

Marks of the Church: The Word of God

In the name of him who has the Words of eternal life, dear friends in Christ: I'd like to begin this series of Lenten evening devotions with a question. If I were to ask "What is the Church?" how would you respond? Think about it for a moment ...

The answer seems simple enough at first ... until you realize that we use the word *church* in a number of different ways. For example, twenty years ago on a Saturday afternoon in September, this congregation's stately building in Yorktown was destroyed by an arson's fire. At the time, if someone had asked what happened, we'd all have said "our church burned down." And so it did. And yet the very next morning at its usual hour, St. Paul Lutheran Church assembled and received God's gifts of grace. We recognized that the church isn't a building; it's a group of sinful people who trust in Christ and his work of salvation for sinners. And we could see the church assembled there in the great room at the Lutheran school. But let me ask a follow up question: after the service, when we all went to our homes and we could no longer see it, did the church cease to exist? I expect you'd answer, no, it still existed. But how do you know that it exists if you can't see it?

The issue is further complicated because people understand the word *church* in different ways. At the time of the Reformation and continuing even today, the Roman Catholic Church insists that there is only one church on earth, namely their own visible institution. All others are church in name only. They really shouldn't be called churches, nor is it possible for anyone in them to receive Christ's gifts of grace because all such gifts are funneled by God exclusively through the Bishop of Rome. If you are not in fellowship with the Pope, if you don't recognize his authority, and if you can't draw a direct line of hierarchy – a chain of command – between your priest, your bishop, your archbishop, and your cardinal all the way up to the papal throne, then you have no real communion with Christ. You are most definitely *not* part of *the* Church. At least, that's what *they* teach. And it's a very effective teaching for keeping members of that church under their thumb and fearful of questioning the hierarchy's authority.

We understand things quite a bit differently. Going back to what was said before, we know that the church exists even if and when we can't see it. And with this in mind, we would agree with our Roman Catholic friends that there is only one holy, Christian, and Apostolic Church; but we say that by its very nature, it cannot be a single, visible institution. Rather, that it consists of all those sinful human beings across the globe who acknowledge their sinfulness, repent of their sins, and trust in Christ and his saving work on the cross for their forgiveness, life, and salvation. That is to say, it consists of those who believe the Christian faith. And it's precisely because it includes only people who confess and actually believe the Christian faith that the one true Church *can't* be seen. No one can see faith. I say I believe; but I could be lying. How would you know? You say you believe; but you could be lying. A lot of folks who claim to be Christians are hypocrites. It's simply not possible to observe a person or a group of people and actually know that you're looking at a manifestation of the Church.

Well, wait a minute then: if, in this life anyway, we can never really see the Church, how can we know where it is? Good question. The answer is that the Church is made manifest in its marks. You might think of them as the Church's footprints. I didn't see the deer that strolled through my garden last spring, but I could tell from the prints it left behind and the damage it did

to my plants that it was there. In a similar way, when we see the marks of the Church, we know the Church is there – even if we can't see the Church itself.

In his treatise on Councils and the Church, Luther identified seven such marks. It's these that we will be considering in our Lenten meditations this year. And this evening we begin with what is the Church's first and foremost mark: it's God's Holy Word. Where the Word of God is being taught in its truth and purity, where it is being read, studied, and explained correctly, there the Church must be for it is precisely by the proclamation of God's Word that the Holy Spirit brings sinners to repentance and works in them saving faith in Christ Jesus. So, when looking for the Church, we don't look at people and their relative piety, or at buildings however grand and inspiring they may be, or for the style of music that most appeals to us; rather we listen for the Word of God. For it is by his Holy Word that the Lord creates and sustains for himself a holy people: The Church.

But in listening for the Word we need to exercise careful discernment. Not all groups of people gathered around the Word and listening to it have the Word of God in equal measure. No, among some groups the Bible is said not to *be* the Word of God but only to *contain* the Word of God. It's a human document with some sprinkles of divine inspiration, and it's up to us to figure out what is and what is not truly from the mouth of God. We can discount whatever we determine to be of human origin and keep only what we decide God has said. Thus we are free to recast God into our golden calf who only says what we want him to.

Among other groups the Word of God is taught along with many additions such as manmade traditions, extra-biblical stories, supposed visions of mystics, and so forth. These tend to cloud and obscure the true teachings of sacred Scripture. Among still other groups, human reason or experience is allowed to supersede the Word of God. If what the Word says doesn't make sense to our satisfaction or fit with my personal experience, then it must not mean what it clearly says.

In all such cases, the Word of God is present; but it is being mishandled. It's presented impure, contaminated with the thoughts of men. These teachers of God's Word are, as Paul says in Corinthians, building on the Church's foundation with wood, hay, and stubble which cannot last. Much of what they build will be burned up at the end when Christ comes again.

On the other hand, where the Word of God is being taught purely, without distortion, addition, or subtraction, there teachers are building on the Church's foundation with gold, silver, and precious stones that will endure the judgment of fire. Indeed, what is built with the pure Word will last forever.

Because this is true, it leads us to a final question: how can you know whether a teacher of God's Word is handling it correctly and teaching it purely? Let me give you a two-part answer. First, on the negative side, I've already mentioned some of the misuses. If you detect any of them in what you are hearing, if the teacher is dismissing certain texts because they are not in line with progressive thinking and the ever changing moral values of the society, if they are mixing in extra-biblical ideas and teachings, if they are saying, "Yes, I know that this is what the text says, but it cannot possibly mean that because it makes no logical sense to me", well, that ought to raise some red flags.

On the positive side, you want a teacher of God's Word who recognizes the following six attributes of God's Holy Word. The first half of them I call the three "I's". They are inspired, inerrant, and infallible. That the Word is inspired means that God is ultimately the sole author of

sacred Scripture. Yes, he used men like Moses, the prophets, the Gospel writers, St. Paul, and others to record what he wanted put down of paper; but they were moved by the Holy Spirit to write what they did, so that, as Paul says to Timothy “All Scripture is breathed out by God”.

That the Word is inerrant means that to the extent that it has been transmitted and translated accurately, it contains no mistakes or errors. It’s 100% true and accurate. That the Word is infallible means that it *cannot* contain mistakes or errors because God cannot err or make mistakes. A human writer on their own could write something that’s inerrant, that contains no mistakes; but they could never write something that is infallible. Only God can do that.

The second half of the six attributes I remember by the letters E S P. They stand for efficacious, sufficient, and (you’re going to love this one) perspicuous. That God’s Word is efficacious means that it’s powerful and that it does things. When God speaks, things happen; as he says through the prophet Isaiah, “my word ... that goes out from my mouth; ... shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” Or as the writer of Hebrews says, “The Word of God is alive and active, sharper than any two-edged sword.”

That the Word of God is sufficient means that with respect to the things the Lord wants us to know regarding spiritual matters and our Christian faith, it contains all that we need – all that God wants us to have. We should not be seeking anything else: no further revelations, no dreams or visions, no additional word from the Lord. And no, this does not mean that the Scriptures tell us everything we might possibly *want* to know. There are things God hasn’t revealed to us. It means that in the Scripture we have all that we need, and we should be satisfied with that.

Finally, that the Word of God is perspicuous means that it can be clearly understood. Yes, it should come as no surprise that the God who created the whole concept of communication knows how to communicate. He is able to say what he wants to be understood, and he does. Thus we can, by applying simple rules of grammar, apprehend what he says. We do this understanding that in Scripture he employs different forms of literature. We don’t read poetry like we read history, and the Bible contains both. So we read poetry as poetry and history as history. Likewise, we understand that at times the Scripture uses various metaphors and figures of speech. If after telling you an outlandish story I say, “I’m only pulling your leg”, you understand me to mean that I’m joking with you. You don’t call me a liar because I haven’t physically grabbed your ankle and started to yank on it. The same is true of Scripture. When the Lord uses a figure of speech, we understand what the figure means, not what the words of the figure literally say. But again, God wants us to understand what he says and therefore in Scripture he communicates to us clearly.

If a teacher of God’s Word holds to these six attributes of Scripture and avoids the pitfalls mentioned earlier, you can be reasonably sure they are handling the Word of God with the respect it deserves. And where the Word of God is being taught in its truth and purity, there you will know the Church must be. Even though the Church itself is invisible, you will recognize it being present by its first and foremost mark: The Word of God.

May the Lord keep us steadfast in his Word, and build up his Church here with the gold, silver, and precious stones of his truth. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!