

This is a great day to begin our new [sermon] series. If you look into you bulletin you will see that we are beginning a new series. It is on I Timothy, 2 Timothy, perhaps and Titus, depending on how I get it all done. It is about the church. Today we have communion, we talk about the business meeting and we are gathered for worship. What does it mean to be the church, the church of Jesus Christ? There are a lot of questions about that I think you will find and I think it will be wise to address those questions and see if we can come to a common understanding of what the church is. Frequent use of the word “church” leads us to have a kind of familiar comfortableness with it; we feel like we know what the church is. We go on a regular basis or we go now and then. We know where the “church” is. But does that mean that we have got it right, that we have an accurate or appropriate understanding?

I think that getting things right is important. In fact, getting things right is at the heart of biblical religion. That raises a question: is Christianity a religion? If you are familiar you know we go back and forth about this all the time. I read a book when I was at Ligonier Conference. It is called “Family Shepherds: Calling and Equipping Men to Lead Their Homes.” It proved to be a good book and I am hoping to persuade the men of this congregation, especially the fathers and grand-fathers to put its teaching into practice. Near the beginning of the book the author attempts to address this question, the confusion that troubles believers to day. He cites another pastor by doing so: he cites Michael Horton. This is what he said:

“The gospel is not man-centered sentimentality. Michael Horton explains this further: ‘It is interesting that the biblical writers chose the word ‘gospel.’ The heart of most religions is good advice, good techniques, good programs, good ideas, and good support systems. . . . But the heart of Christianity is Good News. It comes not as a task for us to fulfill, a mission for us to accomplish, a game plan for us to follow with the help of life coaches, but as a report that someone else has already fulfilled, accomplished, followed, and achieved everything for us. Good advice may *help* us in daily direction; the Good News concerning Jesus Christ *saves* us from sin’s guilt and tyranny over our lives and the fear of death. It’s Good News because it does not depend on us. It is about God and his faithfulness to his own purposes and promises.’” (pp. 54-55)

It is good news! So the good news does not initially say anything to us about what we are to do other than what Jesus said to the disciples when they came to Him and asked, “What should we do to enter the kingdom of heaven?” He said, “Believe in the Son of God.” That is it. That is good news. So now let’s go back to the question: is Christianity a religion? If we define religion as a set of rules, rituals and practices and such by which we seek and find and please and win over and so gain acceptance from God and secure eternal life: no, Christianity is not a religion. The gospel is that God has done all this for us in the Person of Jesus Christ. We receive it as a gift. However, if we understand religion as a set of rules and practices, teachings and callings, learnings and procedures by which we progressively draw nearer to the Lord, obey His commands and fulfill His calling and learn to live together as the peculiar people of God and live in the midst of the world which has rejected Him and rebelled against Him, oh yes, this is a religion and we should adopt its practices and its disciplines.

What is essential for us then to grasp is that God has created the church not to save people but to help believers grow in salvation and the gift that they have received.

Paul gives two purposes for writing I Timothy. The first purpose concerns the people of the church. If you are looking at I Timothy I encourage you to turn to chapter I. Join with me as I pick up the text at v. 3.

Paul writes to Timothy and he says,

*“As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.”*

The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart a good conscience and a sincere faith. Those three phrases indicate the qualities we should look for in those who lead the church. For Paul is first of all addressing Timothy as a pastor/elder. But more generally those qualities should define maturity for all who are in the church.

There is a second purpose that Paul mentions for writing I Timothy. You will find it in 3:14. This is addressed to the general congregation as a whole. What is the business of the church about? What shall we expect for the corporate life of the body to do and how does it function within the purposes of God? This is what Paul says in 3:14, *“I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that if I delay you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the Living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.”* Ah! This is what I referred to when mentioning, “Get it right.” We need to get it right. Getting it right means we know how one ought to behave in the household of God which is the church. Earlier [in taking the offering] it was mentioned that we would like to have all of you come [to next week’s business meeting] so that you know what goes on and how we function as a church. That is not a light or passing comment. We error and we error grievously if we think that by attending a worship service we have done what it means to go to church or that we are being the church. It just doesn’t cut the entire piece of cake if you will. There is far more involved that God intends for His people. Notice he says how one ought to behave. “Ought” is a word of moral obligation.

That American culture is deeply individualistic is no secret to anyone. The degree to which that value or perspective has penetrated the church is best indicated by the incomprehension of many who claim to be Christians regarding the relationship between being a Christian and going to church. Millions in our country see no connection and they demonstrate this by rarely if ever attending church. At the same time many who attend more or less regularly have scarcely any greater understanding of this matter. Indeed for many church is seen as a kind of necessary evil. I have been a pastor for almost 40 years: believe me! “Why go to church?” All lot of people see that the church offers services, opportunities, especially opportunities for making friends, raising their family, facilitating missionary work – that is a good thing to do. The local church is also involved in good works, social practice sorts of things, charity projects. Beyond that if you go to church sometimes you can enjoy some of the services that are being offered: music. However, with the advent of the electronic church much of what is now provided, is provided without the complications and limitations of the local gathering at fifth and main in a building that needs to be maintained with neighbors

needing to be kept happy, difficult itinerants needing to be cared for and kept off the grounds, the annoying committees forever making appeals and interfering in people’s lives. Some of those same “advantages” come with the megachurches. A megachurch is so large you can be involved with nobody ever noticing so you don’t get roped into all the fussy business and awkward mechanics of organizational life. You can just enjoy the spiritual dimension of the body of Christ. This the inconvenient or even “evil” part [of church]. You see for many people the organized or institutional church is unhelpful, unpleasant and unspiritual. Have you heard that? I have heard it plenty of times! Not from [those present] but from people who tell me why they don’t go to church.

This raises a question, an important question. Are megachurches and the electronic church really churches? Do they function as God intends a church to function and do they accomplish what God established a church to be and to do? That gets us back to the reason for this study in I Timothy and the other two Pastoral Epistles. Before we do that, however, a bit more introduction to our topic will be helpful.

First let us be clear that there is one great foundational fact about the church. I hope your minds are going round wondering “What is he going to say?” This is not weird. All of you know this, you know it dead cold. The minute I say it you are going to say, “I knew that!” It is given to us in Matthew 16:13-18. This is what it says:

*“Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter replied, ‘You are the Christ the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.’”*

There it is: I will build My church! If you are familiar with the long history of Christianity, you know that these verses have occasioned huge debates most of which revolve around what Jesus meant by His reference to Peter as the rock upon which He is going to build His church. As interesting as that debate is and as consequential in its way, it is just that other statement that I want us to think about. The church is uniquely Jesus’ project. That is us, we are uniquely His project. He said, “I will build My church.” If you are here today and you are sitting in this assembly and you are a believer in Jesus Christ, it is because He has personally selected you and putting [all of] you together and building as His church. You should realize that.

This is made even more emphatic to us if we reflect on some the statements that are given to us when we are told [along the way] that the church is Christ’s body. Let me ask you, how intimately acquainted with your left hand? Do you think you know your left hand better than God knows you? There is not a remote possibility that you do. Jesus is the Head of the Body, we are its members. The association, what the church is, therefore you begin to understand, is both an organic and intimate kind of gathering.

If we reflect on this a bit, doesn't it seem strange that Christians would have such a confused and oftentimes a low and unflattering view of the church? The church is the peculiar interest and project of the Lord. It is Jesus' project. Surely if that is the case, it should be held in high estimation by us. In fact I think sober reason would conclude that if we wish to serve the Lord and glorify His name on the earth, then we will give our best efforts to make the church the best that it could possibly be. How could we more honor the Lord than to honor what is His peculiar project? But the fact of the matter is that we don't. Some do, but I think if we were honest we would have to admit that the church is not always very high on our list of priorities.

There are reasons for that. In truth even those who are devoted to the life of the church are inwardly conflicted, confused and at times unsure about the whole business. Here are a few of those conflicts and confusions. What should we concentrate on, church or missions? What does it mean to be a part of the church, does it mean we are separated from the world or that we should be actively involved in the community? Our services, should they be designed for the saints or should our services be designed to draw the unsaved in? Is it best for us to have buildings or should we just concentrate on ministry? Should we develop elaborate worship, or simple worship, or minimal buildings for minimal cost and maximum usage or cathedrals for honor and beauty; should we sing Psalms without instruments or have soft rock or... Should we care about denominational ties? Should care about doctrinal definitions? Should we care about historical ties and creeds? Do we have a constitution and an organizational structure, a statement of faith, officers and who know what else? What does it mean to be the church? How many of those things are essential? What part to they play, what part should they play for me as I am engaged in being part of this body? These are some of the issues that float around in people's minds.

Can it really be true that it is of this ill-defined and often ill-functioning entity that Jesus says, “I will build My church”? That is what He is talking about? The easiest mental maneuver to make at this point by the way is to make the distinction between the group that gathers at any place on a Sunday morning the “true church”, the universal body of Christ in the entire world. We can say “I am a part of the church; I am a part of the Body of Christ; I am a part of the spiritual community that embraces all the world. Occasionally I drop in on some miserable local group.” I am overstating the case, at least I hope I am! It is much easier to think about the “Body of Christ” than it is to think about us, the all too human local group. Actually in practical reality I think few people ever think about the church universal, so that in actual reality what we think we end up [with] is something like this, that true spiritual life is really a private matter and church life is just a set of activities, activities which define our social space in the religious community which supports our values.

Two citation should help us understand the Bible's teaching in this matter. The first is what we find in Revelations 2 and 3. You might recall that there the Lord Jesus inspires John the Elder to write seven letters. The seven letters are addressed to seven churches. Those churches are in different places and they are in remarkably different conditions. So it is a hard thing to say well really it is just a letter sent to the church. It is true that those churches represent types and issues that repeat themselves all down through the ages, but if you drop back to Revelations I you will find that they [symbolism] there indicates that each

church has its own lampstand, indicating distinct and separate entities for all seven of them. Local churches are real things. The other thing to remember of course is that Jesus once taught a parable, it is called the parable of the wheat and the tares. This is a pastor's favorite parable when he looks out at the congregation and he thinks about people he has and he hasn't seen, all the committees he is sitting on, the people who have and haven't performed, and all the people who... Right? "Well I know, God, You've just gathered together whoever, and dumped them in a big bunch and we've got wheat and tares! Some people are the real thing and the other people are the ones who don't agree with me!" That is putting it in highly subjective terms, but you get the principle. Consequently the church ends up being a great deal like every other organization on the face of the earth. It has got this and that! [There are] people highly dedicated, people not so highly dedicated, people who've got it and understand it, people who don't get it or understand it, people who are part of the programs, people who have ulterior motives and want to do other things through your organization. [This should be obvious!] But there is no place on earth to find the universal church except in the local body. That is the only place to find it.

So there is another question: is something a church because it says so? In Matthew 18:20 Jesus is speaking. This is the end of that little section on church discipline. He says this, a famous statement often taken out of context: *"For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them."* Here is the question: does that mean that that little group was a church? There is Jesus; there are the believers. What more do you need?

To answer the question we need to look at a few more scriptures. Of this much we can be sure; of this much we can be absolutely certain of: if something is a church, it will have Jesus' fingerprints all over it. If any organization claims to be "church" and does not have the character qualities of Jesus Christ and the priorities of Jesus Christ and is not dedicated to the purposes of God, it is not a church. It is something else, and you need to know that. Remember, at the core is getting it right.

The church was at the center of Paul's thinking when he wrote his letter to the Ephesians. Rather than a random group or crowd of saved souls being the fruit of the gospel, Paul presents the church as the fruit of the gospel. This is captured in the remarkable statement with which he closes chapter I, verse 22. This is what he says, *"The Father put all things under Jesus' feet and gave Him as head over all things to the church which is His body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."* This does not say, by the way if you noticed carefully, that the church is given to Jesus as part of His universal rule. This says that the Father gives Jesus Who rules all things to the church, which is then in a way certainly beyond my comprehension, the fullness of Christ. Paul tells us that there is a particular mystery of the gospel associated with the church. What is that mystery? That mystery which Paul says was hidden for ages, is the uniting of the chosen people of God, the Jews, with the Gentiles and creating a single redeemed and reconciled body which is the church. So in Ephesians 2:17-22 we read this:

*"And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in*

*whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”*

How distant can we be from each other, how indifferent can we be to other members of the body, how distant and unknowing and still say to ourselves, “Ah, but we are being integrated together so that we are one in the Spirit. We are a temple worshipping together even though I don’t even know half the people I am around.

The clear intent is that the church universal will include people from every nation and tribe, and ethnic group. That is why we like missionaries who wander across the face of the earth talking about Jesus. If this is the goal or the ultimate purpose, does it make sense to have local assemblies which are functionally the church in the world and are the practical reality which demonstrates the dynamic of the redeeming and life-transforming gospel being divided into separated groups along ethnic lines, age or generational lines, socio-economic lines and whatever other sort of niche market “Church Growth” strategists come up with to make acceptance of the gospel less difficult because ever less demanding that we would learn how to get along with each other?

We are rightly uncomfortable and even a bit suspicious of little spiritual groups comprised of me and my friends: I am referring now to the house church movement. Me and my friends: we all agree on everything, we all pray together easily, we have the same values, we look at things the same way: it is just so easy, there is no conflict. It is just wonderful. The question is, are you doing what God wants you to do? Are you reconciling the ethnic groups of the world? Are you inviting the unpleasant neighbors in?

There is, beloved, a significant difference between sociologically distinct congregations as a result of social and historical forces which have so far not been overcome – the Evangelical Free Church of America has struggled for at least the last 40 years to develop integrated congregations; most of them aren’t. Ours is barely. But it is one thing to own up the fact that we have a significant challenge of overcoming ethnic and racial barriers and social and economic barriers and developing a unified body of Christ that represents the whole community of which it is a part – accepting that as a challenge – as opposed to the results of a marketing strategy. Most megachurches are mega because they have targeted specific socio-economic groups where we all get along just fine.

The point here is not so much to point fingers as it is to raise issues in how we understand what the church is. As mentioned above, the church exists to help those who are saved to grow in grace and truth. One of the ways it does this is by putting us together where we have to work things out. Probably one of the best if not the best things about the Purity Ball is the number of people who work together over an extended period of time which is long enough so that we are tired enough so that we are crabby! I am dead serious. Then you realize: ok, it’s called grace, grace, grace, in reliance upon the Holy Spirit. We learn to do that over time. It is the same thing with choir practice.

One of the ways is, as I have said, is putting us together where we have to work things out. It goes beyond this of course. Here is Paul’s statement of the purpose of the church: Ephesians 3:10-11. “...that through

*the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord...*” These words inform us that the church exists to help us work together and it is always engaged in some kind of spiritual warfare. It is the explicit purpose in Ephesians 6:10-18 for God to showcase His manifold wisdom to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. The church is always engaged in spiritual warfare: always. But we are called by God to demonstrate the reality of His wisdom.

Let me talk about that just a moment. Wisdom is the ability to get things done. In the context of the church, wisdom means getting things done with or by means of the saints. So every time someone says, “I will accept the responsibility, I will join a ministry, I will come on a committee”, they are stepping into the flow of God’s purpose for the manifestation of His wisdom. Every time a person says “No, that is not for me; no, I haven’t got time...” that person is stepping out of the flow of God’s wisdom in the accomplishing of His purpose. Don’t get a guilt trip on this. Christians are called by God to do many things in many places. I know that full well. I am talking about the church and how we think about the church and what we anticipate happening in the context of the church and how we understand our spiritual lives in relationship to God’s purposes through the life of the church. We do not live our entire lives within the context of a body that meets as a local assembly. But where are we?

Amongst the things to be done of course is the renewing of the minds of believers according to the truth of God and conforming the character of the saints after the model and character of Christ. A core commitment for the church and its members is the Great Commission, which involves both reaching the lost with the gospel and training up the saved as disciples. All of these are aspects of what it means to be manifesting the wisdom of God.

I will conclude with this comment. Reflecting on what we have seen so far, this much is obviously true; church life always combines corporate efforts with and on the foundation of individual commitments. You have to ask yourself the question, not “Do I know the purposes of my local church,” But do I care to know? The question is, “In the range of my personal commitments, where is the church?” In what sense do I see and understand myself as one chosen by God to be a functioning part of His body? That body is the church. We are about to take communion. Those of us who had the opportunity to come on Thursday night last, the Maundy Thursday service, it turned out to be a wonderful service. I had opportunity when opening a portion of God’s Word to indicate that when Jesus established the “Lord’s Supper” as the signal ceremony, the ritual by which we enter again into as much as possible imaginatively the experience of those first disciples, seeing that as a sort of template for us in all of our lives, He said right at the end of the Supper, “I give you a new commandment.” That new commandment is that we would love one another as He has loved us. What is significant about that is that if you are familiar with the Upper Room discourses, chapter 13 which is the beginning of the Upper Room discourses, begins with the foot washing by Jesus of the disciples. So we realize that the commandment, *you are to love one another*, didn’t just get stuck on at the end as a sudden thought but Jesus was demonstrating the reality of that sacrificial and humble love for one another at the beginning of the evening and then He crowns it, if you will, by saying, “Here is the heart

of the church. The church remembers me as the One who washed their feet.” That kind of humble service given to one another needs to be the hallmark of the body of Christ.

Please pray with me: our heavenly Father, we have had a little introduction today to some of what you have taught us in Your word regarding what Your Son died for and is building, and it is amazing to us to realize we are a part of His number one project: “I will build My church.” We realize our Father at one level or another the building process is one in which we grow in love for one another. The love manifests itself in a whole variety of ways, not least of which is that we worship together, we bow before You together and we remember You and the incredible example of love given by Your Son Jesus for His disciples. Oh Father, we know You want to work that kind of love in us and through us, so may we be yielded to Your Spirit. We ask this expectantly in Jesus’ name. Amen.