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The Four Marks of the Church

Today and Tomorrow

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Introduction

A few years ago, I wrote a book about the church which I subdivided into historical periods.[1] For each period I considered the meaning of the four traditional marks of the church as we recite them in the Nicene Creed—unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. I pointed out that these basic principles, which have survived the test of time, and which are agreed by virtually all Christians, have been understood in quite different ways at different times by different groups of people. Today the legacy of this history is apparent in the many denominations that make up the world of Christendom. Each of them looks back to some past time when their particular ecclesiology was either dominant or else emerging in the face of opposition from what was then the establishment. To varying degrees everybody tries to ground their doctrine of the church on the Bible, but this can be frustrating, because the Scriptures often give us enough to justify our own positions but not enough to exclude others. For example, in 1 Cor 11 there is quite detailed information about the celebration of the LORD's Supper, but there are some surprising gaps. The Apostle Paul never

1. Bray, *The Church*.

mentions who should preside at it, and that has been a major bone of contention for centuries. The man who went on to say "Let all things be done decently and in order" would hardly have assumed that it would all just happen, but we have no idea who was in charge at Corinth![2]

I mention this because so much of what is written about ecclesiology is theoretical and idealistic, rather than a guide to what works in practice. People tend to expound what they think the church ought to be rather than describe what it actually is. Arguments for episcopacy, Presbyterianism or independency concentrate on their positive aspects and ignore the negative ones, making it difficult to choose which of them is best and almost impossible to combine them in the hope of retaining what is good about each of them and ignoring the rest.

It is not my intention to argue what I think the church should be, or be like. I have no desire to rake over past quarrels or to advocate a particular way forward to the exclusion of anything else. My aim is more modest than that. I want to look at the four classical marks of the church and examine where we stand in relation to them today. I then want to outline some of the problems that will need to be addressed under each heading, and challenge us to think how we might tackle them. History shows us that consensus will be difficult to achieve, and that well-meaning attempts to bring the church into line with Biblical teaching will probably do no more than produce a series of new denominations, each one claiming to be more faithful to the Word of God than the others. I do however want to peer into the future as far as we can and take a look at the challenges we all face, whatever our particular background or ecclesiastical allegiance might be.

Perfection is unattainable and the danger that we may find ourselves in a position that none of us wants is very real. When Oliver Cromwell invaded Scotland in 1650 he tried to avoid battle at Dunbar by asking the Scots, in the bowels of Christ as he put it, to consider that they might be mistaken. Of course, by that he meant that they should have the good sense to agree with him. Neither side was prepared to concede the possibility of error on their part or admit that their opponents might have something worthwhile to say, and so the issue was settled—temporarily and unsatisfactorily as it turned out—by force of arms. I hope that we can avoid that outcome today, and I believe that we shall do so if we can come to a common mind about where we are and humbly seek the LORD's help as we consider together how we might go forward from here. So let us begin.

2. 1 Cor 14:40.

Unity

We believe that the church is one. That is the first and most basic statement of ecclesiology that we have. The church is one because it is the body of Christ, and he became incarnate only once. The church is one because it is the bride of Christ, and he is not a polygamist. The church is one because, as the Apostle Paul told the Ephesians, there is only one LORD, one faith and one baptism.[3] Around the heavenly throne all Christians will be united in wonder, love, and praise. Jesus told his disciples that in his Father's house there are many mansions, but despite the jokes that occasionally circulate about this, nobody seriously thinks that we can seal ourselves off in one of those mansions and ignore whoever might be in the others. As the ancient theologian Origen observed many centuries ago, the ark of salvation may have three decks, just as Noah's ark did, but even if places on the upper deck are reserved for those who are especially close to Jesus, as Origen thought, the ship contains every kind of animal, and all will be brought safely to the other shore. Predestination is God's decision, not ours—those who are saved will all be washed by the blood of the one Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world, whose names are written in the one book of life.[4]

Those are the principles on which all Christians are agreed, but how far does it tally with the perception of most people in actual practice? On the one hand, at a time when Christianity seems to have ever less influence in its historic homelands and is under threat of persecution in various parts of the developing world, the sense and even the practice of unity across Christendom seems to be stronger than it has been for many centuries. On paper, our denominations preserve the memory of past conflicts, but with few exceptions, these play little part in the lives of ordinary Christians today. Institutions may find it hard to merge because their polities are different, and the vested interests of their personnel often stand in the way. Devotional practices, particularly those that distinguish Protestants from Roman Catholics or Eastern Orthodox, frequently diverge to the point where they divide people from one another and are barriers to practical unity. Theologians are always ready to wage battle over points of doctrine and many of them find argument more congenial than agreement. But beyond these things there is a deep sense that whatever differences Christians have, we are all on the defensive in a world that has turned against God. We

3. Eph 4:6.
4. Rev 13:8.

all have to confront those who have either rejected Christ outright or who have reduced him to dimensions that pervert the message of his gospel. When confronted with this reality, our internal disputes often fade into the background, even if they do not entirely disappear.

It is not difficult to see that in some spheres, pan-Christian ecumenism is already taken for granted. Bible translation, for example, is almost always a collaborative effort with no noticeable denominational or doctrinal bias. Translators may disagree about some of their methods and choice of words, but these are usually professional disputes among linguists, not theological or ecclesiological problems. This situation is reflected in theological colleges and seminaries, where students are regularly made aware of the entire range of thought on a wide variety of issues. Very rarely would any lecturer ignore or dismiss a book simply because its author was Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant–ordinands and seminarians are expected to become familiar with different points of view and in most cases will use books, like commentaries on the Bible for example, that come from sources outside their own tradition. The world of scholarship is generally free of denominational bias and theological students of many different backgrounds study together, often in inter or non-denominational settings.

At a more popular level, worship services across the spectrum are much more similar now than they once were, with only a few traditional Protestants and Catholics, as well as the Eastern Orthodox, resisting the trend. Everybody sings the same hymns, devotional literature circulates widely across denominations, and many lay people worship wherever they feel most at home, regardless of the ecclesiastical label the particular congregation wears. At times it seems to them that denominationalism is the province of the clergy and a few obsessive fanatics who stand out precisely because they are so odd. Pockets of traditionalism survive here and there but they are declining as younger people move away and seek fellowship wherever they can find it. This sort of practical ecumenism is now very common, and on the whole its effects are more positive than negative. Old quarrels are put aside, secondary matters are increasingly seen for what they are, and people tend to concentrate on the essentials. To some this appears to be a kind of dumbing down that obscures important doctrines, but people who think that way are in the minority. The process of homogenization is not yet complete, but we have come a long way in the past century and there is no going back now.

Of course, divisions still exist, but for the most part, they are of a different kind from what was common in the past. At the risk of oversimplification, I would say that they fall into two main categories—external authority and internal spiritual experience. The question of external authority is one that takes us back at least as far as the Reformation and even beyond that. Speaking in the most general terms, the main dividing line here is between the living *magisterium* of the church and the deposit of faith found in the Holy Scriptures. There used to be a fairly clear distinction between the approach of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches on the one hand, and that of most Protestant churches on the other, but things are not that simple nowadays. Rome and the East continue to believe that ultimate authority lies with the church hierarchy—in the Roman case, primarily (though not exclusively) with the Bishop of Rome, and in the East with councils of the church. But in recent times, popes have been known to reproach Protestants who ordain women on the ground that they have gone beyond the authority of Scripture, something that they claim they cannot do, and the Eastern churches have not managed to hold an authoritative council since 787, which makes it hard for them to decide on any question that has arisen since then.

Protestants retort that Rome and the East have frequently and quite openly ignored the teaching of the Bible and added many things to the requirements of faith that Jesus and his disciples never taught, but although this appeal to *sola Scriptura* makes sense to them, it does not persuade either Catholics or Orthodox. Their response to Protestant claims is to say that the Spirit who inspired the Scriptures is alive and guiding the church into fresh revelations, which can go well beyond the ancient texts without actually contradicting them. Thus, Catholics can argue that there is no contradiction between the compulsory celibacy of the clergy today and the fact that the Apostle Peter, supposedly the first bishop of Rome, had a wife. In their view, doctrine has developed over time, so what was acceptable for Peter is no longer permitted to his successors. Of course, that could change if a fresh revelation were to come along, particularly where the question is one of tradition, not dogma. Compulsory clerical celibacy is not an immutable doctrine but is subject to revision, as are many other practices of a similar nature. No Catholic would ever agree that the Bible could be set aside by papal decree, but in the final analysis it is the pope who determines how the church must interpret it and to supplement its teaching where necessary.

This traditional position is well known, but what is often not perceived so clearly is that many Protestant churches have developed a living *magisterium* of their own that is not all that different from the Roman position. Synods, general assemblies, and even theological committees set up by particular denominations have taken it upon themselves to pronounce on important matters of doctrine, regardless of what their confessions of faith or other founding documents might say. The ordination of women is a case in point, and now we are similarly confronted with the claims of same-sex marriage advocates. In both cases, proponents of change have had to argue that the Bible does not prevent them from introducing such novelties, even if they must admit that it does not encourage them either. The tension is usually resolved by saying that the Bible is a book of its time and can no longer be applied in the way that it originally was, something that even conservative Protestants are forced to admit to a limited extent. The result is that significant numbers of church people no longer accept the Scriptures as their supreme authority in matters of faith, and so division of one kind or another is inevitable.

Conservative Protestants, and particularly those in mixed denominations, often appeal to the concept of the invisible church, which goes back at least as far as the Reformation, and which can be found in different guises throughout Christian history. This says that the wheat and the tares grow together until the harvest, that the visible church on earth is a mixed bag of true believers and others, who belong to it in body but not in spirit. True believers are identified by their spiritual experience, which brings us to the second great question that confronts us when we seek to ground the unity of the church in some overarching principle. Those who have known personal conversion, the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit and the transformation that he brings, recognize each other and share in fellowship. This includes a strong element of orthodox doctrine, but that is not the essential thing.

The reason for that is that it is possible to hold to classical orthodoxy on paper without knowing it as a living experience, just as it is possible to know the LORD Jesus Christ in spirit without being well-read in doctrine. In this second case, those who have been converted are expected to learn the doctrine and to profess it—if they fail to do so, their *bona fides* will be questioned and they may find themselves excluded from a fellowship to which they do not really belong. In practice this is how Evangelicals operate most of the time. We may be involved in mixed denominations, but

our true allegiance is to those who are like-minded, wherever they may be found. We are not doctrinal minimalists, but hold to orthodoxy in theology plus vital experience in our lives. However, if we see the latter in someone from a different church or denomination, we usually accept them on the basis of that and overlook differences of doctrine, as long as they are of secondary importance. This principle extends across all Protestant denominations and even to Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox whom we do not exclude from our fellowship purely on the basis of their formal church allegiance.

Looked at in this way, we can say that the ecumenical church of the future has already arrived. Barring a few residual barriers here and there, most of us circulate freely among congregations, fellowships and parachurch organizations that share our basic outlook, and conflict is rare. In many places independent churches have sprung up that avoid denominational entanglements, though they are usually more dependent on existing formal structures than they realize. Many of their ministers have received their training in denominational theological colleges, and to that extent they are somewhat parasitic. But except in cases where a minister leaves an existing denomination and practices deliberate sheep-stealing from established congregations, hostility is rare. Some refugees from mixed churches make their way to independent congregations and may feel a certain bitterness towards those whom they have left behind, but that is seldom encouraged by the leaders of the independent churches to which they have gone. For the most part, people take their own decisions, and everybody learns to live with that, which is probably the best we can hope for in the circumstances. church splits often leave hard feelings behind, but over time these tend to diminish, and spiritual, if not institutional, unity can be allowed to prevail.

There seems to be little doubt that spiritual affinity wins out over institutional connections whenever the unity of the church comes up for discussion. We see this most clearly when people move from one locality to another and start to look for a "good church" to go to. In a few cases this may mean a congregation belonging to the same denomination as the one they are leaving, but most of the time, one suspects, that is a secondary consideration. What really matters is the quality of the preaching, the soundness of the teaching and the vibrancy of the fellowship on offer. If they are satisfactory, denominational allegiance is liable to be overlooked. The result is that for more and more people, it is the local congregation that

represents the universal church, and it is there that worshipers expect to find the fulness of gospel ministry.

It is not my purpose to recommend congregationalism as the way of the future, and like every other system of church government, it has weaknesses as well as strengths. Rather, what I would say is that in our present circumstances, and given the challenges that we now face, Christian unity is more likely to be worked out in that way than in any other. Fewer people nowadays can be brought to accept decisions taken by a wider and more impersonal church body—if someone does not like a woman minister or same-sex marriage, he or she is likely to go elsewhere, to a place where his or her views will be more congenial. We already know how hard it is for institutional churches to practice any kind of discipline, but we should not pay too much attention to aberrant clergy. The truth is that the power of lay people to vote with their feet has never been greater than it is today, and it is the spiritual bond that unites them to fellow believers. This does not make pastors and teachers redundant, but it puts whatever authority they may exercise on a different basis. Those who lack the authentic seal of the Holy Spirit will either lose their congregations or create churches that will not be accepted by others as fellow-workers in the Kingdom of God. What already happens in practice will probably become the norm, making it necessary for believers to discern where they belong and putting the onus on them to make sure that the congregation does not lose its zeal for the LORD.

To ensure the maintenance of a godly church unity in the future, teachers will have to restructure their approach to the faith, concentrating on the essentials and keeping controversial issues in their place, as far as this can be done. Human nature assures that there will always be disagreements of one kind or another, and some of these will continue to divide us, but it will be the duty of church leaders in the future to make a clear distinction between what really matters and what is less important, insisting on agreement about the former while leaving room for different opinions about the latter. In a sense we shall find ourselves back in the seventeenth century, when Puritan ministers were faced with a similar challenge, but too often failed to rise to it. History seldom repeats itself exactly, but perhaps a pattern is there, and our grandchildren will be able to revisit the fundamental principles and take a course different from the one that our ancestors either chose or were forced by the circumstances of their time to follow.