

# “Easily Recognized”

## An Exposition of Article Twenty-Nine of the Belgic Confession.

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### Article 29: The Marks of the True Church

We believe that we ought to discern diligently and very carefully, by the Word of God, what is the true church—for all sects in the world today claim for themselves the name of “the church.”<sup>1</sup> We are not speaking here of the company of hypocrites who are mixed among the good in the church and who nonetheless are not part of it, even though they are physically there.<sup>2</sup> But we are speaking of distinguishing the body and fellowship of the true church from all sects that call themselves “the church.”

The true church can be recognized if it has the following marks: The church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel;<sup>3</sup> it makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them;<sup>4</sup> it practices church discipline for correcting faults.<sup>5</sup> In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God,<sup>6</sup> rejecting all things contrary to it<sup>7</sup> and holding Jesus Christ as the only Head.<sup>8</sup> By these marks one can be assured of recognizing the true church—and no one ought to be separated from it.

As for those who are of the church, we can recognize them by the distinguishing marks of Christians: namely by faith, and by their fleeing from sin and pursuing righteousness,<sup>9</sup> once they have received the one and only Savior, Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup> They love the true God and their neighbors,<sup>11</sup> without turning to the right or left, and they crucify the flesh and its works.<sup>12</sup> Though great weakness remains in them, they fight against it by the Spirit all the days of their lives,<sup>13</sup> appealing constantly to the blood, suffering, death, and obedience of the Lord Jesus, in whom they have forgiveness of their sins, through faith in him.<sup>14</sup>

As for the false church, it assigns more authority to itself and its ordinances than to the Word of God; it does not want to subject itself to the yoke of Christ;<sup>15</sup> it does not administer the sacraments as Christ commanded in his Word; it rather adds to them or subtracts from them as it pleases; it bases itself on men, more than on Jesus Christ; it persecutes those who live holy lives according to the Word of God and who rebuke it for its faults, greed, and idolatry.<sup>16</sup>

These two churches are easy to recognize and thus to distinguish from each other.

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<sup>1</sup> Rev 2:9 <sup>2</sup> Rom 9:6 <sup>3</sup> Gal 1:8; 1 Tim 3:15 <sup>4</sup> Acts 19:3-5; 1 Cor 11:20-29 <sup>5</sup> Mt 18:15-17; 1 Cor 5:4-5, 13; 2 Thes 3:6, 14; Tit 3:10 <sup>6</sup> Jn 8:47, 17:20; Acts 17:11; Eph 2:20; Col 1:23; 1 Tim 6:3 <sup>7</sup> 1 Thes 5:21; 1 Tim 6:20; Rev 2:6 <sup>8</sup> Jn 10:14; Eph 5:23; Col 1:18 <sup>9</sup> Jn 1:12; 1 Jn 4:2 <sup>10</sup> Rom 6:2; Php 3:12 <sup>11</sup> 1 Jn 4:19-21 <sup>12</sup> Gal 5:24 <sup>13</sup> Rom 7:15; Gal 5:17 <sup>14</sup> Rom 7:24-25; 1 Jn 1:7-9 <sup>15</sup> Acts 4:17-18; 2 Tim 4:3-4; 2 Jn 9 <sup>16</sup> Jn 16:2

Whenever we talk about the marks of a true church, we immediately enter a minefield of controversy. To say that one church is a true church is to say that another church is a false church, even when that church may be filled with sincere people who love Jesus. To speak of true and false churches is to pick a fight

which the vast majority of modern Americans find completely offensive. But the fact of the matter is the Bible teaches us that there are churches which are faithful to God's word and there are churches which are not. To complicate things even more, most American churches fall along a continuum somewhere between a true and a false church. As Reformed Christians who stress the necessity of believing certain things and then confessing these same doctrines before the unbelieving world, the discussion of what constitutes a true church and what makes a church a false church is not a discussion from which we can walk away, no matter how distasteful our contemporaries find the subject. That being said, this is a subject which we must discuss with great care and certainly with a great deal of charity.

Our confession has previously defined the church as a holy congregation of all those who profess a common faith in Jesus Christ and who assemble each Lord's day to hear God's word, receive his sacraments, submit to Christ's yoke, worship according to pattern we find in God's word, pray together as God's people, and give thanks through prayer, praise, and our offerings. Such a church is not limited to one congregation, one denomination, or one country, but it can be found throughout the world and across the ages. As Reformed Christians we are also "catholic" Christians.

We have seen that the New Testament has no category for someone who professes faith in Jesus Christ but who is not also a member of Christ's church. As we saw in Article Twenty-Eight of our confession, church membership is not optional. If we are Christ's and profess him as Lord, then we are obligated to join a local congregation of like-minded believers. Furthermore, we must submit to the teaching office of the church insofar as the church is faithful to Scripture. We must submit to the discipline of the church as its shepherds watch over our doctrine and life. We must add our spiritual gifts to the spiritual gifts of other members which God has given to his church for the common good and for the furtherance of his kingdom. We cannot be part of the mystical body of Christ (the elect) and yet refuse to join a congregation of Christ's people who profess a common faith.

Despite the fact that Americans chafe against the requirement to submit to Christ through the offices and ministry of the church, Scripture does not give us an option. Even though we will be persecuted by people who hate Christ and his church (and perhaps by the state as well), nevertheless, we must join a local church because the local church is the visible manifestation of the mystical body of Jesus Christ (the invisible church). The church of Jesus Christ is a spiritual temple, built of living stones (us) which is indwelt by the blessed Holy Spirit. The church is that place where the gospel is preached, the sacraments are administered and discipline is exercised for the well-being of souls. Therefore, our confession makes the point that "we believe that since this holy assembly and congregation is the gathering of those who are saved and there is no salvation apart from it, no one ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself, regardless of his status or condition. But all people are obliged to join and unite with it."

As we have also pointed out throughout our discussion of the articles dealing with the church, the situation under which our confession was written in 1561 was much different than our own. Not only must De Bres refute the erroneous notion that the church is a dispenser of grace as taught by Rome, he must simultaneously make the case that the Reformed churches in Holland were every bit as opposed to the Anabaptists as was Rome. This explains the comments in our confession to the effect that Christians must not only join a true church, they must also "separate from those who do not belong to the church."

De Bres is not telling us to withdraw from, or ignore our non-Christian friends and family. But he is reminding us of the antithesis which exists between Christian and non-Christian ways of thinking and doing. As members of Christ's church, we need to be very cautious about our personal and business

relationships with those who reject Christ and his gospel. We cannot profess the faith expressed in our confession and then behave like our doctrine has no impact upon how we live. When our confession was written, De Bres was referring to people who secretly embraced Reformed doctrine, but who were afraid to break with the Roman church for fear of persecution. Under our circumstances, we must not be naive about the attraction that non-Christian ways of thinking have for some of our own, who may be tempted to marry non-Christians or form partnerships with those who see nothing wrong with breaking the law and trampling on all those who get in their way.

But Guido De Bres could have never imagined a situation such as the one in which we find ourselves today—a wide range of Protestant churches with varying degrees of faithfulness to the gospel, many of whom seem to be completely indifferent to the sacraments. De Bres only knew of Rome, the Anabaptists and the Lutherans (there were few Lutherans in Holland). He certainly knew of those Reformed churches throughout the cantons of Switzerland, the Palatinate (along the Rhine River and the city of Heidelberg) France and the low countries (Holland and Belgium).

De Bres had no category for a modern evangelical church which may preach the gospel, contend for justification by imputed righteousness and then act like the very mention of the “s” word (sacrament) is to embrace Romanism. Since Guido De Bres was put to death for celebrating the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper to Reformed congregations,<sup>1</sup> he’d be absolutely mystified that anyone could act as though one’s view of the sacraments was a matter of indifference. Rome wasn’t indifferent about the sacraments, and historically neither were Protestants, many of whom thought these matters worth dying for. Luther and Zwingli agreed on fourteen points of doctrine at the Marburg Colloquy in 1529, including the doctrine of justification, *sola fide*. But they disagreed about the Lord’s Supper and the emerging Protestant movement was divided from that time on into Reformed and Lutheran factions, each denying that the other was a true church. This was and should remain an important discussion despite the indifference of our evangelical friends and despite the sad division this subject has caused in the past.

While De Bres would be mystified (and correctly so) with the state of modern American religion, we must approach this topic fully aware that not only is the subject of the marks of a true church itself controversial (Christians disagree among themselves as to what constitute these marks and which church has them, such as the 450 year-old debate between the Reformed and Lutherans), but the very thought that someone would dare claim that their church is a true church and declare that yours is not, is utterly offensive to us. Our contemporaries refuse to see this matter in an objective sense. What is a church’s doctrine? Do they put what they believe into practice? Instead, our contemporaries see this matter in a subjective way based on feeling and emotion. If the people at such and such a church “love Jesus,” and if that church is doing good things how can anyone dare say that such a church is not a true church? Our contemporaries are shocked that Reformed Christians would even consider that such a place might be a false church. To say so is to be mean and divisive.

But despite the difficulties we must make such judgments, although we must do so with as much charity as is possible. If it is true that all those who profess faith in Jesus Christ must join with a local congregation of like-minded believers and then submit to the yoke of Christ, how can we tell which church is like-minded and faithful to the gospel and administers the sacraments according to the word of God? Do we ask ourselves if the people in a church love Jesus and if the church does good things? Or rather do we look to see whether or not the church preaches the gospel, administers the sacraments as

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<sup>1</sup> Schaff, Creeds of Christendom, 1.504.

commanded in Scripture and is willing to defend these things through disciplining its members who teach against this doctrine, or who by their lives, demonstrate that they really don't believe the doctrine taught by the church. The marks of the church are objective (we can see them clearly). These marks do not stem from the piety and sincerity of those who attend (which we cannot determine).

Here is where people get confused. A church can be a true church—preach the gospel, administer the sacraments and discipline its members—yet still have sinful members and non-Christians within its midst (people who profess the truth, but who don't believe the gospel). We can think of groups of Christians who call themselves a church, who assemble for worship and to serve Christ, and yet, do not possess the marks of a true church. Such a group may include many people who are truly Christians. Therefore, the discussion as to whether or not a congregation is a true church or whether it has some of the marks of a false church) does not at all imply that all people who attend such a church are not Christians.

But this does remind us of the necessity for all those who confess a common faith with us to join a church where the marks of a true church are present. The church down the street from you may be filled with people who are truly Christians. But if that church does not believe in justification through an imputed righteousness received by faith alone and excludes the children of its members from the blessings of the covenant by denying infant baptism, we cannot consider such a place to be a “true church.” Again, we are not saying that all of the people who attend this church are not Christians. But those who believe as we do are duly bound to leave such a congregation, peaceably and humbly, of course, but necessarily. This is never an easy thing to do, as many of you can attest.

In order to most effectively cover this subject, our confession first discusses the marks of a true church, then takes up the subject of the marks of those who belong to the true church, before concluding with a discussion of the marks of the false church.<sup>2</sup>

With these things in mind, how do we determine a true church from a false one? Article Twenty-Nine opens with a discussion of the marks of a true church.

Our confession states, “We believe that we ought to discern diligently and very carefully, by the Word of God, what is the true church—for all sects in the world today claim for themselves the name of “the church.” We are not speaking here of the company of hypocrites who are mixed among the good in the church and who nonetheless are not part of it, even though they are physically there. But we are speaking of distinguishing the body and fellowship of the true church from all sects that call themselves “the church.”” This brings us to the heart of the matter. The true church is faithful to the teaching of the Word of God (defined more specifically momentarily) while the false church is not faithful to the Word of God. While there are sincere people who are truly deceived, the false church is usually characterized by either indifference to the Word of God or by the addition of other authorities to the Word of God.

This means that denominational labels, while useful and important, are no sure guide to whether or not a church is a true church. There can be false churches within denominations which as a whole are confessional and faithful to the Word of God. There can be true churches (congregations) within denominations which are apostate. Then, there is the fact that there are denominations which are historically Reformed and officially subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity (or the Westminster Standards), but show no evidence (or interest) in being Reformed—if you go by what is proclaimed from

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<sup>2</sup> Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 218.

the pulpit and that doctrine which is held by church officers and members. It is not enough to say, “oh yeah we believe that,” when the only copy of the church’s doctrinal standards is locked away in a file cabinet (or buried in the back of the hymnal) where no one has looked at them in years. We are talking about a church (or congregation’s) current practice. If, for instance, through its official decisions, a denomination embraces doctrines and practices which are positively unbiblical and reflect the marks of a false church, congregations which are true churches are obligated to leave the larger denomination. This too is very painful as many of you know first hand.

It is important to notice that our confession acknowledges the presence of hypocrites in a true church. In Romans 9:6, Paul reminds us that not all Israel is Israel. In Matthew 13, Jesus speaks of the wheat and the tares growing up side by side, and Jesus takes to himself the task of bringing down judgment upon all those who outwardly profess the truth, but who have never trusted in his death and righteousness. The presence of hypocrites does not make a true church a false church when it otherwise possesses the marks of a true church. The same holds true for a false church which has true believers in it. Their presence does not make a false church a true one. Thus the marks of a true church are objective and visible and do not depend upon the subjective state of church members, but rather upon how faithful a church is to the teaching of Holy Scripture.

What are those things which indicate that a church is in fact a true church? Our confession puts it as follows: “The true church can be recognized if it has the following marks: The church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel; it makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them; it practices church discipline for correcting faults. In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and holding Jesus Christ as the only Head. By these marks one can be assured of recognizing the true church—and no one ought to be separated from it.”

The first mark of a true church is the pure preaching of the gospel. This is the foundation for everything else.<sup>3</sup> Get this one wrong and nothing else matters! If this mark is not present then a church cannot possess any of the other marks (since, for example, the sacraments draw their efficacy from the gospel, not from the church or the minister). The pure preaching of the gospel entails what Paul calls the public placarding of Christ (Galatians 3:1). It involves the faithful proclamation of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ on behalf of sinners as defined in 1 Corinthians 15:1-8. To preach the gospel is to speak of God reconciling sinners to himself in the person of his Son (Romans 5:8-11; 2 Corinthians 5:18-21). It is to proclaim that through the cross, God manifests his love and his justice, satisfying his just anger toward people who deserve his wrath (Romans 3:20-25). According to Romans 10:14-17, faith comes about through the hearing of the proclamation of that gospel. The pure preaching of the gospel involves very specific content: proclaiming Christ’s saving work for sinners through his active and passive obedience, his death and resurrection. To talk about Jesus in some vague way in a sermon is not preaching the gospel!

The second mark is the “pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them.” At the time when our confession was written, this point was vital since both Rome and the Anabaptists had very unbiblical views of the sacraments. Rome taught there were seven sacraments: baptism, the mass, penance, marriage, anointing of the sick (extreme unction), confirmation, and holy orders, coupled to all

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<sup>3</sup> Beets never defines the gospel in this narrow sense and speaks only of the need to be taught according to the truth of God’s word. See Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 219.

of the unbiblical ceremonies and pronouncements which accompany them. The Bible teaches only two sacraments—baptism and the Lord’s Supper.<sup>4</sup> And then there were the Anabaptists, who while having no official view on the Lord’s Supper tended to regard it as a mere memorial. The real issue with the Anabaptists was the rejection of the universal practice of the church for its first fifteen hundred years, the baptism of the children of believers. Since the sacraments are so important, our confession devotes three articles to them and we will cover these matters in some detail later on.

The third mark of a true church is that “it practices church discipline for correcting faults.” The critical biblical text in this regard is Matthew 18:15-17: *“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 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.”* Our Lord establishes both the need and procedure for us to deal with our disputes, in which the highest court of appeal is the church. In 1 Corinthians 5:4-5, Paul speaks of excommunicating professing believers whose unrepentant sin brings scandal upon the church. In 1 Corinthians 5:13, Paul commands the Corinthian church to expel a wicked man from their midst—a man who had taken his step-mother as his own. To ignore such behavior and not deal with it by removing the offending party, is to risk bringing down God’s judgment upon the entire assembly. Like church membership, church discipline is also not an option.

While the Reformed have been divided about whether or not church discipline is a mark of the essence of the church (an undisciplined church is not a church), or of the well-being of church (an undisciplined church is a sick church), all Reformed theologians and confessions have agreed about the importance of church discipline in distinguishing it from a false church—false churches do not care about discipline. This too is an important subject in its own right and is the subject of Article Thirty-Two.

Since these things are so essential in determining whether a church is a true church, our confession summarizes that matter by stating that “in short, [the true church] governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and holding Jesus Christ as the only Head. By these marks one can be assured of recognizing the true church—and no one ought to be separated from it.” Since the head of the church is Jesus Christ, we must submit to him, preach his gospel, administer the sacraments as he commanded and discipline unruly persons within our midst. When we do so, we accomplish three very important things. (1) The presence of these marks gives every believer a standard to test whether or not a given church is a true church, (2) they give us an ideal to strive for in our own churches and (3) they give us a foundation to establish relationships with other churches (as in a denomination) and with other denominations (i.e. other Reformed and Presbyterian denominations) who believe most, if not all, of those things which we believe and confess.<sup>5</sup>

This brings us to a brief discussion of the marks of the members of Christ’s church. Our confession speaks of these marks of the members of the true church as follows. “As for those who are of the church, we can recognize them by the distinguishing marks of Christians: namely by faith, and by their fleeing from sin and pursuing righteousness, once they have received the one and only Savior, Jesus Christ. They love the true God and their neighbors, without turning to the right or left, and they crucify the flesh and

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<sup>4</sup> Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 220.

<sup>5</sup> Beets, the Reformed Confession Explained, 221.

its works. Though great weakness remains in them, they fight against it by the Spirit all the days of their lives, appealing constantly to the blood, suffering, death, and obedience of the Lord Jesus, in whom they have forgiveness of their sins, through faith in him.” Here, the focus falls upon how we determine whether or not someone is a true believer, and therefore, part of the invisible church as well as the visible church. This is how we weed out, as best we can, those hypocrites mentioned earlier. The key is simply this, “is a person’s behavior consistent with what they profess to believe?” Hypocrites are those who for a time profess to believe in Jesus Christ, but who really do not.

The first thing we look for is a personal profession of faith in Jesus Christ. Earlier in our series we made mention of the absolute necessity to believe in Jesus and confess him as Lord, quoting Paul’s words in Romans 10:9-10, “*because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.*” But our confession of faith cannot be separated from our conduct. This is why Paul states in 2 Timothy 2:19, “*But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: ‘The Lord knows those who are his,’ and, ‘Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.’*” We cannot that profess Jesus as Lord and then live like pagans. Those who do so, must become the recipients of church discipline.

As Paul tells us in Galatians 5:6, justifying faith expresses itself in love for neighbor. That same act of faith which justifies the wicked also begins the life-long process of sanctification which includes the production of the fruit of the Spirit, the continual weakening of the *habitus* of indwelling sin, as well as the continual strengthening of the new nature. Those who are truly Christ’s will struggle with sin until they die, but in the mist of the struggle will continue to look to Christ for salvation—not to their own righteousness, good works, or merit. This, of course, is what Paul teaches us in Romans 7:14-25. This is why Reformed churches require a profession of faith in Jesus Christ for admittance into his church as well as explaining why we must discipline those whose behavior does not match their profession of faith. A true church requires these things. A false church doesn’t care much about them.

Finally, we address the marks of the false church. If the marks of a true church are easily seen—the faithful preaching of the gospel, the proper administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline—then the false church also can be easily recognized. “As for the false church, it assigns more authority to itself and its ordinances than to the Word of God; it does not want to subject itself to the yoke of Christ; it does not administer the sacraments as Christ commanded in his Word; it rather adds to them or subtracts from them as it pleases; it bases itself on men, more than on Jesus Christ; it persecutes those who live holy lives according to the Word of God and who rebuke it for its faults, greed, and idolatry.” These words are clearly aimed at the Roman church, which, at the time our confession was written, was ordering Reformed Christians in France and Holland to be put to death. But these marks of the false church are not limited to Rome. They certainly apply to all cults and sects (which spring from Christian roots), and they apply to virtually all mainline Protestant denominations (but not necessarily to all the congregations within them). Just as some churches may have only one mark of a true church, so too, many churches may manifest one or more (if not all) of the marks of the false church. This is often a matter of degrees.

Throughout the New Testament, we find repeated warnings about false teachers, false doctrine, lazy and disobedient church members, and even the possibility of persecution by the state. There is also a direct warning from Jesus Christ about the possibility of true churches becoming false churches. In Exodus 25, we read of the importance of the construction of a golden lampstand to be placed in the tabernacle opposite the table. We may wonder why was God so concerned about the furnishings of the temple.

This is because the golden lampstands are intended to point the people of Israel to God's Spirit being present with them throughout their journey through the wilderness. In Revelation 1:9-20, we discover that the lampstands constructed for the tabernacle now reappear in John's vision as symbolic of Christ's presence with his church in the power of the Holy Spirit. When John is given a vision of Jesus in all his resurrected and ascended glory, he is walking among seven golden lampstands, symbolic of the seven churches mentioned in chapters 2-3 of Revelation. What was the covenant curse threatened to come upon the church in Ephesus? That Jesus would remove his lampstand—and therefore his blessing and the power of the Holy Spirit.

The point is to remind us that a true church can lose Christ's blessing by abandoning those things mentioned in our confession—the preaching of the word, the administration of the sacraments and discipline. While the Ephesians were commended for contending for the truth, the congregation had become a place of strife and contention. The members of the church failed to do those things they did at the beginning. Failure to repent would result in curse—the removal of the lampstand, symbolic of Christ's blessing and the power of the Holy Spirit. A church which loses its lampstand, loses its ability to serve as a witness of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the unbelieving world.

Such a church will soon lose the marks of a true church and will eventually begin to reflect the marks of a false church as mentioned in our confession. Such a church will assign more authority to itself than to God's word—accepting current cultural norms which the Bible clearly forbids, i.e., gay marriage, or practicing homosexuals as clergy. It will stop preaching the gospel, because to do so might offend its members, many of whom may not believe the gospel. It will not longer administer the sacraments as it should and invent its own—as is the case with Rome, but also true of American churches with the altar call and baby dedication. It will refuse to submit to Christ and begin to persecute those who do—how many of who have received the left foot of fellowship, or know someone who has, because they embrace Reformed distinctives? Eventually, every church which loses the marks of a true church will become filled with sin, greed and idolatry. And it will hate the true church—perhaps even more than non-Christians hate the true church. No Reformed denomination or congregation is immune from this either.

While this discussion is never easy, it is a necessity. Because the marks of both true and false churches are objective and easily determined, our confession concludes, “These two churches are easy to recognize and thus to distinguish from each other.” Does a church faithfully preach the gospel as the saving work of Jesus Christ on behalf of sinners? Are the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper administered as God commands in his word? Are unruly and unrepentant members of the church disciplined? If the answer to these questions is “yes,” then, you have a true church, and it is easily recognized! And such a church is the visible manifestation of Christ's invisible body. It is that place where we join with others of like mind, together under the yoke of Jesus Christ, one in heart, mind, purpose and faith. Amen.