

The marks of the true church-true-can be shown so clearly, that they can be recognized by anyone who is looking for the true church.

Why does the article use such absolute terms? Well, it uses such absolute terms simply because of the fact that when a denomination begins to lose the marks of the true church, even though it has lost them only in part, that church has principally, essentially, become the false church.

Now I know that sounds probably a bit harsh to you. Let me explain that by use of a figure. Supposing you know a man (and I'm sure you all have at one time or another)who is, say in his 50s, at the peak of health and without any known disease, who suddenly is diagnosed with having terminal cancer. There are people like that. They're caught by surprise. They feel well. They notice nothing wrong. But through an examination, it is discovered that they have an inoperable cancer that will kill them. What do you say about that man? Do you say about that man-he is a healthy man? Of course not. He's got cancer. He's going to die. He's got the seeds of death in him. You say-but look at him. You'd say there's nothing wrong with him. He goes to work every day yet. Yet-but although he bears all the outward appearance of a healthy man, if the doctor's diagnosis is correct, principally he is dead. And that's how article 28 looks at the church.

It doesn't deny the fact that there are churches that do not travel the line from true church to false church overnight. It recognizes that. It recognizes that so much, that it gives to the true church the calling to witness to that church that's on the road to apostasy.

Calvin in his Institutes in talking about the distinction between the true and the false church, doesn't hesitate for a moment to call Rome the false church, and yet at the same time he says there are many people of God in the false church-in the Roman Catholic Church. But it is the calling of the church to call them out. That's part of her calling.

In the second place, and history substantiates this, once a church begins to lose the marks of the true church, there is no turning back. That's a striking phenomenon, but it is nevertheless true, and I have paid rather close attention to this question in studying over the years the history of the church of Christ in the new dispensation. That's different from the old, for obvious reasons. Once a church begins to lose the marks of the true church, there's no turning back.

There's only two ways a church can go. It can go up, growing in the knowledge of the truth, or it can go down. It never stands still.

Now that's important, and it's for that reason that article 28 talks about-not the relative terms: truer, truest; falser, falsest. But the church, which fulfills faithfully the commands of Christ, and the church, which, although it may appear healthy, nevertheless has a deadly cancer eating at its vitals that is beyond cure.

That's why article 28 says that it is the obligation of the people of God to join themselves to the true church. That obligation is so critical, so crucial, so fundamental, so urgent-if you will-that in striking language article 28 says the people of God must do this though the edict of princes be against it. That is, though you are persecuted for belonging to the true church, though ultimately you are killed for belonging to the true church, this is so fundamental, so crucial, that you can't live the life of the antithesis in the world, ultimately, unless you make it your business to become a part of the true church.

Nothing may stand in the way of that. Nothing may be an obstacle too great to overcome. That's how the antithesis is manifest, first of all, in the church.

And I dare say, that anyone who knows he belongs to a false church, or is aware of the fact the church of which he is a part has in large measure or small measure begun to lose the marks of the true church, and stays there-cannot_ live an antithetical life in the midst of the world.

That's because of the fact-that's because of the fact that it's in the true church where you have the pure preaching of the Word. And at the very center of the antithetical life lies the power of the truth of God as it is revealed in Christ. There is no antithetical life of holiness and godliness, ultimately, without an unwavering commitment to the truth ...

(Prof. Hanko, excerpt, Antithesis in the Church)