

Marks of the True Church

Marks of the True Church

By

K. F. T. Matrunola

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Publisher's Note: The Gospel Standard Trust issues this book with the hope that it might be spiritually profitable. Although we only issue books we feel set forth a Scriptural standard, there will be differences in opinion and interpretation, and the most gracious of men still have to say, "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect." We trust our readers will prayerfully "prove all things" and "hold fast that which is good," whilst bearing in meekness with any imperfections.

Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Publisher's Foreword..... | 7 |
| Introduction | 11 |
| How to Discern the True Church..... | 15 |
| 1. Regenerate Membership..... | 23 |
| 2. Baptised Membership | 37 |
| 3. The Lord's Supper..... | 57 |
| 4. Church Discipline..... | 75 |
| 5. Independence of the Local Church | 95 |
| 6. Free from Church and State..... | 115 |
| 7. A Despised Remnant | 131 |
| 8. Priesthood of all Believers | 149 |
| 9. Ministers by God's Appointment..... | 165 |
| 10. Ministers Supported Voluntarily by the Churches | 179 |
| 11. Preaching of the Gospel in the World..... | 193 |
| 12. Only Recognised Society | 213 |
| Conclusion | 217 |

Publisher's Foreword

This book is a valuable and notable addition to the books published by Gospel Standard Trust Publications.

Firstly, in terms of its subject: the church. The bride of Christ. Christ's jewels. The doctrine of the church should rank very highly in our esteem. It should be an important question with all – am I a member of the church? Salvation is to be united to Christ. To know the loving communion of the church is to assure ourselves that we are in Christ. If we love Christ, we will want to serve and honour him in, and as part of, the church. Because Christ and his church are one, we can legitimately say: there is no safety outside the church! That means it is essential that we know what the church is, and what Christ has ordained for the church. Too many take these things lightly today and think they are secondary issues. A study of church history will soon show that many godly people of past generations have given their lives or suffered the loss of many possessions for this doctrine. May we hold it as dearly today. The publishers pray that this book will be blessed of God to stir many up to again lay hold on this precious doctrine.

Secondly, in terms of its author: Mr Matrunola was not brought up in a Strict Baptist home. When he was first converted, he joined the Baptist Union of Scotland, with all its education, committees, and denominationalism. The Lord slowly separated him from all that. He came from a background where the doctrines of grace were

MARKS OF THE TRUE CHURCH

not prized, and experimental preaching was virtually unknown. The Lord led him to embrace these things, owned and blessed by the Spirit, and he valued them highly. This spiritual journey cost him dearly – he had to leave his home country and pastorate. As a consequence, Mr Matrunola spoke with conviction and a true zeal for New Testament church order. Not the mere conviction of intellectual learning, but the conviction of the Spirit’s teaching, and of principles founded on the unassailable foundation of the Word of God. As a consequence, this book is forthright; it has a weight of authority; it is clear. Mr Matrunola loved the truths he proclaimed and this warmth is easily discernible in the text. We desperately need such preaching and teaching today and pray that the Lord might yet bring forth fruit from Mr Matrunola’s life among the churches.

This book arose from a series of sermons at Salem Chapel, Portsmouth, during the closing years of Mr Matrunola’s life. It is evident that he carried a burden for the church there, desiring to see the members well established in the truth, and arming them to holdfast the doctrine of the church when he would be gathered into glory. It is the mark of a good pastor that this should have been so. Jesus’ final sermon in the Upper Room very much emphasises the doctrine of the church – both its union (love to the brethren), its witness (many wonderful works, that the world might believe) and its safety (Father keep them). May it be a concern to all pastors in the churches that their flocks might be well established in these same truths before they are called from their scene of labours.

Unusually perhaps, these sermons were suggested by Mr Matrunola’s reading of the *History of the Church of God from the*

PUBLISHER'S FOREWORD

Creation to A.D. 1885; including especially the history of the Kehukee Primitive Baptist Association. This work was written by a father and son team, Elders Cushing Biggs Hassell and Sylvester Hassell. It was first published in the USA in 1886. The book is fascinating and it even includes in its massive scope a brief history of the Gospel Standard Baptists. However, the Primitive Baptists hold various views that we would not subscribe to. Mr Matrunola had the gift of reading widely with discretion and discernment. His reference to the book in these sermons, and the publication of them by Gospel Standard Trust Publications, is by no means an endorsement of the Hassells' book or the teaching of the Primitive Baptists, although it must be admitted that the chapter which influenced these sermons (providing the titles for each sermon) is an excellent summary of the doctrine of the church.

We would like to thank Mr Matrunola's family for the work they have expended on preparing these sermons for publication at our request. We warmly commend the book to all readers. May the Lord's blessing rest upon it.

Matthew J. Hyde,
Publications manager,
September, 2023

MARKS OF THE TRUE CHURCH

Introduction

This short series of twelve sermons was delivered in the early part of 1993 at Salem Chapel, Portsmouth, after Mr Matrunola had preached from Colossians chapter 1, “He (Christ) is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the pre-eminence,” (Colossians 1: 18). This led to a desire on Mr Matrunola’s part to preach on the subject of the church, basing his remarks on the twelve marks or notes of the apostolic church. He believed this little series was one of the most significant series on the doctrine of the church that he had ever preached. And that it was the fruit, beginning to be gleaned, of thirty years of study of the word and the experience of these things. He believed that everything which he put forth could be substantiated from the word of God and that he was putting forth the definitive position which was truly embraced and maintained in the cause at Salem, Portsmouth. Mr Matrunola introduced these sermons as follows.

We are utterly convinced that 20th century churches should be reproducing likeness to the apostolic churches. We do not believe that the church, chameleon like, takes on the colour of the day and age in which it is found: that it was one church in the day of the apostles, another church in the day of Constantine and the Roman Empire and another church in the present day. There is no lustre

MARKS OF THE TRUE CHURCH

in the professing church in these evil days. The glory has largely departed from the professing church of God in the earth: 'Ichabod,' is written over it! The wonder is, that it is not also written over us! And it can only be that we know the continuing presence of the Lord and his favour, because we seek to reproduce a likeness to the pattern of things which he established in the beginning. And for that we must go to the scriptures. We glibly talk of the scriptures as our rule of faith, but it means nothing except we act upon it! Very few people in these days seem willing to make a stand against error and separate from churches which are not acting according to scriptural principles. When nothing is done to bring in biblical change and spiritual appointments, they should leave that church and separate from it. In that sense I am very much a dissenter – a separatist. We are to judge in matters of truth and righteousness.

What was the body, the church, like in the days of the apostles: in the first Christian century? There was a spiritual kingdom set up by Christ and planted through the apostles and – despite the hostility of the Jews (who were mainly in unbelief); and despite the presence of innumerable false religions in the earth (as there were in that day); and despite the secular power of Caesar (which was utterly contrary to the gospel); and despite the gross sinfulness and gross immorality of the first century world – in the space of 70 years or so, the gospel was preached and churches were found in all parts of the Roman world. This was done by the power of the Holy Spirit of God according to the prophet Zechariah, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit saith the Lord of hosts." (Zechariah 4:6)

And when we are living in a day when the world is full of innumerable false religions (as it is!); and when there is such

immorality as we see all around us; and when there is increasingly secular state authority, we are not to feel that the day is too hard! It was just such a day when these early churches were planted and when first the apostolic preaching sounded forth. God did a work in that day and God is doing a work in this day: and there is none that can prevent that work from being done. We are not to be defeated before we start. We are not to be ashamed of the gospel and the things that we believe. We have the truth. And we are those, then, that are dedicated to this principle, that the New Testament churches, the apostolic churches (as we see them in the Acts of the Apostles and in other parts of the New Testament), are the standard and the norm: this is the pattern until the Lord come again. What we read in Acts chapter 2, “Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers,” (Acts 2:41-42) we believe to be the abiding principle.

There are, however, many who do not believe that. You would not find that many of the denominations in our land today believe that. They would say that the Bible is a historical document, but we are living in a day when we have got to bring in new ideas and new theories and we have got to be modern and contemporary. We are not to be moulded by these ancient things! Such a view is held in many places; and yet it is utterly false and churches which hold to that principle are not really churches at all. The only true churches are churches which hold to the authority of scripture and are determined, as they understand it, to practise these things. We believe – and sometimes wonder why it should be so, but we do –

MARKS OF THE TRUE CHURCH

that it has been in the goodness of God that we have been preserved here in this way. We are not perfect as a people; we are those, no doubt, that have much still to learn and we must continually apply the reforming principle; the church must always be under the process of reformation by scripture. But we do believe that this is the position that we take. We say, therefore, that that church – even if it is only half a dozen people – is a true church before God, which seeks to be ordered in doctrine and practice by scripture.

We have kept the sermonic form in publishing these sermons. At the beginning of each new sermon Mr Matrunola briefly recapitulated the burden for preaching on this subject, and the twelve marks he was dealing with. We have removed these introductions to make the sermons more readable. Otherwise, the text is, as far as is consistent with readability, exactly as Mr Matrunola delivered it from the pulpit.

How to Discern the True Church

“He (Christ) is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the pre-eminence.” (Colossians 1:18)

Christ is the Head of the body the church. He is Head by pre-eminence. No angel is the head of the church, for as Hebrews tells us, “Unto the angels hath he not put in subjection the world to come, whereof we speak.” (Hebrews 2:5) No mere man, however he is styled, is the head of Christ’s church. No councils of men, however august or however influential, are the head of Christ’s church. Christ alone is Head. The Son of God has that headship by virtue of his pre-eminence: he is the eternal Son of God. Could we have a more glorious Head, than the eternal Son of the Father? Could we have a more suitable Head? The one who has taken over our indebtedness in the appointment of the covenants of grace and has paid the price of his own precious blood that we should be (not our own) but his! He who is exalted to God’s right hand, as the covenant mediator, is worthy. He is a fitting Head over his body, the church.

He, who is Head by pre-eminence, has, therefore, the right in all matters of government and rule. He has the right to make laws for his Zion. He it is that institutes the ordinances in his church. I mean by that not only the two ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s

MARKS OF THE TRUE CHURCH

Supper, but all the ordinances of worship. All that in the word of God, is clearly appointed to pertain to the worship which God desires from his people. The Head of the church has the right to see that this is practiced. He has the right to govern and rule. He is the one upon whose shoulder is the government and he will be the defence of his people. He is Head also by way of influence. We derive from Christ, the Head, as the body derives strength: just as there is the imparting of strength to the body which flows to every member, so there is that which flows to every spiritual member of the body, which is the church, from the great Head himself.

Christ, from whom all blessings flow,
Perfecting the church below;
Steadfast may we cleave to thee,
Love the mystic union be.

Move, and actuate and guide;
Various gifts to each divide;
Placed according to thy will
Let us all thy work fulfil

(Charles Wesley)

What do we mean by the body the church? The church is the assembly: in Greek the *'ekklesia,'* the called-out people of God: the elect from every nation. The church can be thought of as the universal church, "the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven." (Hebrews 12:23) And we think of the universal church being divided into the church triumphant and militant. The church triumphant, which are with Christ which is

far better; the church militant, which are still in this time state, in their various places and spheres, fighting the good fight of faith.

There is also the division of the universal militant church as *invisible*; because we never actually see the greater part of it. We believe that there are churches and congregations in other continents. Indeed, in this day of communications we hear more, I suppose, than many of our forefathers ever heard, concerning the work of God in many parts of the earth, but they are largely invisible to us, and will remain so. But there is also that division of the militant church which is the *visible*: that which we can see; the company of visible saints which God brings us into. And we are particularly thinking of the headship of Christ in the visible church. There is no question but that he is the Head of the triumphant church! He is also the Head of the whole number of the elect; there can be no debate about that! But there are some, who purport to be Christians, who are not so sure that he is the Head of the local assembly. There is not a whole string of little churches, there is but one church, but it is viewed in different aspects and different senses. And we are not to be those who are indifferent to – indeed we are not to be those that despise, as some do – the local assembly of Christ’s people. That is the body: and as the body is made up of many members, so the assemblies of the Lord, over which he is as Head, are made up of many members, but united to him.

Paul speaks in wonderful language concerning the church, which emphasises the dignity of it as, “the house of God, which is the church of the living God.” Could you speak more finely of the church than that? Surely, he is speaking of the church triumphant? No, he is not speaking of the church triumphant! Surely, he is

MARKS OF THE TRUE CHURCH

speaking then of the mystical number of the whole elect? No! Paul is speaking of the *local* assembly. He is writing to Timothy whom he has left at Ephesus, he is speaking of the assembly of Christians met in the city of Ephesus and the early part of this verse makes this unmistakably clear. He writes, “But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.” (1Timothy 3:15) I would say that it is a heresy which differentiates the universal from the local church, to the point that it makes two churches; and which differentiates the visible from the invisible, to the point that it makes it two churches. There is but *one* church over which Christ is the Head. And in these visible assemblies, *he is Head*. We are to seek that God will ever give us such a view of the local church.

The notes of the church

I want to bring before you certain of the marks of the visible church. What are the marks by which the visible church can be known? What are the *notae verae ecclesiae*, as the Reformers were wont to term it: the notes of a true church. If you come across the expression the notes of the church, in some older writings, it means the marks or the characteristics of the true church. And we are going to look at some of these notes.

The Church of Rome has its notes. It claims to be the church of antiquity, the church of universality, the church of apostolic succession, the church with power to work miracles upon the earth. But every one of these is not a note of a true church. And there are some of us that are not prepared even to allow the word ‘ekkklesia’

HOW TO DISCERN THE TRUE CHURCH

to be coupled with the word Rome. We do not regard it, in any respect, as a true church of Jesus Christ. Although some reformed men would do the very opposite, they would say that it may be an unreformed church, but it is still a true church, I would rather follow the apostle in 2 Thessalonians who speaks concerning the Roman church and its leader, “Whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, and with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish.” (2 Thessalonians 2:9-10) I cannot, therefore, conceive of it in any sense as a true church, but as the most gross apostasy and deceiver of countless souls. Thank God for the Reformation! And the Reformers’ notes of the true church are not these notes of Rome, every one of which is a counterfeit note. Rome does not have the antiquity of which it boasts. Those of us that are established on apostolic doctrine and practice, are those that are in a far greater antiquity than those that are in a counterfeit Roman church. It is not truly universal. It is not one in all places. There are as many divisions among it as one can imagine. There are those that even within its fold are resentful of the papacy and its authority over the congregations. It has not the oneness and the universality that it claims to possess. Its apostolic claims are vitiated. How can it be claiming an apostolic succession when it denies all the true apostles stood for? And that it should claim power to work miracles! The lying miracles of Rome have been legion over the centuries and even to this present day poor benighted souls, often in bodily weakness and extremity, make pilgrimages to some shrine that they might receive a so-called cure. And we say that these things are not marks of the power of God, but evidences of the working of Satan.

MARKS OF THE TRUE CHURCH

At the Reformation the notes of the true church were threefold: right doctrine, right ordinances and right discipline.

Right doctrine

The Reformers confessed the authority of the word of God, which is the source of all saving knowledge. They were concerned to go to scripture. That is the great theme of the Reformation. There were other great themes, such as the setting forth of justification – not by works as it had been taught so long to the people by Rome – but justification by faith alone in the Son of God. But the greatest of all discoveries at the time of the Reformation, and that from which all the other blessings derived, was the rediscovery of the authority of the word of God. It was the translation of the word of God from the original languages, in those days, and the invention of printing and the putting of these things into printed form so that men began to have the word of God in their own hands and were able to see what God’s word said, which worked more than anything else under God, by the Holy Spirit, the great work of reformation in the 16th century. There was right doctrine: they regarded the Scripture as inspired, infallible and the only rule of faith and practice.

Right ordinances

Not merely the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, but the appointments of Christ for his people according to scripture. Right worship: biblical worship. There was the concern for there to be duly appointed ministers and that there might be that life in the assemblies of the saints that was regulated by the appointments and the ordinances of God in his word.

Right discipline

Preventing errors, preventing those that taught error and dealing with those that were in error and that were immoral. Seeking that there might be a curative influence in the churches. Where there was disease, seeking that there might also be restorative measures that those might be reclaimed, if it be the will of God, who had fallen into serious defects of knowledge or practice.

So, there were right ordinances, right doctrine and right discipline. We can reduce these three to two: right doctrine and right discipline, because the ordinances follow from the doctrine and are to be administered by the discipline of the church. Right doctrine and right discipline in the church, the body over which Christ is Head.

Robert Murray M'Cheyne began his ministry in Dundee thinking that he went with one key in his ministerial office – the key of doctrine – but he soon came to see that he was entrusted with the two keys of doctrine and discipline. He said that the church must be both *taught* and *ruled* well. And those churches, he said, which are taught and ruled well, are the churches that will flourish best. And I wholly concur with M'Cheyne in that! There must be the use of these two keys, which belong to the very life and ethos of the church.

We seek these things to be important to us here in the testimony at Salem, Portsmouth. I do not think that there would be a Salem today (1993), if they had not been important nearly 200 years ago to those who commenced the work and to those who have continued the work. They were concerned for doctrine and for discipline. I think it is summed up in these two words on the notice

MARKS OF THE TRUE CHURCH

board, 'Strict and Particular.' 'Particular' refers to the distinctive doctrinal stand which this church takes and 'Strict' refers to the discipline that this church practices in respect to those that we admit to membership and especially to the Lord's Table. We are not ashamed of these things. They are there for people to read so that they may know what we believe and, if they do not know what they mean, we will be only too pleased to explain to them what we understand by these words.

It is, therefore, on these two notes of doctrine and discipline that we will look at the marks of the apostolic church. I have found to be unsurpassed the *History of the Church of God: from Creation to A.D. 1885*. This book was written by two Primitive Baptists in America: a father, C. B. Hassell, and his son, S. Hassell. They lived in North Carolina and the latter died in 1928. In this book they give twelve marks of the apostolic church. And it is from these heads (these marks) that I want to bring before you the basic and fundamental truths concerning the things which we believe and the practice which we follow; although I will seek to develop them in the way in which the Lord opens them up to me.

I am not saying that these are the only marks of apostolic churches by any means. But they are twelve great principles which, I believe, deserve our careful consideration and which must be maintained through all generations because they are based upon the word of God, "Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it." (Psalm 127:1) How we need clear views of these things!

1. Regenerate Membership

The first mark of the apostolic church is that we believe that the members of the church must give credible evidence of a (or *the*) work of grace (in that saving sense) in their hearts. There must be the evidence of conviction of sin and conversion to God in their hearts. Conversion to God means that, being so convicted of sin, they are brought to see Jesus Christ as the only Saviour, the Saviour that they need, without whom there is no hope for them and they are brought to saving repentance and to saving faith. They are not repenting and believing in order that they might be saved, but being regenerated, being saved all of grace, they are brought to repent and to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Born again of irresistible grace, they are brought to confess Jesus Christ. We are to look for such in membership. And the faith of those that are so brought to Jesus Christ will be the faith of God's elect. We are to look for that. Paul speaks of himself in the work of an apostle, as being in the faith of God's elect, "Paul, a servant of God, and an apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the faith of God's elect, and the acknowledging of the truth which is after godliness; in hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began." (Titus 1:1-2)

There is such a thing as the faith of God's elect. The apostles' doctrine, as it is termed in Acts chapter 2, "They continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers." (Acts 2:42-43) The apostles' doctrine will