



Marks & Fruit

We call them “marks of the Church.”

The Church is... a fellowship of faith and of the Holy Spirit in hearts. This fellowship has outward marks so that it can be recognized. These marks are the pure doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments in accordance with the Gospel of Christ.

Apology of the Augsburg Confession VII/VIII:5

In other words, the way one detects the presence of the Holy Spirit within a church is by looking to see if the Gospel is proclaimed truthfully and baptism and the Lord's Supper are used properly. If those marks are there, you can be certain the Holy Spirit is there, creating and strengthening faith. Therefore, if those marks are there, you can be certain the Church is there too. For the Church is simply the body of believers.

Now, how many of the unchurched visitors that join you on Christmas Eve (or any other time during the year) will be able to recognize that your church has the pure Gospel? How many of them even know what the Gospel is? What percentage of your worship guests will say, “Oh, look! They have a baptismal font in a prominent place. This is a spiritually healthy place for us to be.” Probably none.

The point is that “the marks of the Church” are useful for spiritually mature individuals to assess churches. However, they are probably *not* what your worship visitors are going to use when determining whether or not your church is a place where they will encounter the Holy Spirit. Your unchurched guests will be looking at other “marks,” the ones about which St. Paul writes.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Galatians 5:22,23

These are secondary marks of the Church at best. For unbelievers can have a type of joy and peace and love that looks similar to that of Christians. Therefore, just because a group of people is kind or peace-loving does not mean they belong to the true Christian Church. However, let us be clear. The unchurched prospect *does* expect to find church-going individuals to be kind and peace-loving. And that is not a logical leap for the prospect to make. Paul tells us such things are “fruit of the Spirit,” evidence of the Holy Spirit's work.

If the unchurched person visits your church and no one says anything to him, he may perceive your church as unloving. Therefore, he may falsely conclude that your church is not a place the Holy Spirit works powerfully. If a visitor to your church notices people are tense or bitter about something why would he ever consider joining your church? He has plenty of tension in his personal life. He does not need his church adding to it.

Now, when an unchurched visitor jumps to such judgments, he demonstrates that he does not understand that believers still have a sinful nature that leads them into all kinds of sin. But why would you expect him to understand that? He is unchurched!

What does this all mean? Simply that members of a church need to understand the importance of what Jesus is saying.

Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5:16

When visitors assess a church, they tend *not* to look at the primary marks: word and sacrament. Instead, they look at things like how warmly they are welcomed, how hospitable a church is, and how members treat one another. They look for “fruit of the Spirit.”

May the Holy Spirit, through his word, produce that fruit in us. Then, when visitors join us at church they will see the Holy Spirit at work, in the warm way we welcome them and the kind and loving way we treat one another.



COMPANY FOR CHRISTMAS is part of C13, a Christmas planning program produced by the WELS Congregation & Ministry Support Group.