

Marks of the Church: Praise, Thanksgiving, and Prayer

In the name of him who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, dear friends in Christ: Saving faith in Christ's Gospel is an invisible quality. You can't look at someone or even a group of people and see whether they have it. They may say they do; but they could be lying. There are plenty of hypocrites in the world. But this brings us up against a problem: the Holy Christian Church on earth consists of all those who do have saving faith in Christ's Gospel, the true believers – whom you can't know for sure because their faith cannot be seen. So, if you can't see the Church, how can you know where it is?

The answer, as we have been investigating in this series of evening devotions, is that the Church is seen in its visible marks. It is the Lord who creates and sustains his Church. And where he is at work, we can see it in the marks he leaves – which we might think of as the Lord's fingerprints on his handiwork. Luther identified seven such marks. Thus far we have covered five of them. The first four are the Word of God rightly taught, the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper properly administered, and the correct use of the Keys – that is the authority to forgive and to retain sins. These four together are what we call the means of grace; that is they are the means by which God the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies, and keeps people in the one true faith – and therefore in the Holy Christian Church.

Last week we considered the fifth mark, which is the Office of the Holy Ministry. Just as the Lord gives to his Church the first four marks – the means of grace – so he also gives to his Church someone to administer them on his behalf; that is, a pastor. (How do you like that? I'm God's gift to you. Yeah, I know: where's the returns department, right?) Anyway, the thing to see here is that the means of grace belong to the whole Church and to each of its members individually, yet they are administered by one on behalf of all. By way of rough analogy the food in a household belongs to all the members of the family, yet typically the task of planning and preparing meals falls to one – one who is busy making sure the family is properly nourished while the other members are busy doing all the other tasks that need to be done to make the household run.

Okay, what these first five marks of the Church have in common is that they are all directed from the top downward. They come from God to us. They come from God to us specifically to create and to sustain saving faith in people's hearts. This evening we come to the sixth mark of the Church which is different because it's directed the *other* way: it goes upward, from below to the top. It's the response of faith. When by the means of grace and the office of ministry the Lord makes believers in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, these believers gather together to respond to him. And they respond in three ways:

First they respond with praise, which we can define as expressions of admiration, awe, and approval to the Lord both for his attributes – his wisdom, power, glory, kindness, love, and so on, and also for his actions: his works of Creation, his works of redemption and salvation in Christ Jesus, and his works of sanctification in calling people out of the darkness into the light of his truth and bringing them to eternal life in glory.

Secondly the faithful respond with thanksgiving, which are expressions of gratitude, gratitude born from a sense of appreciation in the heart for the Lord's gracious actions on behalf of believers.

And in the third place the faithful respond with prayer. Prayers are petitions addressed to the Lord in anticipation of his continued and future gracious actions on behalf of people. Knowing who God is and what he is capable of, knowing his gracious kindness and benevolence toward us, and knowing too that he has given us the invitation to ask him for whatever we desire “as beloved children ask their dear father”, we go to him with our requests trusting his wisdom to give us those things that he knows will work for our good.

So, praise, thanksgiving, and prayer together are the response of the faithful and the sixth mark of the Church. Where we see them going on, there the Church must be. And about them three things need to be said. First is to note their placement on the list of marks of the Church: they are next to the last. There’s a reason for that; namely that they depend on and spring from the first five. The first five work together to make people faithful, and only then can the faithful respond. Too often we fall into the notion of thinking that praise, thanksgiving, and prayer are the primary purposes of our assemblies in the Church. Not so. They are a necessary part, but we gather *primarily* to have our faith built up upon the foundation of God’s Word and Sacraments. Our response is what follows and flows from that.

Second, we want to note that while praise, thanksgiving, and prayer are directed upward from us to the Lord, it’s still the Lord who is at work in us to make them happen. In our fallen state, it’s not part of our nature to praise God; no, we rebel and run from him. It’s not in us to give him thanks; we are naturally ungrateful and act like spoiled children demanding that everything to be given to us. Nor is it in us to pray; the sin nature imagines itself to be self-sufficient. These responses to the Lord are worked in us by the Holy Spirit just as faith itself is. They belong to the new nature that was born in us from above.

And finally regarding praise, thanksgiving, and prayer, for them to be a mark of the Church, they have to be seen; and therefore they must be done publically and corporately. Yes, of course we can do these things privately and individually, and we should as Jesus directs us to do in a way that is not simply to show off our personal piety. But through St. Paul (and many others) the Lord also enjoins us to gather together as we do here in order to address each other “in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with [our hearts], giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ”. In this way the whole Church is encouraged and built up, as in harmony and with one voice together we join the saints on earth and the saints and angels in heaven in glorifying the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has done such great things for us.

Therefore as the psalmist says, “Let all that is within [us] bless his holy name”. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!