

Session 1: The Identity and Function of the Church

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2018 Fall Bible Conference

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Well, brethren, good evening and I am aware that you've had a long day perhaps, some number of you, and as Pastor Sheffield indicated at the end of the week, on the one hand I do have a full length sermon, I think I could describe it that way, but I am going to endeavor to do some abridgment on my feet with regard to various references and perhaps some quotations that I will leave out.

I begin tonight by directing your attention to 1 Timothy 1:3, and in doing so, more broadly to the background of this first pastoral letter. The text I indicated reads,

3 As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus so that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines,

Now it seems that after Paul's release from his first Roman imprisonment, he returned to Ephesus to discover that his previous warning to the elders of the Ephesian church there on the beach at Miletas had come to pass. I will simply excerpt from that warning found back in Acts 20, "from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things."

Well, as we come to 1 Timothy, it's about five years later, about 63 AD, and strange doctrines were being taught to some degree in Ephesus. The nature of them is evidenced by various references in 1 Timothy. It seems clear from 1 Timothy 1:3 that Paul and Timothy had been together for some span of time in Ephesus. While there, Paul himself dealt with some of the leading false teachers. They are named at the end of this first chapter. Paul then left Ephesus for Macedonia and Paul urged Timothy to stay in Ephesus to deal with matters there. Now he was leaving a very valuable resource in that city. Paul's estimate of Timothy, I'll not read it, but it is found in Philippians 2 at verse 20.

Now Timothy was to be Paul's representative in Ephesus. He was not an elder technically, for the church, Acts 20, already had elders. He was left there as an apostolic representative to counter the present danger of false teaching and to reveal the mind of the apostle as to the order and ministry of their church life. It was a large and daunting task for Paul's true child in the faith. 1 Timothy was purposed to guide Timothy and authorize him in his work. Timothy was to instruct the church in Ephesus as Paul would have instructed it had he remained there.

Now following the greeting in 1 Timothy 1:1-2, there is a charge given to Timothy that occupies the rest of that first chapter. Turning, if you would, in your Bibles to chapter 2, certain aspects of church life are then consecutively addressed. In chapter 2, verses 1 through 8, a subject, Lord willing, that we will take up on the Lord's day, the vital matter of corporate prayer. Then in verses 9 through 15 of the second chapter, the role of women in the church is taken up. Then coming to chapter 3, verses 1 to 7, the qualifications of an overseer. Verses 8 through 13, the qualifications of a deacon. And then chapter 3 concludes with a statement of purpose for what has just been written and just been surveyed since verse 1 of chapter 2. A statement of purpose, a statement of rationale for Paul's concern in setting forth these particulars. Follow as I read in chapter 3 at verse 14.

14 I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; 15 but in case I am delayed, I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself [and what follows consists of Paul's reasons for concern about conduct in the church] in the household of God, which is the church of the living God [briefly put, that is the identity of the church], the pillar and support of the truth [that is the function of the church].

Verse 16 is a summary of the essence of the truth confessed, a six part declaration concerning the person of Christ spanning his Incarnation through his ascension, or perhaps the final reference is to his return.

Now let us return to verse 14 and this statement of purpose that begins there. "I am writing these things to you," that is, to Timothy, my authorized representative, "hoping to come to you before long," that is, hoping to come soon, hoping to come quickly. Paul wants to return to Ephesus to see Timothy so as to communicate his instructions in person, "but," note the language, "in case I am delayed," literally, if I delay. And suffice it to say the particular conditional construction in the original indicates a probable future condition. Paul is saying very precisely, "It's likely I will be delayed," and thus he's writing.

"I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long," and we should ask again, or should ask, what are "these things"? Well, again looking back to where the context begins at the beginning of chapter 2, these things include corporate prayer of which men are to lead. "I want the men in every place to pray," chapter 2, verse 8. "These things" include godly women validating their profession, chapter 2, verses 9 through 15, by their modest dress and appearance, by good works, by a submissive heart, and by their domestic ways. Who then leads the church? "These things" include chapter 3, verse 1, men. "It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do." Then there follows through verse 7 the qualifications for those men who lead the church. Who then serves the church? Chapter 3, verses 8 through 13, deacons and their qualifications follow. "These things" refer to these previous particular matters and perhaps we could add, anticipate such things as follows in chapter 5: the care of widows; the support of elders; and the sins of elders.

Note the moral necessity of "these things." "I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; but in case I am delayed, I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself." The word "ought" simply put, is the language of moral obligation, the language of moral necessity. What is translated and I am preaching out of the New American Standard, what is translating "ought" reveals that there is a God-prescribed order and conduct in the church for the life of the church, for the officers, for the members of the church. It is not church on our terms. It is not church according to our creative notions. The term "ought" speaks of moral necessity.

Now Paul's concern for how one ought to conduct himself in the church, if we think about it in the context, could seem rather strange and here's why. With the need for evangelistic work in Asia Minor and in Macedonia in the 60s AD, was it reasonable for Paul to leave such a proven valuable man as Timothy in the midst of one church? And further, in a church that he himself had ministered in for over two years? Was it reasonable to be so concerned about one church that had already received so much of the apostle's time and attention? Why not use Timothy in evangelistic crusades throughout Asia Minor? Throughout Macedonia? We could further ask, why leave Titus in Crete to set in order what remains? What justifies such concentrated attention upon what we might call church order? What could justify this focus upon one local church, leaving Timothy in Ephesus and then writing to him of such things?

Now the burden of this message is to answer that question. What follows in the balance of verse 16 constitutes the divine rationale for why church order is so critically important, for why it is not with us to use our creativity and our imaginations and to come up with what we think, at least pragmatically, of very attractive and workable trendy matters. The rationale, the explanation for why Paul is writing, "that you may know how one ought to conduct himself," the explanation is twofold. The first part has to do with the identity of the church and this is expressed in our text, verse 15 of chapter 3, in two ways: the household of God which is the church of the living God. That is at the very essence of the very nature and kind of the church: the household of God which is the church of the living God.

Consider first the household or house of God. That description is founded, grounded in the Old Testament. Its first occurrence is in Genesis 28:17 when after a dream in which the covenant promise is given to Abraham and Isaac were revealed to Jacob, he, and I quote, "awoke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the LORD is in this place and I did not know it.' And he was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God,' that's the first time this metaphor is found in revealed religion, "and this is the gate of heaven."

Subsequently the tabernacle is referred to as "the house of the LORD your God," Exodus 34:26, and subsequently the temple built by Solomon is referred to as "the house of the LORD," 1 Kings 9:1, and the language briefly excerpted from Douglas Bannerman, "The Scripture Doctrine of the Church," the place where his immediate presence was to be recognized, where his glory was to be seen, and where especially he met with them and spoke to them in grace, and adding my own language, is the house of God. It is the place

of his presence and the place of his worship. The Old Testament house of God was God's dwelling place, the place of his peculiar presence among his covenant people, the place again of his presence and his worship, and the Old Testament house of the Lord was the forerunner to the new covenant house of the Lord, the church, and indeed the church is frequently in the New Testament represented by this same metaphor as it is here in 1 Timothy 3 at verse 15, "the household of God." In Hebrews 3:6, "Christ was faithful as a Son over His house--whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end." In 1 Peter 2:5, "you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." In Ephesians 2:19, "So then you," you Gentiles, "are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household."

In the language of the man who in my own pastoral ministry has been my mentor, Pastor Martin, and before quoting him concerning the house of God, I give attribution to him as to his preaching and my consequent understanding of this passage. Pastor Martin writes and I preached and I quote, "The church as God's house was architecturally designed in the eternal ages past. The material for its construction were sinners of every tribe, tongue, people and nation. The builder was God in Christ. The owner of the church was God, the church of God which he purchased with his own blood. The tenants of the house, God himself and his blood-bought people. It is the church which knows the peculiar presence of God and is constituted by those in covenant relation to him. He states the house rules and order, that is, how one ought to conduct himself."

Now consider the second identifying description which is "the church of the living God." The reference to "the living God" may well be an emphatic contrast to what Ephesus was full of. We think of the grammatical historical principle of interpretation, particularly historical, and think of Ephesus full of idols, dead idols manifested by the prominent temple of Diana. It may well be that Paul wrote to Timothy in this way to make a stark contrast between the church and the dead idols so prominent in that city.

Whatever the case, the church is characterized by the presence and the possession of life because it is the dwelling place of the living God. Note in verse 15 the term "church," literally perhaps as you have heard, "called out ones." 114 times in our New Testament you come upon this term. It was used among the Greeks of a body of citizens called and gathered together. It's used three times that way in Acts 19. It's used in the Septuagint of the congregation of Israel in Deuteronomy 9:10 and in 1 Chronicles 13:2. In the New Testament it is used with applications to the body of Christ, the church, in two ways. It is used of the universal church, that is, the whole number of the redeemed of all the ages. In the language of our confessors, the whole number of the elect that have been, are or shall be gathered into one under Christ, the head thereof. References to the universal church are found such as in Matthew 16:18, "I will build My church." Ephesians 1:22; Hebrews 12:22. But the second and the large majority of the references in the New Testament wherein we find the term "church" refers to visible local churches. In Acts 11:22, "the church at Jerusalem." In Acts 13:1, "Antioch and the church that was there." In 1 Corinthians 1:2, "to the church of God which is at Corinth." In Romans 16:1, "Phoebe

who was a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea." In Matthew 18:17, "tell it to the church."

Here in 1 Timothy 3:15, "the church of the living God" is plainly referring to a visible local church. In the context to a local church praying, again going back to chapter 2, verses 1 to 8. To a local church with qualified elders, chapter 3, verses 1 to 7. To a church, a local church with qualified deacons, chapter 3, 8 through 13. Going forward to chapter 5, the church with older men, younger men, older women, younger women, widows. Paul is writing to a specific person, Timothy, in a specific church, Ephesus, with reference to a local visible congregation, and by extrapolation, he's writing to you and I, to the church in Ballston Lake and the church in Rocky Mount.

"Timothy, if you think how one ought to conduct himself in the church of the living God, if you think how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God is a small and unimportant thing, Timothy, if you are tempted to use man's ideas of how the church should be organized, how a church should worship, how the church should minister, Timothy, if you are tempted to pragmatism, to do what appeals to men, to do it because it is user friendly, if you are tempted to get lazy, if you are tempted to neglect, if you are tempted to indifference and carelessness, if weariness has gotten to you, Timothy, and you are backing off, remember the church's identity. It is the house of God. It is the church of the living God. Thus, Timothy, persevere. Persevere even amidst your weaknesses. Persevere, Timothy, amidst your frustrations. Persevere, Timothy, amidst your fears. Persevere, Timothy, amidst your discouragements. Persevere when opposition arises. Let the identity of the church, the house of God, the church of the living God, Timothy, let that be a powerful motivation in your renewed soul. Press on, Timothy, in leading, in teaching, in ministering to Christ's church." The identity of the church highlights, the point is, the importance of how one ought to conduct himself. It's not a light matter because of the identity of the church.

Paul not only sets out the identity of the church, he speaks to its function, that is, its intended task and actions, and this also emphasizes the importance of how one ought to conduct himself. The function of the church is revealed in the final words of verse 15 of chapter 3. The NAS translates, "the pillar and support of the truth," a phrase grammatically that is explanatory of the preceding "household" and "church."

Now note that term "pillar, p-i-l-l-a-r," not p-i-l-l-o-w. Pillar is a column in a building which supports the roof structure. We find this term in Galatians 2:9, "James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars." We find it again in Revelation 3:12 and Revelation 10:1. The question is what is being conveyed in this text by the metaphor "pillar" in connection with the church's function? I assert that what is being revealed is the matter of the winsome attractive display of the truth, and I'll explain in a moment. The metaphor "pillar," I assert in terms of the function of the church, has to do with the exhibition of the church in a fallen world with the presentation of the truth of the Gospel in a fallen world.

Now in ancient architecture, pillars were often ornamentally designed, decorated, and were used for the posting of public edicts from a ruler or a court that the citizenry might view those edicts posted to a pillar and read them. Now again think of Ephesus, where this letter was going, and again of the grammatical historical principle of interpretation. There was in Ephesus, Acts 19:27, the temple of Diana. One of the prominent features of that temple was its 127 60 feet high pillars made of marble, and in the language of William Barclay, and some were studded with jewels and overlaid with gold. The people of Ephesus knew, they knew well how beautiful a thing a pillar could be. It may well be that the idea of the word "pillar" is here not so much support, that's contained in the next term, the idea is the church's duty to hold up the truth in such a way that all men may see it. The idea is to adorn the truth by our lives, by our church lives, by our unified brotherly relations, by our one-another relationships, by the nature of our worship, by the nature of our witness, to adorn the Gospel in the midst of a benighted fallen world. The metaphor "pillar" to a church in Ephesus, it's no stretch to think that the original readers with that temple of Diana in their city so prominent, they understood in a particular way what Paul was saying to them.

The setting forth of the truth, manifesting the truth, holding up the truth winsomely and attractively that men might see it, they hear it, they are drawn to it. Such a sense is analogous to what the Lord Jesus said in Matthew 5, "you're the light of the world, let your light shine before men." Analogous to that may well be the sense Paul intended by "pillar of the truth." To the Philippians 2:15, "children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast," or forth, "the word of life." To Titus Paul wrote, "that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect."

The church, again by her conduct, by her dignified order, by her practice, by the members' love for one another, and by her message, is to display the truth, to render it attractive by her consistent example and message, to set off its excellence by their lives, to render it lovely by their lives, by the membership of a church, by the ministry of the church, dressing up, as it were, in their lives the truth of the Gospel and presenting it winsomely to a dying world. In the language of another, positively the passage sets forth the presentative manifestation of the saving truths of the Gospel before the eyes of men. The church is a pillar, as this interpreter writes, inscribed all over with the truth.

That's our function. Members and office-bearers striving together to advance the truth in a fallen world, to project the truth in a fallen world. The church's function further is revealed in this architectural language by the term in the NAS "support," translated in the King James "ground," in the NIV "foundation," in the ESV "buttress." The pillar and support or ground of the truth with the architectural figure in mind. It seems to be speaking, this second metaphor, of a foundation or slab upon which the pillars stand, the support of the entire building, upholding the truth, maintaining the truth, defending the truth. The sense is our life together, our commitment, our member-to-member relations, our tithes and offerings, our very corporate existence provides in a given culture, in a given society, in a given community, it provides the presence, the repository of revealed truth. That's you in Rocky Mount. You are the slab, the foundation, the ground, the place,

the repository of the truth. If people want to understand revealed truth, then they can come to the Grace Reformed Baptist Church of Rocky Mount. I'm not saying that's the only place they can come, but I am saying the local church by its very presence, by its being, is to be the ground in a given society, the place in a given culture, in a given locale, of the truth itself.

The local church in any given generation, any given nation or culture, by its life, by its presence, by its profession, by its practice, is the very entity that provides the truth, supports it, sustains it. The pillars convey the church's function of displaying that truth. The foundation conveys the church's function of being the very base, basis, of maintaining and supporting that truth in a fallen world. As one writes in summary, Timothy and the church will conduct their lives appropriately if they remember that they are the house built and owned by God and indwelt by him as the living one, that's the church's identity, and also remember that they are called to undergird, I would say that the sense of foundation or ground and hold aloft God's true in word and deed.

Matthew Poole writes, "Pillars also were of ancient use to fasten upon them any public edicts which princes or courts would have published and exposed to the view of all, hence the church is called the pillar and basis or seal of truth because by it the truths of God are published, supported and defended, and in it they are only to be found as their proper seat and place. For to it, the church, the oracles and mysteries of God are committed, and in it, in the church, they are exposed to the notice and knowledge of all as public edicts are upon pillars."

Well, in summary, brethren, the reasons for Paul's concern for how one ought to conduct himself are set forth in terms of the identity of the church, the house of God, the place of his presence, his people and his worship; the church of the living God, a place that possesses by the indwelling Spirit of God his very life; and further set forth by the functions of the church, pillar of the truth, adorning, publishing, advancing the Gospel in a fallen world, and the support of the church by our very presence and being, being the place to which the church or to which the truth is committed and from which it goes. Why give attention to God-revealed order in the church? Are we not just fiddling while Rome burns? No. We give attention to God-revealed church order because of what the church is and because of the stewardship of the truth of which God is author and revealer.

"Timothy, when in your native timidity, in your fatigue, when you're tempted to grow slack, remember that there is in Ephesus a local church which is the pillar and ground of the truth. When you're tempted to pragmatism and expediency in the fear of men, remember, Timothy, labor on and press on and pray on and preach on in view of what the church is and what it does."

Some practical observations with which we close. 1. Our text which speaks of how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, the church of the living God, the church's identity, which speaks of the church in its function, pillar, support of the truth, our text calls us to give careful attention to and practice of what God has revealed as the design of, the order of, conduct in his church. The church is God's house. Simply put, it's

not ours. We do not determine the house rules, God does. We do not decide which ones are acceptable and which ones are not. Matters such as corporate prayer, matters such as male and female roles and duties, matters such as elders and deacons and public worship and corrective discipline and member-to-member relations, and the care of widows and a culture of evangelism are set forth in the word of God. They are not flexible. They are not time bound. They are not culturally bound. We have no right to ignore them. Being who we are and doing what we are to do, we are to understand them and respond obediently. We are to receive and submit to what is revealed concerning the life and ministry of the church over which Christ is living and ruling head.

Secondly, our text reminds all Christians of the need and importance of attachment to, a thorough integration in the church, aka membership. The identity and function of the church obligates all Christians to invest their lives in the life and ministry of the church of Jesus Christ. How can one profess to be a child of God and take lightly or refuse life in the house of the God professed? There is no biblical logic in that. To refuse to live under the authority and discipline of his Father whom he professes to be his child? To refuse to live within his Father's house, how can that be? How can one professing saving union with Christ and then go on and ignore his body, the church? Ignoring the assembly to which they were called out from a world of sin and rebellion and united to? One who professes the truth of God must be invested in that divine institution that displays and supports that truth, which presents and upholds that truth. Each member should maintain a self-awareness that his or her example out there in the normal traffic lanes of life, his or her speech, his or her behavior, bear upon the function of the church in advancing the truth in a fallen benighted world.

We must repudiate neglect and carelessness and detachment. We must repudiate the matter of being a Christian and yet not being not vitally identified with the local church. This migrating from one church to the next with no life investment, bearing no responsibility, refusing accountability, manifesting the idea that people can do what they want with Christ's church, ignore it, attend it when they want, choose what they want, have it on their own terms, all of that must go. We must dispense with poorly ordered churches, poorly governed churches which say, in effect, the bride can do as she wishes and will submit to no head. Professing Christians remaining in apostate churches with no heart for the truth, no practice of the truth, no vision of advancing the truth. The identity and function of the church, brethren, is an authoritative summons to live in the Father's house according to his design and his standards is a call to support by your very presence and to propagate the truth of the Gospel.

Thirdly, it reminds us of what is at stake. What is at stake in a church's members in their public conduct, in their private conduct, in the four walls of their home? What is at stake in one's ways, in his relation to his or her spouse? To his or her children? To his or her customers? To his or her superiors in the marketplace? To his or her schoolmates? Neighbors? What's at stake is the credibility of the message of your church, that's what's at stake. Adorning, crediting the church, lives of a given membership clothing the truth with attitudes and motives and words and deeds that render the truth distinctive and lovely and which call others to it. The truth of God among men and its propagation is at

stake as well as the truth having a foundation in a given place by the very reality of faithful brethren praying, giving, striving together. It is the privilege and duty of church members to be the pillar and support of the truth corporately, a privilege and status in your locale and your conduct in your homes and your conduct in your schools and your conduct in the workplace, your conduct, again, in the normal traffic lanes of life, bears upon that function.

And finally to men of God such as your pastor, he is called to be a man like Ezra. Ezra 7:10, "For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel." A man like Ezra to study what God has revealed about life in the local church, to practice it, and teach the people of God, diligent in study, declaring the whole counsel of God, exemplifying the truth, leading a church to walk in truth in view of the church's identity and function.

Being in the church, brethren, is serious business. May the matter of church order, how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth, not be a little matter. May there be a revived sense of the significance of who you are and what you do. God has called you out of the world and assembled you here. You brethren have a common life together in Christ. You have an identity and you have a function. May God use you here in Rocky Mount.

Let's pray.