

Ekklesia

The Marks and Means of the Church
(Part III of V)

“The Church’s One Foundation” with Scripture Proofs

Partakes one holy food.

"We all are partakers of that one Bread." (1Co 10:17b)

Yet she on earth hath union
With the God the Three in One,
And mystic sweet communion
With those whose rest is won:

"Our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son JESUS Christ." (1Jn 1:3)

"...the communion of the Holy Ghost be with you." (2Co 13:14)

"Ye are come unto the heavenly Jerusalem and to an innumerable company of angels, and to the general assembly and Church of the firstborn...and to the spirits of just men made perfect." (Heb 12:22-23)

A True Church

Lots and lots of groups use the word “church” in their name or self-identification. There is the Roman Catholic Church. We have Presbyterian, Orthodox, Lutheran, Baptist, Methodist, and Anglican churches. There is the “Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints,” or the “Unitarian Universalist Church,” or the “Process Church of Final Judgment.” In Boulder you can go to the “Church of Divine Light” or Ekkenkar, “**A nonprofit religious organization**

and church.” Head down the road to Denver and you can attend the “International Church of Cannabis.”

We’ve spent two weeks discussing [the foundation and nature of the church](#). In them, I’ve tried to make a case for why church is so important for us to not only consider, but be part of. But one of the great problems with the idea of “church” is that [nearly any group](#) who makes any claim at all about the name “Jesus” [will say that they are a church](#), including the “Church of Satan.” This raises a significant question. How do you know if a group is in fact a church? Is anyone automatically a church just because they use the term? A second great problem with the idea of “church” is one I’m not sure a lot of people have consciously asked, though I suspect most have thought a lot about it subconsciously. That is, once I have determined if a group is a church, how can I know that it will be [good for my soul](#)? A lot of people don’t ask this question directly, but I guarantee they have felt the power of it any time they go to or leave a church.

Today, I want to look at these two related problems by asking two more related questions, questions that really are very close to those problems. [What are the marks of the church](#) and [what are the means of grace](#) God has given to her? “Marks” of a church would refer to those objective, demonstrable, clearly evident things that a church must have to be

a church. Means of grace would be those things God has given to the churches that they must do to grow and disciple the people. While both of these have certain objective attributes to them, the second one moves us into a more subjective experience. This then takes me back to the two problems.

When dealing with our first problem of what we do when just about everyone who says something about Jesus calls themselves a church, it can easily be seen that this **relates directly** to the marks of a church. Do all groups that call themselves a “church” actually qualify as such? Is there even a way to objectively determine such a thing? If there are marks of a church, then this answers the first problem. When dealing with our second problem about whether a church is good for my soul, wouldn't this mean that whatever the means of grace are, that they would not only be available to the people, but front and center as **the most important things** that the church does? And wouldn't this mean that they are good for our souls? We will get into all of this as we go along.

The Marks of the Church

The importance of my first question today was put succinctly by **Martin Luther**. In his lengthy book *On The Councils And The Church*, after calling for a church council to

fairly hear the Protestant cause and bring about Reform, after being labeled a heretic and sentenced accordingly in a monkey trial, and after it finally became apparent that there could be no reconciliation between Rome and the Protestants, he set out to show how “the one, ecumenical, Christian church ... is [to be] represented by all believers rather than by pope and councils.”¹ But what would this mean in practice? He understood that in a world where the Pope was omnipresent in Christian’s minds, it could bring great confusion. If the Pope wasn’t in it, could it be a real church? He puts the problem this way, “But how will or how can a poor confused person tell where such Christian holy people are to be found in this world?”² For perhaps the most opposite reason there could be, not that there was only one visible representation of the church but that there now seem to be a million, we have the same problem.

He addressed it by giving seven objective tests or marks of the church.³ I’ll come to those in a moment. But first, when you Google “marks of the church,” the vast majority

¹ Eric W. Gritsch, “Introduction,” On The Councils And The Church, in Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 41: Church and Ministry III*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 41 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 8.

² Martin Luther, *ibid.*, 148. The seven marks below are found immediately following.

³ On these below see W. Robert Godfrey, “Martin Luther’s 7 Characteristics of the Church,” Ligonier (Dec 1, 2022), <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/martin-luthers-7-characteristics-church#fn3>.

of pages that come up first these days are not Luther or Calvin or the Reformers, but something that comes from the Nicene Creed. The creed says, “I believe in one holy Apostolic church.” These four things are the marks of the church.

It’s interesting that the version at the Christian Reformed Church website reads, “We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church,” while that on for example the website of St. Matthew The Apostle Catholic Parish it reads, “I believe in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.” The difference is one of *all caps vs. lower case letters*. This is not insignificant. What’s the difference between “Church” and “church?” In modern English, capitalization means a proper noun. Therefore, “Church” for a Catholic means the Roman Catholic Church. But “church” in the lower case refers to the entire church everywhere, not one expression of it visibly.

The church is *one*, there are not many churches, but one church. The church is *holy*. God makes her this way because she is his new creation by water and the word. The church is *catholic*, that is universal, not just the Roman expression which began in the NT and has developed in many ways—often bad ways, over time. And the church is the *church*, meaning that it is an assembly of called out saints who gather together to worship God.

Because we've already dealt with these four a bit last time, and because we have a lot to get through, I won't spend any more time on these as the "marks" of the church, even though I do believe they are absolutely **vital and, strangely, are rarely if ever taught** as "marks" by us Protestants, though Luther did essentially start here as we just saw. This is to our shame, because all four of these go back much farther than the Nicene Creed, to the very earliest days of the NT church and Bible. If we are not acting as one, as holy, as catholic, and as a church, then what are we? Quite honestly, these marks by themselves are enough to weed out many groups that call themselves churches.

I do, however, want to return to this idea of "Church" vs. "church." We need to tackle what is probably the most difficult of all groups to deal with as it concerns the use of the word "church." When **Roman Catholics** give us these four marks, they mean something different than Protestants do. This is why the capitalization is different (by the way, in Greek, all the letters were capitalized, and capitalization has never been a consistent thing even in English, so all we can do is speak about this as a modern phenomenon). On the Catholic website I cited a moment ago, it discusses these four marks. When it comes to this third one, it says, "**The third mark is Catholic, because the Church is universal. The word**

‘catholic’ means universal and *we* are the visible Church, present in every part of the world. This also means that the Church transcends cultures and has no need to appropriate cultures into it. The Church, while being universal and open to all peoples, will express itself differently through approved rites, but without finding need to change with the blowing winds of social constructs” [italics mine]. For the most part, I agree with this!

But it is **the capitalization that becomes problematic**, which is seen in the use of the word “*we*.” When they say “we” are the visible church, they go on to explain what they mean,

The Catholic Church is the only Church that can say “One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic.” But how do we know this? We know this because we are the only Church that was founded by Jesus Christ himself when he said, “And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:18-19). **This is how we know we are one, because Jesus Christ only built one Church.**⁴

⁴ “**The Four Marks of the Church**,” *St. Matthew The Apostle Catholic Parish*, last accessed Oct 9, 2023, <https://stmatthew.net/news/the-four-marks-of-the-church>.

What they are saying is that *the Roman Catholic Church* is the only true church in all the world. As Dr. Godfrey puts it, “The Roman Catholic Church in the sixteenth century basically argued that Christ preserved the true church through the work of the pope, the bishop of Rome. The true church is easy to recognize because it is in fellowship with the pope. Any church that does not submit to the pope is a false church.”⁵ In this, they are behaving deeply sectarian, if not flat out cultish, the exact opposite of *catholic*!

Of course, they use Matthew 16 and Jesus telling Peter that on this rock he will build the church, but they necessitate that the Rock is Peter himself and that apart from Peter, there is no other true Church. Then they say the Peter founded the church at Rome. So much for Corinth, Ephesus, Antioch, and all the churches founded by other Apostles from Britain to India. Did not Jesus found them through the Apostles? But so much, quite honestly, for even Rome itself. What do I mean Rome itself?

I find the following a fascinating but important digression. A tradition from Irenaeus (180 AD) tells us that Peter and Paul founded the Roman church together (*Against Heresies*

⁵ W. Robert Godfrey, “The Marks of the Church,” *Ligonier* (May 4, 2023), <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/the-marks-of-the-church>.

3.1.2; 3.3.1). However, this is impossible based on Paul's own teaching in Romans, as he clearly says that he only proclaims the Gospel in a place where an Apostle has never been (**Rom 15:20**⁶) and that his great longing is that he might make it to Rome to proclaim the Gospel to them (**1:15**). Therefore, our earliest traditions cannot be trusted on this matter.

But if he does not make it his ambition to preach where the Gospel has already been established by another Apostle (notice, not just Peter), why would he care so much to do this in Rome? Logic leads us to conclude it is because the church at Rome was not founded by Peter at all, but by someone like the Jewish visitors from Rome who heard Peter preach on the day of Pentecost (**Acts 2:10**) and then took the Gospel back to Rome themselves and established a church there.⁷ In fact, this

⁶ "I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation." He is using technical language here of building on the foundation of the Apostles (**Eph 2:20**). The Apostles would go to a city, preach the gospel, God would convert some, and they would establish a church built upon Apostolic tradition and authority. However, This appears to have been the case in Rome as well. This is the reason why before telling them that he does not make it his ambition to preach the Gospel where another Apostle has already been, he told them that he is "eager to preach the Gospel also to you who are at Rome" (**Rom 1:15**). But if this is the case, then it necessitates that Peter did not establish the church at Rome! In fact, it was established most likely by some of the Jewish visitors to Jerusalem from Rome who heard Peter speak at the Day of Pentecost (**Acts 2:10**). This makes the entire claim of Rome profoundly ironic, since it appears from the NT witness that they are one of the rare NT churches that was actually not started by any Apostle!

⁷ Cyprus and Cyrene show that this had precedent ("But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus;" **Acts 11:20**), on a few occasions, churches were actually established prior to any Apostolic visitation. Many have suggested that Andronicus and Junia could have done it or that Prisca and Aquila could have done it. There are many possibilities. Cf. [Aida Besançon Spencer, *Paul's Literary Style: A Stylistic and Historical Comparison of II Corinthians 11:16-12:13, Romans 8:9-39, and*](#)

is precisely what the Church Father **Ambrosiaster** (380 AD) tells us.⁸ This makes the Roman claim profoundly ironic, for that church itself did not originate in Peter or any Apostle, and it was not until much later that an Apostle even came to it (I do think Peter eventually got to Rome, but in the late 40s, he was still very much in Jerusalem).

It is this kind of **sectarianism** that made all the Reformers so angry. They simply wanted to reform the one church (the Roman expression of it, as part of a long line of earlier voices that wanted the same). Rome simply wouldn't budge an inch. In fact, at the Council of Trent, it got so bad that they condemned the Reformers and their biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone as heretics and condemned them to hell,⁹ something they have, sadly, never recanted. So, the Reformers had to reform it themselves. It is interesting that

[Philippians 3:2-4:13](#) (New York: University Press of America, 1998), 73-74; **Greg Magee**, "Origins of the Church at Rome": http://bible.org/article/origins-church-rome#P118_33322; **Douglas J. Moo**, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 4.

⁸ "It is known that Jews lived at Rome in apostolic times, because they were subjects of the Roman Empire. Those of them who had become Christians passed on to the Romans the message that they should profess Christ and keep the law ... Without seeing displays of mighty works, or any one of the apostles, they accepted the faith of Christ, though with Jewish rites." **Ambrosiaster**, *Qui Dicitur Commentarius in Epistulas Paulinas*, trans. **C. H. Dodd**, [The Epistle of Paul to the Romans](#) (New York: Harper & Row, 1932), xxvii-xxviii.

⁹ For example, "If any one saith, that men are justified, either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ, or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and the charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost, and is inherent in them; or even that the grace, whereby we are justified, is only the favour of God; let him be anathema." **Council of Trent**, Sixth Session Canon XI. Rome condemned to hell anyone who believed several other doctrines of the Reformation as well. There are many websites you can visit to see these.

in return, the Reformers did not go around saying that Presbyterianism is the only true church or Lutheranism is the only true church or Baptists are the only true church (of course, they said that Baptists *weren't* a church, but that's another story). How did they think about Rome then?

William Perkins (after the Council of Trent) is a good example. He said that because Rome had the Scriptures and baptism, that God's elect might be gathered out of the midst of Babylon. God preserved his church "in the very midst of the papacy." "The Church of Rome may be said to be in the church of God, and the church of God in the Church of Rome; as we say the wheat is among the chaff and the chaff in the wheat." So they were careful to make a distinction between the "state or regiment of the people, whereof the pope is head ... and do believe the doctrine established in the Council of Trent" which is "no church of God," and those within Rome who truly did love Christ and did not hate the Gospel and the "inward baptism" standing in the justification and sanctification of a sinner.¹⁰

To me, this makes **Rome the most tricky of all the groups** out there that call themselves the church to know what to do with. I think Perkins is equivocating on the word

¹⁰ This is in **William Perkins**, *Reformed Catholic Works* VII, 149-152 at, Paul J. Barth, "Rome is Not a True Church," *Purely Presbyterian* 1646 (Jan 10, 2022), <https://purelypresbyterian.com/2022/01/10/rome-is-not-a-true-church-william-perkins/>.

“church” here, in some sense denying that those within Rome who love God are really the visible church at all, even though they are Christians. And yet, it is difficult to find words to express what happened with Rome, what her relationship to the visible church is, since on one hand they say they believe the Creeds and all Jesus did, but on the other deny the clear teaching of Galatians on salvation and justification and add so many doctrines that must be believed that aren’t even in the Bible and our offensive to the Gospel. Paul’s warning there was very clear about justification by works that it is “another Gospel,” and he tells the Galatians in no uncertain terms that they are in danger of spiritual apostasy.

At any rate, all this to say that Luther understood the pressing need to give people objective marks by which they can discern if an assembled group is really the church or not. After raising the Creed, rather than go to it only, Luther’s seven points began with the Scripture. “First, the holy Christian people are recognized by their possession of the holy word of God.” Luther spoke about the word in many senses. There is the eternal Word, the Logos. There is the Word incarnated in Jesus. There is the Word inscriptured—the Bible. There is the word “shouted,” in preaching. There is the visible Word: baptism and the Supper. Luther

always went back to the Word. For everything. We will see this more when we come to the means of grace. His point here is that the church must hold Christ and the Scripture in such high regard that it alone settles the matters of our disputes and doctrines. Even if we may still disagree, there is a way to hold the Word this high, recognizing that we humans may still read it differently. If the group does not do this, and if these sense of the Word are not present, then its most fundamental mark is missing. For it is the Word that creates the church, dare she subordinate it or rid herself of it altogether?

Following suit, his **second and third marks** were baptism and the Lord's Supper. Listen to the way he puts it. "Second, God's people or the Christian holy people are recognized by the holy sacrament of baptism, wherever it is taught, believed, and *administered correctly* according to Christ's ordinance ... Third, God's people, or Christian holy people, are recognized by the holy sacrament of the altar, wherever it is *rightly administered*, believed, and received, according to Christ's institution. This too is a public sign and a precious, holy possession left behind by Christ by which his people are sanctified so that they also exercise themselves in faith and openly confess that they are Christian, just as they do with the word and baptism." Why would these be marks of the

church? Because **they are the word of God** in visible form and because Christ commanded that his church do them. “Baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” he told the disciples (**Matt 28:19**). “For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread ...” (**1Cor 11:23**), Paul told the Corinthians.

Of course, the key words here are “**correctly**” and “**rightly**,” and those words have been the reasons that Baptists have sometimes not been considered the true church, because we supposedly do not baptize “rightly.” As for me, I do think that both can be used so unbiblically and blasphemously that it destroys this mark of the church. But not always. Nevertheless, on the more basic level, these were objective marks that one could use to see if a church was present.

After this for Luther came **church discipline**. “**Fourth, God’s people or holy Christians are recognized by the office of the keys exercised publicly. That is, as Christ decrees in Matthew 18[:15– 20], if a Christian sins, he should be re-proved; and if he does not mend his ways, he should be bound in his sin and cast out. If he does mend his ways, he should be absolved. That is the office of the keys.**” Again, Jesus commanded his church to use discipline, even using the

same terms “**binding**” and “**loosing**” in regard to it as he used when he told Peter he would build his church (**Matt 16:19; 18:18**). This is one of those marks that is **sorely lacking** in most places that call themselves a church. And we know why. It isn’t popular. It presupposes some kind of authority, and people today despise authority. It can also be abused. Nevertheless, Jesus commanded it and so it became a mark of the church, which you can easily understand in Luther’s context of a church that never disciplined its own, but only those heretics who dared to say it needed to reform.

Now, when we **Reformed people** talk about the marks of the church, they usually end here (giving us three marks, combining baptism and the Supper). We usually get a little more specific in terms of the word, that it must be **faithful preaching** of the word. But as Calvin noted, this is not enough. He said that a man standing on a street corner may be faithfully declaring the Word, but there is no church. Rather, a further mark is that in a true church the word is also faithfully *heard and received*. If no one is listening and responding, then no church exists, but where the Word is preached faithfully and received, then the mark can be seen.¹¹

¹¹ **W. Robert Godfrey**, “The Marks of the Church.”

But Luther continues, and I think his logic is sound. Remember, **there is no place in the Bible that gives us a list for these things**. These are tools we have developed from Scripture to help people know if what they are seeing is really a church or not. Discipline necessitates some kind of **formal organization with officers**. Thus, he says, “**Fifth, the church is recognized externally by the fact that it consecrates or calls ministers, or has offices that it is to administer.**” Here, he knows that the Bible again commands these things, but he also is fighting against the **sacral caste of priests** in Rome. One does not have to have a Roman Priest to have a real church, he is saying. He believed in the priesthood of all believers. However, he also understood the need for functional hierarchy. If the church calls her own elders/bishops and deacons, and agrees to abide for the sake of unity and discipline and growth with them, it is a mark of a church. Of course, this gets into a long and complicated question of biblical offices, women officers, and other questions they didn’t have to deal with. Nevertheless, I think it is a wise thing for people to consider. **How can you carry out discipline or administer the sacraments rightly if there are no officers of the church?**

I’m going to talk about his sixth mark more next time, but it is interesting to me that the Reformed do not usually

talk about it as a mark. The mark is “[worship](#).” “Sixth, the holy Christian people are externally recognized by prayer, public praise, and thanksgiving to God. Where you see and hear the Lord’s Prayer prayed and taught; or psalms or other spiritual songs sung, in accordance with the word of God and the true faith; also the creed, the Ten Commandments, and the catechism used in public, you may rest assured that a holy Christian people of God are present.” Again, you can hear that this is what God has commanded of his church. And what other reason do we ultimately even have for gathering? Throughout the OT, the church gathered to worship. Same into the NT. It is why we exist. To glorify God and enjoy him forever. [Worship of God alone](#) must certainly be a mark of a church, especially in our pluralistic day where people calling themselves churches are worshiping anything but Him.

Luther’s final mark is one I’m do not think is necessary, but I understand it. It is [suffering](#). “Seventh, the holy Christian people are externally recognized by the possession of the sacred cross. They must endure every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world, and the flesh.” It’s easy to see why a man who suffered like he did for the Gospel would say this, and the NT also infers that many times Christian will suffer for their

faith. *If we are not willing* to suffer for it, perhaps that is a mark. But sometimes, God blesses a culture so that it doesn't have to. This does not mean no true church exists. Rather, it means God is being gracious.

Luther developed these from [the first table of the law](#)—our duty to God. Yet, he recognized that they would never be absolutely perfect in the world, save by Christ himself. Yet, “[We constantly strive to attain the goal, under his redemption or remission of sin](#)” until we shall be perfect as Jesus was. Along these lines, he also thought that there were other outward signs that identify the Christian church, namely, [the second table](#) which tells us our obligations to one another, shows us how far the Holy Spirit has advanced us in sanctification, how much we still fall short, and must constantly grow in Christ.

To me, these are [wise and important things for Christians to consider](#). Not that they must be perfect, but that they should be present. When one or another is not present, it may not necessitate that a church is not there, however, taken as a whole, it certainly does. We have our ways of describing assemblies where less to none are present. We talk of [sects and cults](#) rather than churches. These can, but may not be helpful. It depends. But what is certain is that Christ's

church must love and proclaim the word, honor the sacraments, discipline the members (including the officers if need be), formally organize and willingly consent together under authority, worship her God, and be willing to suffer for the Gospel. If these are present, you know Christ's church is there. If they are not, beware leery, lest you enter a synagogue of Satan.

The Means of Grace

So it is clear that not every group that calls themselves a church is a church. It doesn't matter if they have a Protestant label before or after it either. Our [labels are not marks of the church](#). You can be in a Baptist, a Presbyterian, a Methodist "church" and it not be a church at all. Look for the true marks, the biblical marks and you are on the right track.

But now I come to our [second question](#). This is a question of whether or not even that church would be good for my soul. Sometimes we can be in a real church but that church is wreaking havoc on us. Not on everyone, but us. We sit there fuming, constantly fighting, regularly upset at things that are going on in the church—be it from particular doctrine to practice to programs. And I'm not talk-

ing about just being obstinate, I'm talking about things being done that go against our conscience and understanding of God's word.

I was talking with one of you this week about a real problem they faced as they were looking at churches a few years back. In church after church, the leadership taught the people that Christian maturity was demonstrated by **how many programs** you were involved in each week. “**Oh, they're only involved six days a week? We can certainly get them into the seventh.**” Some literally viewed stacking chairs after the service as a mark of Christian maturity. This idea puts programs and volunteering for them as a kind of means of grace. Of course, the result is often burnout and resentment, not growing in godliness.

Then there are those churches that have radically **changed what worship is** and who it is for. This is one of the reasons why I said I agree with Luther that worship is a mark of the church. The whole “**seeker**” **movement** literally changed the audience of worship—from God to pagans. As such, the entire service became geared to pleasing people rather than the Lord. This changed how preaching was done, what was to be said, how song was done, what was sung, it changed other parts of the worship service. Why have communion or baptism at that time? Why read Scripture?

Church really wasn't about coming to worship God, but coming to be saved (at best). This, of course, had roots in our country two centuries earlier in the Second Great Awakening which added all kinds of elements of worship to help people get saved. And as the Seeker thing has died down and other movements have taken its place, many Christians are often left feeling empty after going to church and they don't know why. And you can hear in this how subtly, the marks of the church are taken away.

And, of course, there is the whole idea of **doctrine**. There are fundamental essential doctrines (for instance, one holy universal church), and then there are secondary level doctrines, sometimes of great importance, but which when there is no agreement can cause great controversy and heat in a church and a person's heart. It's not healthy to be in a situation like that. There is a better way. I want to suggest that we've lost something fundamental in all this that if we returned to it, people would once more come to **understand why God gives his people the church**—for their nourishment, comfort, help, well-being, growth, and sanctification. *Church is for Christians.*

We can speak of certain of Luther's "marks" in another way. That way is what we call "**means of grace.**" Our Con-

fession of Faith is once more helpful here. “God, in his ordinary providence makes *use of means*, yet is free to work without, above, and against them at his pleasure” (LBC 1689, 5.3). **Means are instruments** through which God chooses to work, even though he could act miraculously. The opposite of God working through a direct miracle is him working through a means of grace. These means are ordinary, common, often boring, repeatable, instituted, and used by God.

Listen to this paragraph, “The *grace of faith*, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts, and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word; by which also, and by the administration of baptism and the Lord’s supper, prayer, and *other means appointed of God*, it is increased and strengthened” (14.1). You can hear several things here. **God gives faith through means**. As a specific, in another place it says, “God was pleased to give forth the promise of Christ, the seed of the woman, *as the means* of calling the elect, and begetting in them faith and repentance” (20.1). **The means of faith is hearing the Gospel of Jesus**. Just an announcement. Usually without even fanfare.

God **increases and strengthens faith through means**. For example, in another place it talks about assurance and says, “**Assurance does not so belong to the essence of faith, but**

that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it; yet being enabled by the Spirit to know the things which are freely given him of God, he may, without extraordinary revelation, *in the right use of means, attain thereunto*” (18.3). In other words, by using the means of grace, a person who has no assurance can gradually **come to a sense of assurance**. But, like all forms of sanctification, it can be a life-long process and on that must be **diligently sought through the means**. You don't give up until you die.

Next, these **means come from God**. They are *not our* means, but *God's* means. God ordained them to be the instruments through which we are granted faith and faith is increased and strengthened. As such, we very much ought to know what they are.

In the wisdom of God, **he chose means which look like foolishness to the world**. When we think of means that will help someone be saved or become mature in Christ, we sometimes think of **works** (be a better husband, volunteer for church ministries, etc.) and this is why so many sermons—the preaching of the word of God—focus on our works. It tells you what they really think of the means of grace. Other times we focus on our **ingenuity or industry or imagination**. We want the extraordinary, not the ordinary.

God only works through the explosive and exciting! Worship these days is filled with high tech lighting, stages and expensive equipment, professional bands, people going up and creating art as the sermon goes on. If you can think of it, someone has probably tried it. This betrays that we think the means of grace come at our hands, our minds, our wills. That's what makes sense to us.

But as Calvin says in his commentary to the Corinthians, the super-apostles were not taking away anything from the substance of the gospel but “as they burned with a misdirected eagerness for distinction, I am of the opinion that, with the view of making themselves admired, they contrived *a new method* [i.e. means] of teaching, at variance with the simplicity of Christ.”¹² There's nothing new under the sun.

Thus, we learn the last thing from that statement in the Confession. **What the means of grace are that God has ordained. The *ministry of the Word, the administration of baptism and the Lord's supper, prayer, and other means appointed of God.*** Those other means are described or elaborated in another paragraph as the **reading of the Scriptures, preaching, and hearing the Word of God, teaching and admonishing one**

¹² John Calvin and John Pringle, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 39.

another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with grace in our hearts to the Lord; and also church fastings and thanksgivings, upon special occasions (22.5). And in another place it adds “holy fellowship and communion” with one another and the performing of other spirituals services as tend to one another’s mutual edification (27.2). In fact, our song “The Church’s One Foundation” hits this one directly. “And mystic sweet communion with those who rest is won.” Communion is fellowship, fellowship with the fullness of the church, which includes one another. Our rest is won already, by Jesus and we have fellowship together in that truth.

Notice the close overlap between the marks of the church and the means of grace. The first marks were the word, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper. The first means of grace are the word, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper! That means that God gives us the marks of the church so that the church can be a means of grace to his people. God uses the church through the means of grace for the washing and sanctifying of his people with the word.

Let’s return to this idea of the five kinds of word. For the means of grace are all about the word of God, especially, the Gospel. The Second Person of the Trinity is the Word—the Logos. He is the eternal Word. Through him, all the

other means flow. If our marks and means focus on him by talking about him, learning about him, preaching him, worshipping him, the kind of irritation that we can get in churches will diminish, which is what the means are supposed to do. They are supposed to comfort and grow us! Church will be good for our souls!

This includes him in the OT, but also **in the incarnation, the second way we think about the word**, as one of us, as a human being. This is how God spoke to us—**by his Son whom he appointed heir of all things (Heb 1:1-2)**. Jesus is the church's foundation and cornerstone because he is the root and beginning of our very salvation and life together. To constantly have his First Coming and works of Christ placarded before us is to have the means of grace as near as it humanly possible, for this is the Gospel. And what Christian's soul fights against that?

Then we have the word inscripturated. All other means such as prayer, singing, and even fellowship are to have as their foundation, the Bible. **What should we sing together?** The word of God. Not our own words, though it is certainly fine in my mind to sing our own imaginative takes on the word of God, such as we do in hymns. But the word is what we sing. **What should we pray?** We should pray what the word tells us to pray. Prayers of Adoration, Confession,

Thanksgiving, and Supplication. Those are all in the Bible and we are commanded to pray them and we have examples who demonstrate them to us. We can also pray the word of God. Learning God's word and praying it back to him is a great means of grace, because in it you are putting the living word of God into your very heart and soul and mind. Remember, the word of God is living and active all by itself. That's why we want it.

What should we *fellowship* around? The Broncos? Our favorite album? The latest political machinations? Those are fine to talk about and they can even build friendships. But biblically speaking, our *fellowship is around the word of God*. We build one another up through song, that's a kind of fellowship. We talk about what God is doing in our lives. We talk about his sovereignty over the world. We talk about what his attributes are. We look at how he has worked in biblical history and learn to apply that today. The foundation of our fellowship is the word.

If we *fast* or have days of *thanksgiving*, these too are around the word. Fasting just to lose weight isn't a means of grace. Sitting around being thankful for one another isn't a means of grace. But fasting together or thanking God together as a church is, because you are engaged in activities

that revolve around worship and the word. These are all the word inscripturated and then carried out in practice.

We also have **the word “shouted.”** This is the proclamation of the word, especially in **preaching**. While there can be very many kinds of sermons as there are many kinds of texts, they must all be word-**Word focused**. Biblically sound and grounded, Christ-centered, with law and gospel. The Gospel becomes the means by which the law can be obeyed, because the gospel changes your heart by the power of God’s word. It is his power to do this. It is a means of grace.

Too many people think that the Gospel is only for unbelievers. They’ve been too influenced by Billy Graham type sermons and think that the only time the Gospel should be given is when an unbeliever needs to be saved. This is profoundly wrong. The Gospel never ceases to be important for a Christian. It is not just the power to save, but to sanctify. *You*, Christian, need to be told that Jesus still died for you, even after you are saved, because you continue to sin. *You* still need to know that he justifies you once-for-all. *You* need to hear that he will glorify you in heaven because he has adopted you as his child. *You* need to be regularly confronted that Jesus did all the work in the flesh that he did for you and therefore, that work is guaranteed. *You* need to know that he is coming again to judge the living and the

dead. *You* need to hear that the Gospel is about God and not yourself. *You* need to be confronted with the Holy God, the Just God, the Good God, the Merciful God, the God of Wrath, the God of Grace. It is in knowing God that you grow in godliness. If churches **stopped feeling guilty** for actually having gatherings of *Christians* come together because they weren't doing "outreach," and started preaching to people who are starving for the good news, it would be the greatest means of grace this world has ever seen. Ironically, I'm convinced that it would also change the world. That's the power of the word of God. *It* is God's power to save and sanctify. That's what the Gospel is. That is its nature.

Then there is **the visible word**. The reason **baptism and the Lord's Supper** are means of grace is because they are the Gospel to our eyes, ears, nose, taste, and touch. Our senses are engaged in the Gospel through them. I'm going to talk a little more about them next time as we consider the role of the church next time. But let's just think about them here as a means of grace.

How are they the Gospel? Baptism pictures for you **your death into Christ's death**. He was baptized into death so that you might have life. You come out of the waters alive, because he makes you a new creation (**Rom 6:1ff**). You are ordained into the priesthood through the waters, made clean

figuratively speaking which points to the clean heart he has given you through the Holy Spirit. Because of it, you can now serve as his priests in the NT temple as living sacrifices. That's the Gospel. It pictures all that Christ has done for you.

The Supper points you to Christ's death as well. His death is the Gospel. It represents his body and his blood (Luke 22:19-20). It allows you to internalize in a profound way—together as the church—the benefits of Christ's death for you today. As such, it is a holy thing. We “partake one holy food.” And we feast upon Christ, the Manna from Heaven. We live upon no other bread than Christ alone. It is the word-bread given to us that we might thrive in this world of men.

Means of grace are God's chief way, using ordinary common everyday things, things that he has blessed and made holy, to save and to sanctify his elect. Isn't it amazing that the church of Acts when they gathered were doing just these things? “And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42).

There is no fighting in our souls against them, because they are all about him. Thus, they bring comfort to us, they sustain us, they nourish us, they grow us. Do we have the

faith to believe that this is true? They are a test, you know, because it doesn't seem likely or even possible to the natural mind. The whole point here is that in coming to church, **we come to receive**—receive the benefits of God in Christ. We come to receive faith, to grow faith, to have renewed hope, to learn again and against of the forgiveness of sins, of life eternal, and so much more.

God has given his church **marks and means**. By the marks, we know we can trust that God is near in blessing to that church. Since they so very closely overlap the means, we can be sure that as the means of grace are present, our souls will be able to rest, even when we are surrounded by sinners, which begin with ourselves. Let the church learn again the marks and means of grace. And may God be pleased to use them to bring much needed Reform and help to the people of God.

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