

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

ECCLESIOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Church

One Body, One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One God and Father of All

UNIT 3: THE MARKS OF THE TRUE CHURCH

What Identifies a Genuine Assembly of Christ's People

Lesson 7

THE REFORMATION MARKS

Word, Ordinance, and Discipline — How to Identify a True Church of Jesus Christ

The church is not identified by her address, her attendance, or her architecture — but by whether Christ's Word is heard, His ordinances are kept, and His discipline is practiced.

“Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.”

John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, IV.1.9

Key Texts: Acts 2:42; Matthew 28:19–20; 18:15–20; 2 Timothy 4:1–5; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26; Titus 1:9

“I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.”

1 Timothy 3:15, NASB 1995

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Introduction

Not every organization that calls itself a church is one. In the religious landscape of the contemporary Western world, the word “church” is applied to a remarkable variety of assemblies: from cathedral-filling liturgical institutions with centuries of architectural and institutional history, to store-front gatherings of a dozen people meeting in a strip mall on Sunday afternoons; from congregations whose pulpits declare the biblical gospel with clarity and conviction, to communities whose weekly gatherings have been emptied of any discernible theological content; from assemblies whose life together is shaped by the whole counsel of God administered through elder oversight, to self-styled “spiritual communities” that reject every form of institutional authority in the name of organic fellowship. The word “church” does a great deal of work in the contemporary religious vocabulary, and not all of that work is legitimate.

The question that opens this unit, and that must be answered with theological precision and pastoral courage, is: how do we identify a true church of Jesus Christ? This is not a question about the invisible church, whose membership God alone knows with certainty. It is a question about the visible church, the historically concrete assembly of professing believers, and it is a question that matters practically and urgently. A believer who has moved to a new city needs to know which congregations in that city are genuine churches in which he should seek membership. A family damaged by an abusive religious community needs discernment about what distinguishes that community from a true church. A pastor needs criteria for evaluating the health and faithfulness of his own congregation. The doctrine of the marks of the true church is the theological instrument the Reformers developed to answer these questions, and it remains indispensable.

The Reformers’ answer was crafted in the context of their confrontation with Rome’s claim to be the only true church by virtue of apostolic succession and institutional continuity. Rome argued that the true church was identified by its hierarchical connection to Peter and his successors. The Reformers replied that institutional lineage is no guarantee of doctrinal faithfulness, and that the true church is identified not by her institutional pedigree but by her fidelity to the gospel. Calvin, the Belgic Confession, and the broader Reformed tradition converged on two primary marks, the faithful preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments, to which many added a third: the faithful exercise of church discipline. These three marks are the subject of this lesson, and they are as relevant to the twenty-first century church’s self-evaluation as they were to the sixteenth century’s confrontation with Rome.

This lesson is the first in Unit 3, which addresses the marks of the true church. Lessons 8 and 9 will treat the four classical attributes (one, holy, catholic, apostolic) and the sufficiency of the local church against the parachurch temptation. But this lesson establishes the diagnostic framework that underlies all of those discussions: the conviction that the church’s authenticity is a function of her faithfulness to what Christ has given her, not of her size, her history, her budget, her cultural relevance, or her institutional connections. The three marks constitute a minimum standard, not a maximum aspiration, a floor of authentic church life below which a community cannot descend without ceasing to be a genuine church of Christ. Where the Word is faithfully proclaimed, the ordinances are rightly administered, and discipline is faithfully practiced, there is a true church, however imperfect in every other respect.

I. THE REFORMERS' ANSWER

A Criterion Forged in Controversy and Grounded in Scripture

A. *The Historical Context: Rome's Claim and the Reformation Response*

The medieval church's claim to exclusive ecclesial legitimacy rested on two pillars: apostolic succession and sacramental necessity. The true church, Rome argued, was the institution in unbroken hierarchical continuity with Peter and his successors, the institutional lineage that guaranteed both the validity of the sacraments and the authenticity of the church's doctrinal authority. The Reformers' rejection of this claim was not merely institutional; it was theological. They did not simply assert that the Roman church had become corrupt and that a new institution must be founded in its place. They argued that the criterion of authentic ecclesial identity had been misplaced, located in institutional continuity rather than in doctrinal faithfulness, and that the recovery of the true church required the recovery of the correct criterion.

Calvin's formulation in the *Institutes* is the locus classicus: "Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists." The two marks Calvin identifies, the pure preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments, are both functions of fidelity to Christ's own institution, not functions of institutional pedigree or historical continuity. The church is identified by what she does with what Christ has given her, not by whom she can trace her organizational lineage to. This was a revolutionary criterion in the sixteenth century, and it remains a demanding one in the twenty-first: it refuses to grant ecclesial legitimacy on any basis other than the faithful exercise of the means of grace that Christ Himself appointed.

The Belgic Confession of 1561, Article 29, adds to Calvin's two marks a third that many in the Reformed tradition had already recognized as essential: the faithful exercise of church discipline. The Confession states that the true church "practices church discipline for correcting faults. In short, she governs herself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and holding Jesus Christ as the only Head." The addition of discipline as a third mark is not an afterthought; it is the logical completion of the Reformers' ecclesiological argument. If the Word generates the church and the ordinances seal and display the gospel, then discipline is what protects both, the mechanism by which the church maintains her fidelity to the Word she preaches and the gospel the ordinances proclaim. A church that faithfully preaches the Word but tolerates persistent public contradiction of that Word in the lives of its members has allowed the third mark to atrophy, and the integrity of the first two is eventually compromised.

B. *The Marks as a Minimum, Not a Maximum*

Before examining each mark in detail, it is essential to understand the logical status of the three marks in the Reformers' ecclesiological framework. The marks are a minimum criterion for authentic church identity, not a comprehensive description of a healthy, flourishing, fully functioning church. Calvin's dictum, "wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard", is a criterion for recognizing a genuine church, not a description of an ideal one. A congregation that barely meets the standard of the three marks, whose preaching is faithful but thin, whose ordinances are administered but poorly understood, whose discipline is practiced but inconsistently,

is a true church, even if she is a weak and struggling one. A congregation that surpasses the minimum in every respect but has abandoned one of the three marks entirely is not a true church in the Reformers' sense, however impressive her other achievements may be.

This minimum status of the marks has important practical implications. It means that the marks are a test of authenticity, not of quality. A small, poorly resourced, culturally marginal congregation that faithfully preaches the Word, administers baptism and the Lord's Supper according to Christ's institution, and practices church discipline is a true church. A large, well-resourced, culturally celebrated megachurch that fills its auditorium with thousands of attenders but whose preaching consistently fails to proclaim the biblical gospel, whose ordinances are reduced to emotional experiences, and whose practice of discipline is effectively nonexistent is not a true church by the Reformers' criterion, whatever institutional or popular success it may enjoy. The marks judge the church by the standard that Christ Himself has set, and that standard is indifferent to size, cultural relevance, or institutional prestige.

It is also important to note that the three marks do not require perfection in any of their expressions. "Purely preached" does not mean "preached without any error or omission." "Right administration" does not mean "administered with complete theological precision in every detail." "Faithfully exercised" does not mean "practiced with perfect wisdom and consistency in every case." The marks are criteria of genuine, recognizable fidelity to Christ's own institution, not criteria of ecclesial infallibility. Calvin explicitly acknowledged that even the truest churches contain imperfections, and that the presence of imperfection is not in itself evidence of inauthenticity. What the marks guard against is the wholesale abandonment of the means of grace that Christ has appointed, the substitution of human alternatives for divine appointments. Imperfect faithfulness is still faithfulness; the complete absence of a mark is evidence of a genuine problem with the church's ecclesial identity.

II. MARK ONE: THE FAITHFUL PREACHING OF THE WORD

The Church Is Constituted by the Gospel It Proclaims

A. *The Preached Word as the Church's Constitutive Act*

The first and foundational mark of the true church is the faithful preaching of the Word of God. It is listed first not arbitrarily but because it is logically and theologically prior to the other two: the church is constituted by the gospel, and the gospel is proclaimed through the preaching of the Word. Where the Word is not faithfully proclaimed, there is no church in any theologically meaningful sense, regardless of how impressive the institution, how committed the membership, or how genuine the religious sentiment of those who gather. The community that meets without the authoritative proclamation of the apostolic gospel is not a church; it is, at best, a religious society, and at worst, an assembly that provides the social and emotional benefits of religious community while withholding the one thing that creates genuine spiritual life, the Word of God.

Paul's argument in Romans 10:13–17 establishes the logical priority of the preached Word with unavoidable clarity: "How will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?" The chain is unbroken: faith depends on hearing; hearing depends on preaching; preaching depends on being sent with the authoritative message of the gospel. The church

is, at its most fundamental level, the community constituted by the proclamation and reception of this apostolic Word. She does not preexist the gospel and then decide to make the gospel her message; she is called into being by the gospel and exists only as long as the gospel continues to be her proclamation. This is why the first mark is the most fundamental: to abandon faithful preaching is not merely to neglect one important function among several but to cut the root from which the church's entire life flows.

Paul's charge to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:1–5 captures the urgency and the content of the first mark: "I solemnly 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: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths. But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry." The solemnity of the charge, sworn in the presence of God and Christ Jesus, reflects the weight of what is at stake. The faithful preaching of the Word is not a pastoral preference or a stylistic choice; it is a solemn obligation before God, the fulfillment of which constitutes the church and the neglect of which begins to dismantle her.

B. What Faithful Preaching Requires

Faithful preaching, as the first mark of the true church, requires at minimum three things: it must be expository in method, evangelical in content, and apostolic in authority. Expository in method means that the sermon's content is determined by the text of Scripture, not by the preacher's topical agenda, the congregation's felt needs, or the cultural moment's dominant concerns. The expositor opens the text, determines its meaning in its original context, traces its place in the redemptive-historical narrative, and applies it to the congregation with pastoral specificity. The standard of faithful preaching is not rhetorical excellence or emotional impact but the accurate transmission of what the biblical text actually says. "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15).

Evangelical in content means that the preaching consistently and explicitly proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ: His person, His work, His death for sinners, His resurrection, His present reign, and His coming return. This does not mean that every sermon must be a full presentation of the plan of salvation from start to finish; it means that the preacher's handling of every text is shaped by an awareness of its place in the redemptive narrative that culminates in Christ, and that the congregation is regularly and clearly confronted with the claims of the gospel on their lives. Paul's description of his own preaching ministry in 1 Corinthians 2:1–2, "I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified", is not a limitation of his subject matter but a description of the Christological center around which all his preaching revolved. The first mark requires a preaching that is Christocentric, because the church is a community constituted by Christ.

Apostolic in authority means that the preacher speaks as a herald of the apostolic word, not as an innovator offering his own spiritual insights or as a therapist addressing the congregation's emotional needs. Titus 1:9 requires that the elder be one who holds "fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict." The elder's authority in the pulpit is derived from Scripture, not from his own spiritual experience or personal charisma. He speaks with authority insofar as he accurately proclaims what Scripture says; he speaks without authority, however eloquently, when he departs from it. This apostolic character of faithful preaching is what distinguishes the

Christian pulpit from every other form of public address: it claims to speak on behalf of the living God, whose word it is carrying, and that claim imposes both a tremendous privilege and a tremendous accountability.

III. MARK TWO: THE RIGHT ADMINISTRATION OF THE ORDINANCES

Baptism and the Lord's Supper According to Christ's Institution

A. The Ordinances as Visible Words

The second mark of the true church is the right administration of the ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Supper, according to Christ's own institution. The Reformers spoke of the ordinances as "visible words": enacted proclamations of the same gospel that the preached Word declares audibly. Where the Word addresses the ear through the spoken sermon, the ordinances address the eye through visible signs, the water of baptism declaring the washing away of sins in the blood of Christ and the believer's union with Him in death and resurrection (Romans 6:3–4), the bread and cup of the Lord's Supper proclaiming the Lord's death until He comes (1 Corinthians 11:26). The ordinances are not supplementary additions to the church's core identity; they are constitutive of it, because they are the means by which the gospel that the Word proclaims is enacted, sealed, and renewed in the life of the covenant community.

The Baptist designation of these rites as "ordinances" rather than "sacraments" reflects a careful theological distinction that is directly relevant to the second mark. The word "sacrament," as traditionally used in Roman Catholic theology and in some Protestant traditions, carries the connotation of a rite that conveys saving grace by its proper administration (*ex opere operato*), the grace being located in the sacramental act itself rather than in the faith of the recipient. The Baptist use of "ordinance" reflects the conviction that these rites are ordained by Christ and are genuine means of grace, but that they do not convey saving grace mechanically or automatically. Their grace operates through faith, not apart from it. The ordinances are signs that point to and seal the gospel reality that the believer has already received through regeneration and faith; they do not create that reality. This distinction shapes every aspect of how the Baptist tradition administers and teaches the two ordinances.

The right administration of the ordinances requires, at minimum, that they be administered to the right people, in the right manner, and with the right understanding. Baptism is rightly administered to those who personally profess saving faith in Christ, by immersion, as the public declaration of their union with Christ in His death and resurrection and their entry into the new covenant community. The Lord's Supper is rightly administered to baptized members of the covenant community who are in good standing, with proper examination (1 Corinthians 11:28), as a communal proclamation of the Lord's death, a covenant renewal, and an anticipation of the eschatological feast. In both cases, the right administration requires both the external form that Christ instituted and the theological understanding that gives the form its meaning. An ordinance administered without instruction produces a rite divorced from its gospel content; an instruction given without the ordinance's practice produces a theology divorced from its covenant expression. Both Word and ordinance belong together in the life of the true church.

B. Distortions That Undermine the Second Mark

The second mark can be violated in three directions, each of which represents a distinct form of departure from Christ's institution. The first distortion is sacramentalism: the elevation of the ordinances into instruments of saving grace that operate apart from faith, conferring grace by virtue of their proper administration. This is the Roman Catholic error, and it has practical consequences that directly undermine the gospel. If baptism itself regenerates, then the sacrament replaces the Spirit's sovereign work of new birth; if the Lord's Supper is the representation of Christ's sacrifice (the Mass), then the finished work of the cross is implicitly denied. Sacramentalism inverts the proper order of sign and reality: instead of the sign pointing to and sealing a grace already received through faith, the sign is made the vehicle of a grace received regardless of faith. The Baptist tradition's insistence on the ordinances as signs and seals rather than instruments of saving grace is its principled resistance to this first distortion.

The second distortion is ordinance minimalism: the reduction of baptism and the Lord's Supper to optional, peripheral, or infrequent observances that carry little theological weight in the congregation's life. This error is rampant in contemporary evangelical culture, where baptism is sometimes delayed indefinitely after profession of faith, and the Lord's Supper is observed quarterly or annually in a brief ceremony appended to the end of a regular service. The minimalist church implicitly communicates that the ordinances are less important than other elements of church life, less important than the music, less important than the announcements, less important than the fellowship time. But Christ gave these ordinances to His church as the visible proclamations of His death and resurrection and the seals of the new covenant community's membership and renewal. To treat them as peripheral is to treat Christ's own appointments as less important than the church's preferred programming.

The third distortion is ordinance substitution: the replacement of Christ's appointed ordinances with human alternatives that seem to accomplish similar purposes. The most prominent contemporary example is the "seeker-sensitive" church that eliminates baptism and the Lord's Supper from its public worship on the grounds that they are confusing or off-putting to unchurched visitors. The argument is that the ordinances are insider practices that create barriers to entry for those who are not yet Christians. But this argument misunderstands the function of the ordinances entirely: they are not insider exclusions designed to make the uncommitted feel unwelcome; they are the church's public proclamations of the gospel to the watching world. The Lord's Supper is the church's enacted sermon on the meaning of Christ's death. Baptism is the church's public celebration of new life in Christ. To remove them from the assembly is not to make the gospel more accessible; it is to strip the gospel of two of the visible forms through which Christ Himself appointed it to be proclaimed.

IV. MARK THREE: THE FAITHFUL EXERCISE OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

The Mechanism by Which the Church Maintains Her Fidelity

A. The Biblical Foundation and Purpose of Discipline

The third mark of the true church, the faithful exercise of church discipline, is the most neglected in the contemporary evangelical church and, in many respects, the most necessary for understanding the integrity of the other two. The biblical foundation for church discipline is Christ's own institution in Matthew 18:15–20: "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he

does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” This process, private address, address with witnesses, address before the congregation, and finally exclusion from membership if unrepentant, is not a human pastoral innovation; it is the procedure that Jesus Himself prescribed for maintaining the integrity of the covenant community.

The purposes of church discipline are multiple and must be clearly distinguished in order to understand why the third mark is genuinely constitutive of authentic church identity. The primary purpose is always the restoration of the sinning brother or sister: “if he listens to you, you have won your brother” (Matthew 18:15). Discipline is an act of love, not of judgment; the aim is never to punish but always to restore. The secondary purpose is the protection of the congregation from the corrupting influence of unaddressed public sin: “A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough” (1 Corinthians 5:6). The church that tolerates persistent, public, unrepentant sin in its members implicitly declares that the gospel makes no practical difference to the way one lives, a declaration that is both theologically false and pastorally destructive. The tertiary purpose is the integrity of the church’s witness before the watching world: the community that makes no distinction between the conduct of its members and the conduct of the surrounding culture has forfeited its credibility as a community transformed by the gospel.

Paul’s instruction to the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 5 is the clearest New Testament case study in the third mark, and it is all the more instructive because the sin Paul addresses, the toleration of a man living with his father’s wife, is one that the Corinthian church was actually boasting about, apparently viewing their non-judgmental acceptance of the situation as a mark of spiritual sophistication. Paul’s response is withering: “Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened.” The theological ground of Paul’s call to discipline is Christological: “For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Corinthians 5:6–8). The church’s holiness is grounded in Christ’s sacrifice; the maintenance of that holiness through discipline is the community’s covenant response to what Christ has done.

B. The Practice and the Pastoral Character of Discipline

The faithful exercise of church discipline requires a pastoral culture in which the process of Matthew 18:15–20 can actually function, a culture of genuine accountability, genuine relationships, genuine commitment to truth-telling in love, and genuine trust that the process is motivated by love for the person and loyalty to the Lord, not by institutional self-interest or personal grievance. A congregation of strangers who do not know one another’s names cannot practice church discipline; a congregation of acquaintances who see each other on Sunday mornings and maintain a careful social distance the rest of the week cannot practice church discipline; only a congregation of genuine covenant brothers and sisters, who know and are known, who bear one another’s burdens and hold one another accountable, can practice discipline in the manner that Matthew 18 envisions.

The exercise of discipline must be carefully distinguished from two forms of spiritual abuse that masquerade as discipline but are in fact its opposite. The first counterfeit is legalistic control: the use of discipline procedures to enforce the preferences, standards, and authority of a domineering leadership, going beyond the clear moral and doctrinal standards of Scripture to include minor matters of lifestyle, association, or theological nuance. This is not discipline; it is coercion, and it produces not holiness but fear, resentment, and eventual departure. The

second counterfeit is punitive exclusion: the use of excommunication as a first response to failure rather than as a last resort after the exhaustion of the process Christ prescribed, driven by a desire to remove the offending party from the community rather than to restore the wandering brother. This too is not discipline; it is rejection dressed in ecclesiological language.

The pastoral character of genuine church discipline is captured in Paul's instruction to the Galatians: "Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:1–2). The word translated "restore" (*katartizō*) is used in the New Testament for the setting of broken bones and the mending of torn fishing nets: it describes the work of bringing something back to its proper condition with the skill and care that the task requires. Discipline is not a blunt instrument applied indiscriminately; it is the skilled, gentle, patient work of a physician treating a wound, painful when necessary, but always oriented toward healing. And it is done in a spirit of humility by those who know they are themselves capable of the same failures: "each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted."

V. THE RELATIONSHIP AMONG THE THREE MARKS

Word, Ordinance, and Discipline as an Integrated System

A. How the Three Marks Belong Together

The three marks of the true church are not three independent criteria that can be assessed separately and combined into an aggregate score. They are an integrated system in which each mark depends on and reinforces the others, and the failure of any one mark eventually undermines the others as well. The Word generates the church: it is through the proclamation of the gospel that people are called to faith, that the community is constituted, and that the members are formed in the knowledge of God. The ordinances seal and display the gospel: they are the visible enactment of the Word that the preached gospel declares, and they reinforce the preached Word's content by giving it a visible, embodied, communal expression. Discipline protects both: it maintains the integrity of the Word's proclamation by requiring that the community's life reflect the gospel it preaches, and it maintains the integrity of the ordinances by ensuring that those who receive them are credible members of the covenant community.

The interconnection of the three marks becomes most visible when one considers what happens when any single mark is absent. A congregation that faithfully preaches the Word and administers the ordinances but never practices discipline will eventually produce a community in which the gap between the gospel proclaimed and the lives lived becomes so wide that both the preaching and the ordinances lose their credibility. The Word says that the gospel transforms; the lives say that it does not; and the ordinances become a ritual performed by people whose conduct contradicts their covenant claims. A congregation that practices discipline and administers the ordinances but whose preaching is doctrinally deficient will eventually produce a community that enforces behavioral standards without the gospel foundation that gives those standards their meaning and their grace. And a congregation that preaches the Word and practices discipline but neglects the ordinances has severed the visible, enacted proclamation of the gospel from the community's life, reducing the gospel to a verbal proposition without its appointed covenant signs.

The three marks also illuminate the proper relationship between the church's ministry of the Word and her sacramental and disciplinary practices. Preaching is generative: it creates faith, calls sinners to repentance, builds up the body in knowledge and wisdom, and maintains the community's orientation toward the gospel. The ordinances are declaratory and confirmatory: they publicly declare the gospel realities that the Word proclaims, and they confirm the individual believer's covenant participation in those realities. Discipline is protective and restorative: it guards the community's fidelity to the gospel by addressing the contradictions that sin introduces, and it works for the restoration of those whose conduct has departed from the covenant's demands. Together, these three constitute the full range of the church's ordinary ministry, the ministry of Word and ordinance and discipline through which the Spirit forms, sustains, and purifies the people of God.

B. The Practical Test

The three marks provide a practical and accessible test for evaluating any congregation, whether one is seeking a church in a new community, evaluating the health of one's own congregation, or assessing the claims of a community that presents itself as a church. The questions are straightforward: Is the gospel faithfully proclaimed here? Are the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper practiced according to Christ's institution, with theological seriousness and pastoral care? Is sin addressed honestly and lovingly in the life of the community, and is there a process by which persistent, unrepentant sin is addressed through the steps Christ prescribed? If all three marks are genuinely present, however imperfectly expressed, however modest the congregation's scale or resources, then one is in the presence of a true church of Jesus Christ, and the appropriate response is grateful membership, covenantal commitment, and patient participation in the ongoing work of the Spirit in that community.

The three marks also serve as a diagnostic tool for a congregation's self-evaluation. The pastor who asks honestly whether the three marks are genuinely present in his congregation will find the exercise clarifying and often uncomfortable. Is the preaching genuinely expository, evangelical, and apostolic, or has it drifted toward topical messages shaped primarily by what the congregation finds relevant and encouraging? Are the ordinances administered with theological seriousness and covenant meaning, or have they become routine ceremonies whose significance is poorly understood by most of the congregation? Is the discipline process of Matthew 18 actually functioning in the congregation's life, or has the expectation of accountability effectively disappeared from the culture of membership? These are not questions to be asked defensively or with the intent to find fault; they are questions to be asked with the humility of those who know that the church's faithfulness is always a work in progress, and that the Lord who walks among the lampstands is both the judge of her present condition and the builder of her future health.

The marks also function as a corrective to the ecclesiological consumerism that was the subject of Lesson 1. The consumer asks: what does this church offer me? The marks ask: what does this church offer to Christ? Does it offer him a community in which His Word is faithfully proclaimed? Does it offer Him the visible enactment of the gospel He accomplished? Does it offer Him a covenant community that takes the obligations of membership seriously enough to hold its members accountable to what they have professed? When a believer evaluates a church by the marks rather than by personal preferences, the question shifts from "what will I get here?" to "is Christ honored here?" That shift is not merely semantic; it is a transformation of the fundamental orientation from which ecclesial commitment flows.

VI. THE MARKS AND CHURCH HEALTH

From Authenticity to Flourishing

A. *The Difference Between a True Church and a Healthy Church*

The three marks establish a threshold of authentic church identity, but they do not by themselves describe a fully healthy, flourishing congregation. A congregation that meets the minimum standard of the three marks, that faithfully preaches the Word, administers the ordinances, and practices discipline, is a genuine church, but it may be a young church, a struggling church, a church whose gifts are underdeveloped, whose worship is unrefined, whose pastoral care is thin, or whose engagement with the Great Commission is nascent. The marks are the floor; there is a great deal of building to do above that floor before the church fully realizes the vision of Ephesians 4:11–16, the body growing into the fullness of Christ, every member contributing its gift to the common good, the whole structure fitted and held together by the supply of every joint.

The distinction between authenticity and health has important pastoral implications. It means that the marks are not the only things that matter in a congregation's life; they are the most important things. A congregation can be authentic and still need to grow in the quality of its expository preaching, the theological richness of its understanding of the ordinances, the pastoral wisdom of its discipline process, the depth of its community life, the breadth of its mission engagement, and the warmth and intentionality of its mutual care. The pursuit of health beyond the floor of the marks is the ongoing work of the Spirit through pastoral leadership, congregational commitment, and the full range of means of grace that Christ has provided. The marks establish where the church begins; health describes where she is going.

The relationship between authenticity and health also has implications for how one responds to finding a congregation that meets the marks but is clearly imperfect in many other respects. The temptation, particularly for theologically formed believers who have a clear vision of what a healthy church looks like, is to withhold membership and commitment from a genuine but imperfect congregation while waiting for the ideal. The marks correct this temptation: if the three marks are genuinely present, the congregation is a true church, and the believer's obligation is to join her covenant community, contribute his or her gifts to her growth, and participate in the Spirit's work of building her up in health rather than standing on the sidelines as a critical observer. The ecclesialogically formed believer is not called to find the perfect church; he is called to serve faithfully in a genuine one.

B. *The Marks and the Baptist Distinctives*

The three marks of the true church, as the Reformers articulated them, provide a framework within which the Baptist distinctive contribution to ecclesiology can be clearly located. The Baptist tradition's convictions about believers' baptism, regenerate church membership, and church discipline are not departures from the Reformed doctrine of the marks; they are a further specification of what the marks require in the light of the new covenant theology that this series has been developing. The second mark, the right administration of the ordinances, requires, on the Baptist reading, that baptism be administered to those who personally profess faith, because baptism is the new covenant sign and the new covenant is defined by the personal, Spirit-wrought knowledge of God among all its members. The third mark, the faithful exercise of discipline, requires, on the Baptist reading, a

regenerate membership as its prerequisite, because discipline in the form Christ prescribed presupposes a community of covenanted members who have personally committed themselves to the gospel and to one another.

The Baptist tradition's contribution to the doctrine of the marks is therefore not a sectarian peculiarity but a covenantally grounded specification of what the marks require when the nature of the new covenant is taken with full seriousness. The Reformers were right to identify the three marks; the Baptist tradition's distinctive is to draw out the full ecclesiological implications of the second and third marks in the light of the new covenant's defining characteristic: that all its members know the Lord from the least to the greatest. A church that preaches the gospel faithfully (Mark One) but then baptizes infants before any personal profession of faith (a departure from Mark Two on the Baptist reading) and admits to full membership those who cannot yet credibly demonstrate the new covenant's hallmark (a departure from Mark Three's underlying logic) has allowed the new covenant's newness to be compromised in its very institutional form. The Baptist distinctives are, at their best, not additions to the marks but faithful applications of the marks in the light of the whole counsel of God.

The practical implication of this Baptist specification is a congregation that takes its ordinances and its membership with deep theological seriousness. Baptism is not a cultural rite of passage or a familial tradition; it is the new covenant sign administered to those who personally bear the new covenant reality. The Lord's Supper is not a ceremony to be observed perfunctorily or a spiritual exercise to be practiced individually; it is the communal proclamation of the Lord's death, administered at the table around which the covenant community gathers as an act of covenant renewal and eschatological anticipation. Church discipline is not an administrative mechanism for removing troublesome members; it is the community's covenantal commitment to the truth it preaches and the gospel the ordinances proclaim. Together, these practices constitute the church's visible testimony to the watching world that the gospel makes a difference, that the community constituted by the Word and sealed by the ordinances is a community whose life is being transformed by the truth it confesses.

VII. WHERE THE MARKS ARE ABSENT

The Gravity of Ecclesial Failure

A. *When Preaching Fails*

The gravity of the absence or corruption of each mark varies in proportion to the mark's centrality. The loss of faithful preaching is the most fundamental ecclesial failure, because it strikes at the root from which the church's entire life flows. When the Word is not purely proclaimed, when the gospel is replaced by moralism, therapy, social activism, prosperity teaching, or the systematic avoidance of any doctrinal content that might provoke discomfort, the church is not merely weak; she is starved. The congregation that gathers week after week without hearing the apostolic gospel is a congregation that is being systematically deprived of the one thing that creates and sustains genuine spiritual life. The people may be sincere; the building may be beautiful; the programs may be impressive; the attendance may be large. But without the Word of God purely preached, there is no true church, because there is nothing to constitute the church as the church.

The failure of preaching takes many forms in the contemporary church, and not all of them are as obvious as the outright denial of the gospel. The most common form of preaching failure in evangelical churches is not heresy

but shallowness: sermons that are theologically accurate in their basic claims but so thin in their engagement with the text, so dominated by illustration and application at the expense of exegesis and theology, and so careful to avoid anything that might challenge or disturb the congregation, that they function as pleasant religious entertainment rather than as the authoritative proclamation of the living God's word to His people. This form of preaching failure is insidious precisely because it is rarely recognized as failure; the congregation is not being told anything wrong, but it is not being formed by the sustained engagement with the whole counsel of God that genuine discipleship requires. The first mark demands more than technical accuracy; it demands the kind of faithful, courageous, theologically substantive proclamation that forms the congregation in the knowledge and grace of God.

The recovery of faithful preaching, where it has been lost or impoverished, is always a slow and costly work. Congregations that have been formed by thin, entertaining, felt-needs-driven preaching do not immediately embrace rich, demanding, theologically rigorous exposition. The pastor who begins to preach faithfully after a period of shallowness will face resistance, attrition, and the sustained pressure to return to what the congregation finds comfortable. He needs the long-term courage that Paul calls for in 2 Timothy 4:1–5: the willingness to “be ready in season and out of season,” to “reprove, rebuke, exhort” with patience, even when “the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine.” The recovery of the first mark is worth whatever it costs.

B. When Ordinances Are Distorted and Discipline Disappears

The distortion of the second mark, whether through sacramentalism, minimalism, or substitution, produces a congregation whose visible testimony to the gospel has been compromised or evacuated. When baptism is administered to those who cannot personally profess the faith it signifies, the visible church's membership is constituted on a basis other than the new covenant reality; the sign no longer reliably points to the reality. When the Lord's Supper is observed infrequently and without theological weight, the congregation loses the regular, embodied, communal proclamation of the Lord's death that Christ appointed as one of the church's permanent forms of witness. When the ordinances are replaced by human alternatives, multimedia experiences, emotional worship productions, or whatever the current innovation may be, the community has substituted its own creativity for Christ's appointments, and the result is always a thinner, less gospel-saturated community life.

The disappearance of the third mark, church discipline, produces perhaps the most gradual but ultimately the most comprehensive form of ecclesial failure, because it operates so quietly and is so rarely diagnosed. A congregation that ceases to practice discipline does not immediately collapse; it continues to gather, to preach, to administer the ordinances, to conduct its programs. But over time, the absence of accountability produces a membership whose visible conduct is indistinguishable from the surrounding culture, a pulpit that quietly adjusts its message to avoid confronting sins that are never disciplined, ordinances that are administered to those whose lives contradict their covenant claims, and a community that has lost the moral seriousness that the gospel demands and that the watching world most needs to see. The church without discipline is like a body without an immune system: it can survive for a time, but it is systemically vulnerable to the very corruptions it was designed to resist.

The pastoral call that emerges from a sober assessment of where the marks are absent is not despair but urgent, faithful, Spirit-trusting labor. The God who builds His church (Matthew 16:18) does not abandon her in her failures; He works through faithful pastors and elders, through the ministry of the Word and the prayer of His people, through the ordinances and the discipline and the mutual care of genuine covenant community, to restore what

has been lost and to build what has never yet been built. The marks are not an indictment; they are a compass. They tell the congregation where it stands and which direction it must move. And the Lord who gave the marks to His church has also given His Spirit to the church that pursues them, the one Spirit who is always the power behind every genuine, faithful, fruitful expression of the three marks in the life of a true church of Jesus Christ.

“Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction.”

2 Timothy 4:2, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Marks of the True Church	The criteria by which a genuine church of Jesus Christ is identified and distinguished from false or merely nominal churches. The Reformed tradition, following Calvin and the Belgic Confession (Art. 29), identifies three marks: (1) the faithful preaching of the Word, (2) the right administration of the ordinances, and (3) the faithful exercise of church discipline.
Faithful Preaching	The first mark of the true church. Preaching is faithful when it is expository in method (text-driven), evangelical in content (Christocentric), and apostolic in authority (grounded in and accountable to Scripture). Not measured by rhetorical excellence or congregational approval, but by accurate, courageous, theologically substantive proclamation of the whole counsel of God.
Right Administration	The second mark of the true church. The ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper are rightly administered when they are practiced according to Christ's own institution, to the right recipients (professing believers, in the Baptist understanding), with the right theological understanding, and without the distortions of sacramentalism, minimalism, or ordinance substitution.
Ordinances	The Baptist designation for baptism and the Lord's Supper, distinguishing them from the Roman Catholic use of "sacraments." Ordinances are rites ordained by Christ, genuine means of grace operating through faith, that visibly proclaim and seal the gospel realities already received through regeneration and faith. They do not convey saving grace mechanically (ex opere operato).
Church Discipline	The third mark of the true church. The process, prescribed by Christ in Matthew 18:15–20, of addressing public, persistent, unrepentant sin in a church member: beginning with private address and progressing through witness and congregational address to final exclusion if the member remains unrepentant. Aims primarily at restoration, secondarily at congregational integrity and witness.
Ex Opere Operato	Latin for "by the work performed." The Roman Catholic doctrine that the sacraments confer saving grace by virtue of their proper administration by an ordained priest, regardless of the faith or spiritual state of the recipient. Rejected by the Baptist tradition, which holds that the grace of the ordinances operates through faith, not apart from it.
Expository Preaching	A method of preaching in which the content and structure of the sermon are determined by the biblical text under examination, not by the preacher's topical agenda or the congregation's felt needs. The expositor determines the text's meaning through grammatical-historical exegesis, traces its place in the redemptive narrative, and applies it to the congregation with pastoral specificity.
Belgic Confession	A Reformed confessional document produced in 1561 by Guido de Brès as a defense of the Reformed faith in the Low Countries. Article 29 provides the most explicit three-mark definition of the true church in the Reformed tradition: faithful preaching of the Word, right administration of the sacraments, and the faithful exercise of church discipline.
Apostolic Succession	The Roman Catholic and some Anglican doctrine that the true church is identified by its unbroken hierarchical continuity with the apostles through a lineage of ordained bishops. The Reformers rejected this as the criterion of ecclesial authenticity, arguing that the true church is identified by apostolic doctrine (fidelity to the apostolic teaching in Scripture), not by institutional pedigree.

Sacramentalism

The theological position that treats the sacraments (or ordinances) as instruments of saving grace that operate apart from faith, conveying grace by virtue of their proper administration. Rejected by the Baptist tradition as a distortion of the second mark that locates saving grace in the sign rather than in the gospel reality to which the sign points and which is received through faith.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the authenticity of a church is determined not by her size, her history, her budget, her cultural relevance, or her institutional connections, but by her fidelity to the three marks that Christ Himself has appointed. This conviction sets us free from the ecclesial consumerism that evaluates congregations by their programming and amenities, and it sets us free from the ecclesial snobbery that dismisses small or imperfect congregations as less-than-genuine. Where the Word is purely preached, the ordinances are rightly administered, and discipline is faithfully practiced, there is a true church of Jesus Christ, and the appropriate response is committed, covenantal membership, however imperfect the congregation may be in other respects.

We must believe that the three marks are an integrated system, not independent criteria, and that the long-term health of the preaching depends on the integrity of the ordinances, and the integrity of the ordinances depends on the faithfulness of the discipline, and the faithfulness of the discipline depends on the character of the community formed by the preaching. The pastor who is faithful in the first mark but neglects the second and third is building on a foundation that will eventually be undermined by the inconsistency of the community's life. The elder who is zealous for the third mark but whose preaching is shallow will produce a community that enforces behavioral standards without the gospel grace that makes those standards transformative rather than merely coercive.

We must believe that the Baptist distinctives of regenerate membership, believers' baptism, and church discipline are not arbitrary denominational preferences but faithful specifications of what the second and third marks require in the light of the new covenant's defining characteristic. To hold these convictions is not to claim that congregations with different practices are not genuine churches; it is to claim that the Baptist tradition's application of the marks is the most faithful application available, and to commit to practicing that application with the theological seriousness it deserves.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

We should feel a deep gratitude for a congregation in which the three marks are genuinely present. The faithful preaching of the Word, the right administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the honest and loving practice of discipline are not things to be taken for granted; they are gifts of God's grace to a community that has not always had them and that may not always keep them. The believer who has been formed in a tradition where one or more of the marks was absent knows by experience what their absence costs, and ought to receive their presence with the reverence and gratitude of one who understands what he has been given.

We should feel a holy indignation at the contemporary church's casual abandonment of the marks in the name of relevance, accessibility, or institutional survival. The churches that have replaced faithful preaching with therapeutic entertainment, that have evacuated the ordinances of their covenant meaning, and that have abolished discipline in the name of a false inclusivity are not merely making unfortunate programming decisions; they are failing the test of authentic ecclesial identity. That failure has real consequences for real people who come to those communities seeking the gospel and leave without having heard it, who present themselves for the ordinances without understanding what they signify, and who enter into a nominal church membership that carries no real accountability and produces no real transformation.

We should desire for this congregation to pursue not merely the floor of the three marks but the ceiling of a fully healthy, flourishing, Spirit-filled community life. The marks are where the church begins; the vision of Ephesians 4:11–16, the body growing up in every way into Christ, every member contributing its gift, the whole structure being built up in love, is where the church is going. Let the marks be the non-negotiable foundation, and let the ongoing work of the Spirit in our midst be the daily pursuit of everything above that foundation that makes the church the display of God’s manifold wisdom to the watching world.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Evaluate this congregation honestly against the three marks this week. Is the preaching genuinely expository, evangelical, and apostolic? Are the ordinances administered with theological seriousness and covenant meaning? Is the discipline process of Matthew 18 actually functioning? For each mark, identify one specific strength to give thanks for and one specific area of growth to pray for.
- Read Calvin’s discussion of the marks in the Institutes (Book IV, Chapter 1, sections 7–12) and compare his formulation with the Baptist tradition’s articulation of the same marks. Where does the Baptist tradition most significantly deepen or specify Calvin’s formulation? Where does it simply follow him? Bring your observations to the next study session.
- Reflect on your own baptism. Do you understand it as a new covenant sign, the public declaration of your personal union with Christ in His death and resurrection and your entry into the covenant community? Or has your understanding of it been primarily social or traditional? If your understanding needs to be deepened, commit to a specific course of study on the theology of baptism, beginning with Romans 6:1–4 and Colossians 2:11–12, and discuss what you learn with an elder or pastor.
- The next time you take the Lord’s Supper, prepare deliberately. Read 1 Corinthians 11:23–32 before the service. Examine yourself in the light of Paul’s instruction: are you discerning the body, recognizing the covenant community of which you are a member and the Lord whose death you are proclaiming? Come to the Table not as a passive recipient of a ceremony but as an active participant in the community’s visible proclamation of the gospel.
- If you are aware of a situation in which the third mark is being called for, in which a member’s public, persistent, unrepentant sin is going unaddressed, bring it prayerfully to the appropriate elder or pastor rather than discussing it informally with others. The process of Matthew 18 begins with private address, and it requires appropriate authority and accountability at every stage. Be part of the solution to the third mark’s neglect in this community, not part of the informal gossip culture that makes the solution harder.

Key Texts: Acts 2:42; Matthew 28:19–20; 18:15–20; 2 Timothy 4:1–5; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26; Titus 1:9

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- When you are evaluating whether a congregation is a true church, what criteria do you naturally reach for first? Size? Reputation? Doctrinal statement? Worship style? Quality of the preaching? Fellowship? How does the three-marks framework challenge or refine the criteria you instinctively use?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Acts 2:42. The four marks of the apostolic community are listed here. How do these four marks relate to the three Reformation marks? Which of the Acts 2:42 marks corresponds most directly to each Reformation mark? Is there content in Acts 2:42 that the three-marks framework does not capture?
- Read 2 Timothy 4:1–5. What is the context and the solemnity of Paul’s charge to Timothy in verse 1? What specific activities does Paul command in verse 2 (preach, reprove, rebuke, exhort)? What does Paul predict in verses 3–4 about the future of faithful preaching? What does the instruction in verse 5 (“do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry”) add to the picture of what faithful preaching requires?
- Read 1 Corinthians 11:23–32. What does Paul say the Lord’s Supper is “proclaiming” (verse 26)? What is Paul’s concern in verses 27–29 about unworthy participation? What does “discerning the body” (verse 29) mean, and how does this phrase relate to the third mark of church discipline? What does the instruction to “examine” oneself (verse 28) imply about the nature of the Lord’s Supper as a covenant meal?
- Read Matthew 18:15–20. Trace the four steps of the discipline process. What is the stated goal of the first step (verse 15)? What authority does Christ grant to the gathered church in verse 18 (“what you bind on earth will be bound in heaven”)? What does the promise of Christ’s presence in verse 20 add to the theological significance of the church’s exercise of discipline?
- Read 1 Corinthians 5:1–13. What is the specific sin Paul addresses? What is the Corinthians’ response to it, and why does Paul find that response more alarming than the sin itself (verse 2, 6)? What is Paul’s instruction in verse 13 (“Remove the wicked man from among yourselves”), and how does it relate to the Old Testament background he cites (Deuteronomy 17:7; 19:19)?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that the three marks establish a minimum standard for authentic church identity, not a comprehensive description of a fully healthy church. Do you find this distinction helpful or potentially dangerous? Could the “minimum standard” language be used to justify complacency about ecclesial health? How would you articulate the relationship between authenticity (meeting the minimum) and health (flourishing above the minimum)?
- The lesson identifies three distortions of the second mark: sacramentalism (the marks elevated to instruments of saving grace), minimalism (the marks treated as optional or peripheral), and ordinance substitution (the marks replaced with human alternatives). Which of these three distortions is most prevalent in the contemporary evangelical churches you are familiar with? What are the practical consequences of each distortion for the congregation’s life and witness?
- The lesson argues that the Baptist distinctives of believers’ baptism and regenerate membership are “faithful specifications” of what the second and third marks require in the light of new covenant theology, rather than departures from the Reformed marks. Is this argument persuasive? How would a thoughtful

paedobaptist (infant-baptism) Reformed pastor respond to the claim that his practice of infant baptism represents a departure from the second mark's requirements?

- Paul's charge in 2 Timothy 4:1–5 anticipates that the time will come when “they will not endure sound doctrine.” Has that time come in the contemporary Western church? What evidence would you cite for and against that assessment? What does the instruction to “reprove, rebuke, exhort” look like in a cultural moment when doctrinal correction is perceived as intolerance?
- The lesson ends with the image of the marks as a compass rather than an indictment. How does this pastoral framing change the way you think about applying the marks to a congregation that is failing in one or more of them? What is the difference between using the marks as a diagnostic tool for growth and using them as a weapon for condemnation?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- If a friend asked you whether a particular congregation is a true church, how would you use the three-marks framework to help them evaluate it? What specific questions would you tell them to ask? What would genuine presence of each mark look like in practice, and what would genuine absence look like?
- This lesson argues that the faithful exercise of discipline requires a particular kind of congregational culture, genuine relationships, genuine accountability, genuine mutual commitment. Does this congregation currently have that culture? What is one specific way you could contribute to building a culture of genuine accountability in this community?
- The lesson notes that the recovery of faithful preaching, where it has been lost, is a slow and costly work that will produce resistance and attrition. If your congregation's preaching needs to grow in its faithfulness, in its expository rigor, its theological depth, or its apostolic courage, what is your responsibility as a member? How can members support and encourage a pastor in the difficult work of raising the standard of preaching in a congregation that has been formed by something less?
- In your next participation in the Lord's Supper, try to hold consciously in mind the three-part proclamation that the lesson identifies: (1) proclaiming the Lord's death (the past work of the cross); (2) covenant renewal (the present commitment of the community); (3) anticipation of the eschatological feast (the future hope of the church). How does holding all three dimensions consciously in mind change the quality of your participation in the ordinance?

Prayer Focus

Begin by reading 2 Timothy 4:1–5 aloud as a congregation or group: “I solemnly 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: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction.” Pause after the charge itself. Let the solemnity of it land. This is not a job description or a program outline; it is a charge sworn before God and Christ Jesus, with the appearing and the kingdom as the horizon in which every act of faithful preaching takes place. Whether you are a pastor or an elder or a member of this congregation, this charge belongs to you, because the faithful preaching of the Word is not only the pastor’s responsibility; it is the congregation’s responsibility to receive, pray for, support, and submit to.

Pray for the preaching of this congregation with specific, informed, text-grounded intercession. Pray that the pulpit would be marked by the three qualities the lesson identifies: expository rigor (that the text would determine the sermon’s content), evangelical substance (that Christ and His work would be the Christological center of every message), and apostolic authority (that the preacher would speak not as one giving his personal opinions but as a herald of the Word of the living God). Pray for the pastor’s study, his preparation, and his courage, especially the courage to reprove, rebuke, and exhort when the congregation’s comfort would prefer silence.

Pray for the ordinances of this congregation. Give thanks for baptism as the new covenant sign, the public declaration of union with Christ, the enacted proclamation that the old has gone and the new has come. Pray for those in this congregation who are approaching baptism, that they would understand what they are confessing and that their profession would be the honest expression of a genuinely transformed heart. Pray for the Lord’s Supper: that it would be received with the reverence, the self-examination, and the joy that the covenant meal deserves; that the congregation would truly discern the body and genuinely proclaim the Lord’s death together; and that the Table would be a foretaste of the eschatological feast that the whole church awaits.

Pray for the practice of discipline in this congregation. Pray that the culture of the community would be one in which genuine accountability is possible: where members know each other well enough to notice when a brother or sister is drifting, where there is enough trust to address one another honestly, and where there is enough love to pursue the wandering rather than quietly removing their name from the roll. Pray for the elders and pastors who must sometimes initiate the process of Matthew 18, that they would do so with the pastoral seriousness and the Spirit’s gentleness that the task requires, and that their labors would accomplish what Paul calls their primary purpose: the winning back of the brother.

Close by giving thanks for the marks themselves, for the fact that Christ has not left His church to define its own identity and invent its own methods of corporate life, but has appointed the Word, the ordinances, and the discipline as the means by which He constitutes, sustains, and purifies His people. The marks are not burdens; they are gifts. They are the visible, enacted, communal forms in which the gospel takes institutional shape in the life of a particular community. And the God who appointed them is the God who honors them, the God who is glorified in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.

“Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.”

Ephesians 3:20–21, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Acts 2:42; Matthew 28:19–20; 18:15–20; 2 Timothy 4:1–5; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26; Titus 1:9

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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