, but on "the teaching". There must be a careful, conscientious approach to how we interpret and proclaim the Scriptures.

2 Timothy 4:1-5 - ¹I 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: ²preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. ³For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, ⁴and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. ⁵As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

- Again, there are a couple of things that we should notice from this passage:
- First of all, for those who are in the position of pastoring, "preaching the Word" is a solemn charge. Don't stand in the pulpit unless you are willing to be accountable to God for what you say!
- And the other thing to notice is that faithful preaching won't always be popular. People won't always tolerate "sound teaching".

Titus 2:1 - But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine.

- By the time, Paul got to Titus' letter, he kept it pretty simple.
- But this points out that in preaching, a pastor is not called to teach what He thinks. He is called to faithfully represent what is in the Bible. "Teach what accords with sound doctrine."
- To take up my own thoughts and proclaim them is not a responsibility that I want to bear. I simply want to be a faithful messenger of someone else's message.

- **Transition** – So preaching is commanded, but there is another reason that preaching is such a big deal...

b. There are LOTS of sermons in the Bible...

- The book of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament is almost like an extended series of sermons. Moses is at the end of his life and he wants to impress on Israel the importance of following God faithfully and so he stands before them and “preaches”. But even that emphasizes an important point. The word “Deuteronomy” means “2nd law”. In other words, Moses sermon wasn’t his own ideas, it was a review of the Law of God, given at Mt. Sinai.
- And then another place where we find a lot of sermons is in the ministry of Jesus. Sometimes, when you hear modern people talk about the ministry of Jesus you get the impression that all Jesus did was go around and work miracles and tell stories. But sermons were a major part of Jesus’ ministry:
 - Listen to **Mark 1.14** – “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the Gospel of God.”
 - **Matthew** contains 5 major discourses.
 - **John** contains at least 4.
 - **Jesus was a preacher!**
 - And then...
- There are a lot of sermons in the ministry of Moses. Something that I didn’t mention from the Old Testament before are all the sermons of the prophets. And then Jesus’ following in their footsteps, preaches lots of sermons. And then there are all the sermons in the book of Acts. We should notice that preaching is important to the existence of the church because the New Testament church started with the sermon of Peter on the day of Pentecost.
- **Transition** – So we’ve the importance of preaching because it is commanded, and we’ve seen the importance of preaching because there are so many sermons in the Bible, and then there is a promise...

c. Preaching is powerful... listen to...

1 Corinthians 1:21 (KJV) - For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.

- Amazingly, God USES preaching to reach people’s hearts!

- d. **Transition** – What’s the big deal about preaching? It is commanded, there’s a lot of it in the Bible, and God promises to use it! But then, let me ask...

2. **What is preaching?**

- Preaching is the authoritative proclamation and application of God’s Word.
- Preaching should be **authoritative** because when we preaching we should not be sharing our ideas and opinions but should be proclaiming God’s Word.
- Preaching should be **proclamation** because the preacher should actually believe what he is saying and should say it with some force!
- And preaching should have **application** to our hearts and lives because the Bible has application to our hearts and lives.

e. See... Nehemiah 8.1-8

3. Why is preaching important?

a. Preaching is foundational to the existence of the church.

- It is the Word of God that calls the people of God into being.
- Think about the people of Israel. Up until Mt. Sinai and the giving of the 10 Commandments, the Jews were an ethnicity. After they received the word of God from the Mountain they became a nation. Once God made a covenant with them through His Word, they were an actual nation.
- Think about the church. At Pentecost, God used His Word to call the church into existence.
- And it is through God's Word, and specifically the proclamation of it that God calls His people into existence. In other words, we are not a church if we try to exist without the Word of God.

b. Preaching is foundational to the fellowship of the church.

Acts 2:42 - And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

- I want us to notice that the fellowship of the early church, which was rich and generous, was based upon the apostle's teaching!
- This also reminds us that if a church doesn't follow the apostle's teaching, we can't really have any real fellowship with them.

c. Preaching is foundational to the ministry of the church.

- I actually pointed this out last week, but in Acts 13.5 we learn that when Paul and Barnabas went out on their first missionary journey they had a very simple approach to missions. They simply, "proclaimed the Word of God". They preached the Gospel.
- You know, I certainly see the need for creativity in missions. We need to be willing to feed the hungry and help the sick. We may need to use concerts and art fairs. But without in some way proclaiming the gospel, those kinds of things are just concerts and art fairs or food banks and hospitals. The FOUNDATION of the church's mission in the world is to proclaim God's Word.

d. **Transition** – And then I want to close with...

4. How should we listen to sermons?

- a. Well first of all, listen for what you need to believe. What truth is in this sermon that you need to believe? For today, you may never have actually thought about why we devote at least half of every service to a sermon. Maybe you've thought that it was just tradition. Maybe today you need to recognize and believe that you actually need to listen to preaching.
- b. And then, listen for what you need to obey. Obviously, we need to be "doers of the word, and not hearers only." So, I realize that not every sermon is going to have direct application to EVERY single person in the room. But I do believe that you can find something to apply. Today, the application might be just simply to start actually listening to the sermon. Resist the temptation to think about everything else in the world!

- c. And then I want to encourage you to “listen for God”. When we come expectantly before the Lord in worship. And when we come to His Word expecting Him to speak. There can be moments in the message when God ministers to your heart! The Spirit of God can apply things to your life that the preacher isn’t actually even thinking about or saying explicitly. Don’t get so caught up in taking notes or even in critiquing the style that you don’t hear the Spirit speak!
- d. And then I want to close out this point with a personal thought. When I listen to a sermon I really have to guard against cynicism. I’m tempted to think things like: that guy can’t actually be practicing what he’s preaching. Or I might think that I could do a better job of preaching that sermon than he could. Or sometimes I think about the people in the audience, why are they here, are they really listening to this? So perhaps, you need to guard yourself against cynicism just like I do. Maybe you do something besides listen for the voice of God in the Word of God when you listening to the sermon.

Conclusion – I think that it would be appropriate this morning to close with the message that we preach...

- Charles Spurgeon used to say that his method for preaching was to pick a passage and then make a “bee line” for the cross.

Illustration – When bee keepers want to catch a feral hive the figure out where the bees are making their hive by placing two different sources of sugar in the area and they can tell basically where the hive is by triangulating those two points and seeing where they meet. That only works because bees fly straight back to their hive with their load of pollen and nectar. They “make a bee-line” for their home hive.

And the message of the Christ and the cross should be our “home hive”.

The message that we preach needs to connect with the Gospel. Whether you’ve believed it for decades or today is the first time that you’ve ever heard it, the Bible is all about Jesus. He came into this world from the glory of heaven and the side of His Father to pay the penalty for our sins. His death on the cross purchased our forgiveness. Our sins stood in the way of being right with our Creator, and the only way that we can be restored to Him is to repent of our sins and believe that Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross is sufficient to cover our sins! Do you trust in Jesus or in your own abilities to make yourself right with God? Your only hope is Christ!

- And then, today I’d like to ask you to think about how you listen to sermons. Sometimes, myself included, we are all guilty of just tolerating the sermon. But today, perhaps we can see with fresh eyes the importance that God places on the preaching of His Word.
 - Perhaps we should prepare our hearts for a few minutes before we even leave for church.
 - Perhaps we should approach the worship service with a little more reverence.
 - Perhaps we should come with more expectation that we are going to meet with God in the midst of hearing His Word.
- Our minds are so bombarded with sound bytes and advertising that we are predisposed to NOT pay attention to God’s Word. Would you join with me in asking God to arrest our hearts this morning with the glory of the fact that God has spoken to us in His Son and in His Word, and that He still speaks to us today in His Son and in His Word!?