

Marks of a True Church

Sept 27, 2026

Discussion: Are we a true Biblical expression of a local church? How can we know?

Historically, Protestants have maintained that the true church is one that gathers around the Apostolic faith contained in the Scriptures. From that baseline there developed three overlapping categories regarding the elements of a church: Essential, Necessary, and Helpful

Essential

Latin: esse, “to be”

These are the essential marks without which a congregation is not a church at all

- The true Gospel confessed and preached (1 Cor 15:1-4; Gal 1:6-9; 2 Tim 4:1-4)
- Right administration of the two ordinances
 - Baptism initiates disciples into Christ’s body (Mat 28:19, Acts 2:41)
 - The Lord’s Supper is observed as Christ’s covenant meal when the church assembles, affirming our continued participation in the believing community (1 Cor 10:16-17; 11:23-26)
- A recognized structure of accountable leadership and membership*
 - Elders/overseers/pastors shepherd and teach and deacons serve (Acts 14:23; Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:1-15; Titus 1:5-9)
 - Members commit to one another (Acts 20:28; 1 Cor 12:7; Heb 13:17)
- The exercise of church discipline
 - The church can admit/affirm and correct/remove, all aimed at restoration and gospel clarity (Mat 16:19; 18:15-20; 1 Cor 5; 2 Thess 3:6, 14-15)

**Some would dispute the inclusion of formal membership as “essential,” downgrading it to “necessary.” Others would maintain that without formal membership, leadership responsibilities are undefined and practices like church discipline are impractical and toothless.*

Necessary

Latin: Bene esse, “well being”

The “health factors” that allow a true church to function well

- Gathered worship: Teaching, reading, praying, singing, and showing the Word

- A thoughtful, Biblical process of leadership preparation, selection, organization, and function
- Meaningful Membership: A clear, careful, process and covenant
- Robust discipleship: Intentional, patient, and formative
- Intentional Outreach: Both international missions and local evangelism
- Stewardship: Integrity in the management of resources and a healthy understanding of giving and supporting
- Unity: Charity on second order issues, cooperation with other true and like-minded churches

Helpful

Latin: Plene esse, “fullness of being”

Allowing a true church to consistently grow towards maturity. These are a few of the indicators that help us see where the essentials are flourishing or where they need to be strengthened.

- A Word-saturated pattern of public worship (our liturgy/Order of Worship)
- An obvious display of obedience and commitment regarding the “one another commands”
- Regular baptisms and growth through conversions
- A culture of prayer
- A missions-aligned budget. A tangible concern for the spread of the Gospel and the planting of new churches through strategic partnerships.
- A concern for the next generation (young adults, youth, and children)
- Deploying those with teaching and leadership gifts into prominent positions
- Other?