

# Trinity Presbyterian Core Group

## Lesson 1: What is a church?

### Intro

- Back during the Reformation, Protestants sought long and hard to understand what made a church legitimate. They cared deeply about the church and did n't want to leave the Roman Catholic Church if indeed it was legitimate.
- Unlike today, they were not out to start their *own* new thing *their* way.
- So in trying to understand what made a church legitimate, they shared Catholicism's claim that a legitimate church should be "apostolic", i.e. should be a part of what God started through His Apostles.
- Rome claimed that they were the true apostolic church because they could trace their origins back further. However, the Protestants rightly understood that what makes a church "apostolic" is that it faithfully teaches what the apostles/the Scriptures teach. Thus a legitimate church is one that conforms to what God commands Churches to do.
- What then are the marks of this true or legitimate church?
- The **Belgic Confession** (1561) helpfully summarizes the Scripture here:

#### **Article 29:**

The marks, by which the true Church is known, are these: if the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if she maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin: in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto corrected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church. Hereby the true Church may certainly be known from which no man has a right to separate himself.

- This does NOT mean that churches must be perfect in order to qualify! But it does helpfully reflect the key factors that Jesus focused on when He commissioned the Apostles and all Christians to build His Church:  

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."
- So Christ is King of the church and He makes churches legitimate by the power of the Spirit as long as they abide by His Word.

- Churches that reject the Word are in danger of losing the Holy Spirit's power:

**Rev 2:4-5**

You have forsaken your first love: Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.

- **Do not** hear this as saying that we are *saved* by how well we obey, and that if we do not perform, that God will remove His Spirit from our hearts!
  - o This is describing what makes a church a legitimate church vs. a group of people gathering together calling themselves a church. Such a group could in fact be full of believers, but what they would be doing is less than what it takes to be a true church.
  - o Thus they themselves could be saved but they would be gathering without a lampstand in their midst (the Holy Spirit's power).
- So a legitimate or true church is one that preaches the Gospel, administers the sacraments, and exercises proper church authority (the three aspects of the great Commission).
- So we will focus this week on the first mark of a true church: preaching the Gospel.

**God feeds us by sending His Spirit to give us Christ through the Word**

- Why do we even need feeding at all? Looking at the broad evangelical scene it often appears as though the need for food is not recognized. We are often simply called to action without a real recognition that we are people in dire need of the continual power of the Gospel in our lives.
- Are Christians on a Pilgrimage or at a Party?
  - o The current paradigm of evangelicalism does not often focus on our need for reminders of God's grace (usually referred to as The Means of Grace)
  - o But Scripture says that our situation is very similar to Israel's wandering in the desert: what kept them alive was the Bread from Heaven and the Water from Rock. **(1 Cor 10:1-6)**
- Today's descriptions of the purpose of the Bible [i.e. road map for life; a love letter from God to you; rules to live by, etc.] often turn it into anything but the food that we need.
- *None of these recognizes the Bible's express purpose of telling the story of redemption*
- Christ Himself showed what the Scripture are ultimately about:

**John 5:39-40**

<sup>39</sup> You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. **These are the Scriptures that testify about me,** <sup>40</sup> yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

- So not only do the Scriptures ultimately point to Him, but they transform us because the Spirit is bound to the Word and changes us with the power of Christ's finished work.
- Christ explained this mysterious and wonderful bond between the Spirit and the Word when He said:

**John 6:63-65**

<sup>63</sup> The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The **words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.** <sup>64</sup> Yet there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. <sup>65</sup> He went on to say, "This is why I told you that **no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him.**"

- And Paul explained that the Holy Spirit is not only the originator of, but also the guarantor of Scripture's transforming power:

**2Tim 3:16-17**

<sup>16</sup> All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

- This is what the Westminster Standards summarize about the power of Scripture in conforming us to Christ by the power of the Spirit:

**Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 155**

Q. How is the word made effectual to salvation?

A. The spirit of God makes the reading, **but especially the preaching of the word** an effectual means of enlightening,(1) convincing, and humbling sinners;(2) of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ;(3) of conforming them to his image,(4) and subduing them to his will;(5) of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions;(6) of building them up in grace,(7) and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation.(8)

**The Spirit and the Preaching of the Word**

- Paul illustrates the necessity of the Word in bringing people to faith:

**Rom 10:13-17**

"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." <sup>14</sup> How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? **And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?** <sup>15</sup> And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" <sup>16</sup> But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" <sup>17</sup>

Consequently, **faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.**

- In verse 14 the “of” should be stricken: “And how can they believe in the one ~~of~~ whom they have not heard?”
- This should instead be translated, as the *NASB* does, “How will they believe in Him **whom** they have not heard?”<sup>1</sup>
- When this is done properly, we see that the next question involves a huge implication: **And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?**
- What is the implication? That when they hear the preacher, they are hearing God because the Holy Spirit accompanies and empowers the Word. Thus, when a preacher preaches biblically (and *only* then), His words should be taken as God’s words.

#### **Ephesians 2:15-18**

His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace,<sup>16</sup> and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.<sup>17</sup> *He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.*<sup>18</sup> For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

- Paul is here speaking to Ephesians who Christ most certainly did not come and preach to literally, but did in fact do so through Paul and the others who preached to them.

#### **Calvin on Eph 2:17**

We too speak as if Christ himself exhorted you by us. (Corinthians 5:20) The faith of the gospel would be weak indeed, were we to look no higher than to men. Its whole authority is derived from viewing men as God’s instruments, and hearing Christ speak to us by their mouth.<sup>2</sup>

- We see a similar point made in Haggai ch. 1; though God’s word came through a messenger, the people properly received it as from God and the text refers to the *prophet’s* words as “the voice of the LORD.”

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<sup>1</sup> pw/j de. pisteu,swsin ou- ouvk h;kousan The genitive ou- here is not rendered “of” except in poetry. See *Expositor’s Greek New Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (Hendrickson, 2002), 673; see also James Dunn, *Romans 9-16, Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 38 b (Waco, TX: Word, 1988), 620; C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans: vol. II, International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 534; Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans: New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 663; Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 389-390; Thomas Schreiner, *Romans: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 565; John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1947), 10:14.

<sup>2</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 2:17.

**Hag 1:3-5, 12**

<sup>3</sup> Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: <sup>4</sup> "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?" <sup>5</sup> Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways...." <sup>12</sup> Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, **and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the LORD their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the LORD their God had sent him.** And the people feared the LORD.

- Luther summarizes this idea quite well:

**Martin Luther**

[T]o be taught by God Himself means to heed the Word of Christ, to learn from Him, and then to feel convinced that it is God's Word. This is hearing God Himself. And even though You were to hear an ass speaking, as Balaam did (Num. 22:28), it would nonetheless be God's Word. Thus when you hear a sermon by St. Paul or by me, you hear God the Father Himself. And yet you do not become my pupil but the Father's, for it is not I who is speaking; it is the Father. Nor am I your schoolmaster; but we both, you and I, have one Schoolmaster and Teacher, the Father, who instructs us. We both, pastor and listener, are only pupils; there is only this difference, that God is speaking to you through me. That is the glorious power of the divine Word, through which God Himself deals with us and speaks to us, and in which we hear God Himself.<sup>3</sup>

- This is a wonderfully encouraging blessing for us to hear. It is amazing that God has empowered His Word with His Spirit so that even when it is preached by fallible humans it does not lose one ounce of its power or authority, and is in fact the primary way in which He chooses to make us more like Christ.

**How Does the Word Feed Us? By pointing us to Christ's Finished Work**

- **Eph 3:14-19** states the paramount importance of the Spirit's ministry in helping us understand "how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ."
- Thus if this is God's design for us, then we need to see that preaching must have this same focus.
- He even summarized the entire message of the Scripture for us:

**Luke 24:44-47**

<sup>44</sup> He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." <sup>45</sup> Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. <sup>46</sup> He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, <sup>47</sup> and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Luther's Works*, vol. 23, ed. Jaroslave Pelikan (St Louis: Concordia, 1959), 97-98.

- **Calvin** explained well what proper preaching looks like:

*As often as we come to the sermon we are taught of the free promises of God, to show us that it is simply in His goodness and mercy that we must trust, that we must not be founded upon our merits nor on anything that we can bring from our side, but God must stretch forth His hand to begin and accomplish all. And that (as Scripture shows us) is applied to us by our Lord Jesus Christ, so that we must seek Him entirely... All that is daily declared to us.<sup>4</sup>*

- We cannot afford to present the typical moralistic, self-help, quick fix versions of the preaching that are so popular today: God calls His Church to proclaim Christ crucified.

### **Bryan Chapell**

A message that merely advocates morality and compassion remains sub-Christian even if the preacher can prove that the Bible demands such behaviors. By ignoring the sinfulness of man that makes even our best works tainted before God and by neglecting the grace of God that makes obedience possible and acceptable, such messages necessarily subvert the Christian message. Christian preachers often do not recognize this impact of their words because they are simply recounting a behavior clearly specified in the text in front of them. But a message that even inadvertently teaches others that their works can win God's acceptance inevitably leads people away from the gospel.<sup>5</sup>

### **Jay Adams**

If you preach a sermon that would be acceptable to a member of a Jewish synagogue, or to a Unitarian congregation, there is something radically wrong with it. Preaching, when truly Christian, is distinctive. *And what makes it distinctive is the all-pervading essence of a saving and sanctifying Christ. Jesus Christ must be at the heart of every sermon you preach.* This is just as true of edificational preaching as it is of evangelistic preaching.<sup>6</sup>

### **T. David Gordon**

Such Christological preaching feeds the soul and builds faith. Faith is not built by preaching introspectively (constantly challenging people to question whether they *have* faith); faith is not built by preaching moralistically (which has exactly the opposite effect of focusing attention on the *self* rather than on Christ, in whom our faith is placed); faith is not built by joining the culture wars and taking potshots at what is wrong with our culture. Faith is built by careful, thorough exposition of the person, character, and work of Christ.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Calvin, quoted in T.H.L. Parker, *The Oracles of God: An Introduction to the Preaching of John Calvin* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1947), 81 (emphasis mine).

<sup>5</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Christ – Centered Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 267-268.

<sup>6</sup> Jay Adams, *Preaching and Purpose* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1982), 147.

<sup>7</sup> T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Preach* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 75-76. (emphasis original)

- This does not mean that all we can ever preach about is the same message about Jesus. Instead it means that we need to see all of Scripture in light of what he has done and understand the ways in which the Bible points us to Christ and His work for us.

#### **T. David Gordon**

Now, since Christ rescues us from both the guilt and the power of sin, one aspect of his work is the work of sanctification, whereby he renews us into the image of God and conforms us to his own likeness.... But it is never appropriate, in my estimation, for one word of moral counsel ever to proceed from a Christian pulpit that is not clearly, in its context, *redemptive*. That is, even when the faithful exposition of particular texts requires some explanation of aspects of our behavior, it is always to be done in a manner that the hearer perceives such commended behavior to be itself a matter of being rescued from the power of sin through the grace of Christ. When properly done, the hearer longs to be rescued from that depravity from which no sinner can rescue himself; and the hearer rejoices to know that a kind and gracious God is both willing and able to begin that rescue, which will be completed in glorification.<sup>8</sup>

### **Conclusion**

- God knows how badly we need to hear of His love for us in Christ because the world the flesh and the devil are all against us at every turn. So God has commissioned His Church to first and foremost preach Christ to the believer and unbeliever alike. And through this He is accomplishing His plan to finally undo all that Satan put in motion back at in the Garden.
- Thus as an outpost of Christ's Church, we must recognize our own need for the Gospel and make sure that we do not fall for the myriad imposters that claim to offer more important or more fulfilling alternatives. They only cause us to starve.

#### **Machen**

There must be somewhere groups of redeemed men and women who can gather together humbly in the name of Christ, to give thanks to Him for his unspeakable gift and to worship the Father through Him. Such groups alone can satisfy the needs of the soul. At the present time, there is one longing of the human heart which is often forgotten — it is the deep, pathetic longing of the Christian for fellowship with his brethren. One hears much, it is true, about Christian union and harmony and co-operation. But the union that is meant is often a union with the world against the Lord, or at best a forced union of machinery and tyrannical committees. How different is the true unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace! Sometimes, it is true, the longing for Christian fellowship is satisfied. There are congregations, even in the present age of conflict, that are really gathered around the table of the crucified Lord; there are pastors that are pastors indeed. But such congregations, in many cities, are difficult to find. Weary with the conflicts of the world, one goes into the Church to seek refreshment for the soul. And what does one find? Alas, too often, one finds only the turmoil of the world. The preacher comes forward, not out of a secret place of meditation and power,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 70-71. (emphasis added)

not with the authority of God's Word permeating his message, not with human wisdom pushed far into the background by the glory of the Cross, but with human opinions about the social problems of the hour or easy solutions of the vast problem of sin...Thus the warfare of the world has entered even into the house of God. And sad indeed is the heart of the man who has come seeking peace.

Is there no refuge from strife? Is there no place of refreshing where a man can prepare for the battle of life? Is there no place where two or three can gather in Jesus' name, to forget for the moment all those things that divide nation from nation and race from race, to forget human pride, to forget the passions of war, to forget the puzzling problems of industrial strife, and to unite in overflowing gratitude at the foot of the Cross? If there be such a place, then that is the house of God and that the gate of heaven. And from under the threshold of that house will go forth a river that will revive the weary world.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923) 180-181.