HOW MANY MARKS?

What things mark of a true Church?

THREE REFORMATION VIEWS

In the period immediately prior to the Reformation it was fairly obvious that the church could be defined as an institution with the Pope as its head. By carefully ignoring the schismatics of the East and putting down dissent, the Church could plod along with this neat definition. However, for the churches that emerged from the Reformation there was a need to attempt a redefinition along biblical lines. This was prompted not only by failure of the Roman Church but also by the many heretical bodies that sprang up in the wake of the Reformation.

Most theologians agreed in the distinction between the visible and the invisible Church, recognising from the Scriptures that until the day of judgment there will always be wheat and tares in the field. Beyond this point there were significant differences not so much about what is desirable in a true Church as about what is essential.

Some took the view that the **only essential mark of a true Church** is the preaching of the pure gospel of Jesus Christ. Beza is sometimes cited as an advocate of this 'single mark' view.

Others added to this **a second mark**, namely the right administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. This, it would appear, was the line taken by Calvin. Of course, those who held to just one mark were not against the sacraments, rather they recognised them as good but not essential to the being of the Church.

Still others took the view that there is **a third essential mark** of a true church, the exercise of ecclesiastical discipline. Peter Martyr is sometimes cited as an example of these.

The fine line between these distinctions can be illustrated by the two-mark Calvin, writing in his *Institutes,* book IV xii 4: *Those who think that the church can stand for long without this bond of discipline are mistaken; unless by chance we can afford to omit that support which the Lord foresaw would be necessary for us*.
Calvin therefore clearly sees the necessity of discipline for the well-being of the Church but apparently was reluctant to make it part of the essence of the Church.

THE ANGLICAN POSITION

With regards to the Church of England, it is interesting to consider its foundational Articles. As readers will know Article XIX describes the Church using these terms: T*he pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly administered according to Christ's ordinance . . .*
Here are the first two marks but apparently not the third. In response some argue that discipline is implicit in the phrases 'pure Word' and 'duly administered'. This argument seems to me to stretch the meaning too far. But this is not the end of the story.

There is more to be found in the Book of Homilies. The 'Homily Concerning the Coming Down of the Holy Ghost and the Manifold Gifts of the Same' is traditionally linked to Bishop Jewel. In the second part of this Homily the nature of a true Church is very plainly spelt out:

> *The true church . . . hath always three notes or marks, whereby it is known: Pure and sound doctrine; The sacraments ministered according to Christ's holy institution; And the right use of ecclesiastical discipline. This description of the church is agreeable both to the Scriptures of God, and also to the doctrine of the ancient Fathers; so that none may justly find fault therewith.*

Since the Homilies in some sense interpret the Thirty Nine Articles, and since the Articles do not actually deny that discipline is a mark of the Church it is probably best to conclude that historically the Church of England holds that discipline is an essential mark of a true Church.
"The true church hath always three notes or marks" wrote Bishop Jewel

The sad fact is that all this is rather academic when we look at the present lax state of the Church of England. Whatever the position of the Articles or the Homilies there is little discipline exercised in the Church of England today. Though there is a Clergy Discipline Measure and various other things since the late 1800s discipline in the Church has not been along Biblical principles and Bishops as a whole have been unwilling to uphold the official doctrine of the church. It must not be forgotten that laws alone are unlikely to bring about any lasting good. What is needed is the recognition in the Church (and by individual believers therefore) that discipline is desirable, and essential, if we are to be faithful to the Lord.

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