
The True Church

On Saturday evening I attended a choir concert which featured four choirs: two church choirs and two Christian community choirs. All of the choirs did a beautiful job leading us in praising God. For the last four songs of the evening, all four choirs took the stage and the power of their voices filled the room. It was good to be there.

When I was in college a few decades ago, I attended a missions conference in Urbana, Illinois. Gathered together were about 25,000 college-aged women and men, and we had the opportunity to attend various workshops and learning opportunities. Each day all 25,000 of us would gather in the stadium of the university where the conference was being held for a worship service in which we heard God's Word proclaimed and where we joined our voices in song. It was good to be there. The final evening of the conference was planned for December 31, and we gathered in the stadium for a worship service which began late in the evening. As the old year ended and the new year began, we celebrated communion together. If I live to be 100 years old, that New Year's celebration will be the most meaningful and memorable. It was very good to be there.

A few days ago, I had a conversation with a salesman, and after making my purchase, we talked casually for a while. The conversation turned to our faith, and it was good to discover that both he and I worship the same God through Jesus Christ. He is from a different denomination, and he talked a bit about a new church that had started in his community. He was a little disappointed that there was a new church, for he viewed it as being so similar to his own that he did not see the need for a new congregation. He said, "When there is already a true church in the community, why do we need another?" Although he may not recognize it himself, I believe that deep down he was lamenting the divisions that exist within the church of Jesus Christ, divisions which are very difficult to overcome even when denominations are very similar to each other. Of course, by merely using the expression, "true church," he was pushing a number of denominations to the sidelines, implying that they weren't good enough to make it to the status of being a "true church."

John Calvin, in his Institutes, talked about what makes a church a "true church." He said that at least two things must be present: faithful proclamation of God's Word and regular celebration of the sacraments. He implied that there might a third mark of the true church, namely the faithful exercise of discipline, although this third mark is often subsumed under the proclamation of the Word. These two (or three) marks have become the standard by which some judge other churches. If a church is not faithfully proclaiming God's Word (teaching and guiding its members) and if it is not regularly celebrating the sacraments, it should not be considered part of the true church.

The question that arises in my mind is this: how faithful and how regular? How do we determine if a church is faithful enough in its proclamation of the Word of God? How often should we celebrate the sacraments? John Calvin said we should celebrate communion every week, but since we don't, does that place Nobleford CRC outside the boundaries of being a true church?

Reading Calvin's Institutes, I discovered that he was not so concerned that churches do things perfectly, or nearly so, before they can be considered part of the true church. In fact, he gives remarkable latitude when he says that even if those marks are present in a small amount, we must understand that church to be part of the true church. In other words, things are not nearly as black and white as we might want them to be, if we follow Calvin's leading.

I would say that the 25,000 young men and women who gathered at the missions conference give us a picture of the true church. We were from a wide variety of denominations, most of which were not Reformed in their theology. Some of us were charismatic while others were from the far more ancient Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions. In the crowd were people who belonged to house churches and people who attended megachurches. As we gathered the Word of God was proclaimed, and, on New Year's Eve, we celebrated the sacrament of Lord's Supper. I fully recognized that the method of our celebration would not have met CRC standards, for I was one of the servers, and I was not an elder at the time. I'm not even sure that the one who presided over the celebration was ordained, something that is required in our denomination. In spite of our differences, we were a small part of the true church of Jesus Christ, the one that is described in Revelation 7:9 as being from every nation, tribe, people and language who worship the one true God through Jesus Christ.

Although we did not celebrate communion at the choir concert last Saturday (that would have caused cries of outrage to be raised by some in attendance), I believe that those who were gathered there were also representative of the true church of Jesus Christ. We were from a multitude of denominations and some of us in attendance hold strongly to our traditions, but, yet, we were worshipping God together, proclaiming his Word in song. We were the true church, and it was good to be there.

Pastor Gary