

The Marks of a Real Church

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Guest Speaker

By Pastor John MacArthur

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Pastor Don Green: Hebrews 13:7 says, "Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith." Our speaker this evening really needs no introduction, certainly not from me. He is the featured teacher on the worldwide radio broadcast known as Grace to You. He is the President of the Master's University and the Master's Seminary. He is the author of the "MacArthur Study Bible," and has a complete commentary set on the entire New Testament which he has taught verse-by-verse over the course of his ministry. At the heart of all of those things is his weekly pulpit ministry at Grace Community Church and I don't think that that can be over-emphasized enough. John MacArthur has been the pastor of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California for 48 years, since 1969, and has been teaching verse-by-verse through the Bible that entire time and it is especially because of his commitment to the exposition of Scripture, and especially his commitment to the local church, that we honor tonight. As we think about that which we would want to imitate as a church, that's it, the pulpit ministry of God's word and a commitment to the local church, and John MacArthur has embodied that in his life for almost 60 years now. So with great pleasure and as a great honor for me to be able to welcome John MacArthur, I encourage you to welcome him as he comes to the pulpit now.

Pastor John MacArthur: It is a great pleasure for me to be able to fellowship with you from afar. Actually, I can see you all. You're on camera and it's wonderful. I've been watching you gather over the last few minutes and just a real delight to see the congregation that the Lord has given to my dear friend Don Green. We miss Don. We miss him at Grace Community Church where for many years he shepherded a wonderful fellowship group here. We miss him at Grace to You. His leadership was critical and immensely fruitful. I miss him as a friend and a co-laborer, fellow teacher of the word of God, partner in ministry, but that's kind of how it goes in my world. The Lord brings the best to us, we have them for a while and then he takes them somewhere else in the world for the work that he has called them to do.

So it's just a wonderful privilege for me to be able to spend a little bit of time sharing my heart about the church with all of you, and hoping in some small way to maybe make a small payment on what I owe Don Green for the years of faithfulness that he gave to our

ministry here. By the way, Don, I have to tell you, you've done something that has never happened in my life by sending me that little book with all your stories and comments. I read all that and I thought, you know, I should be dead before I read this because this is like something you save for the funeral, so many kind and thoughtful and loving words. But it was so meaningful to me. Thank you so very much for the kindness that you expressed in that.

But maybe in the providence of the Lord, I'll have the opportunity to be with you in person. This is not the most desirable way to fellowship but for now I'm just honored to be able to be with you, and Don asked me if I would talk a little bit about the church. Obviously, as he said, I've been part of Grace Church for a very long time. I'm sort of like the poor, they always have me with them, pushing 50 years, a pretty incredible amount of time. For some people at Grace Church, I think it must be a death sentence, all these years and it's the same person talking to them, but it's a testimony to the fact that they are really not hearing me, they are hearing the word of God. I'm really sort of the waiter, I don't cook the meal, the Lord prepares the meal, I just bring it to the table. That's kind of my role and the Lord is the one who is honored for what he has provided to feed their souls. So it is a rare thing to think about what Christian preaching is. There was a British orator who said that the most paralyzing thought he ever had was he would have to speak to the same group three times. I guess if you're an orator, you only have so much material and you want to make sure the audience changes so you can reuse it. Well, I've been speaking to the same group three times a week for nearly half a century, and what a testimony it is that they hear the word of God, that they respond to the word of God. This is what expository preaching does. It's not my personality, it's not my insights, not my cleverness, not my stories, it's the Lord opening his word to their understanding by the work of the Holy Spirit and the preparation of the teacher. That's what we do. That's what your beloved pastor, Don, does, so that when you come, you're hearing the head of the church, the Lord Jesus Christ speaking to his church through the one who is his servant.

An illustration of that, many years ago when the missionaries down in Ecuador were killed back in 1957 by the Huaorani people, called Auca Indians, they massacred them, you remember, at Palm Beach, on that little river in the jungle, people thought, "Well, that's the end of that. All those missionaries and lost lives." But some of those wives and sisters stayed there in that jungle and the Lord used them to build churches. To this very day, we send students from the Master's University down. Three of our students just came back from the very jungles in Shalmara(ph) Ecuador where those massacres took place and they were meeting with the older Huaorani people who were part of that massacre. One of the interesting stories to come out of that was that Rachel Saint ended up in a tribe of these Huaorani up in the mountains and I've been there and I've actually preached there, and I said to her, "Well, what are you going to do as a woman? What are you going to do to communicate the word of God to these people? You're the only Christian here?" She said, "Well, at first I prayed that the Lord would bring to salvation one man, and then that one man could be the teacher because the Bible doesn't permit a woman to teach. So the Lord saved one man and from then on," she said, "I would meet with that man and I would teach him the Bible and then he would go preach to the people. He only knew what I told him and that's what he taught." And that, in a sense,

was a picture to me of what ministry is. It's God preparing the message and we are just the instrument who communicate it to the people. What a privilege it is to stand in that place on behalf of the Lord and do that as an under-shepherd in his church.

And when I think about the church, obviously there are so many views of the church, so many perspectives, so many people advocating all kinds of different approaches to church, that I always find myself if I just have kind of one shot at it, going back to the basics. So I want to invite you to take your Bible, if you will, and turn to the 16th chapter of Matthew and let's go back to the Lord himself who is the head of the church, the Lord who is the Redeemer of his church, and let's see what he said about the church, and there's a lot in this section and we will not be able to cover every detail of it, but it will give you a really good framework.

If you ask people, "How do you recognize a church?" people might say, "Well, it's pretty easy. You look for a cross or you look for a building that is kind of shaped traditionally like a church, or you look for a steeple, or you look for a stained-glass window, or you look for a sign that says 'church.'" But you know, that's really not necessarily true. You could see all of those things and what's inside is a misrepresentation of the church. It's not that easy to find a church. You say, "Well, if you go inside and you see pews and a platform and a pulpit and an organ and a choir maybe, or a praise band, or some folks gathered and they have Bibles in their hands, isn't that how you tell a church?" Well, that's how you tell a gathering of people who might think it's a church but how do you really know you have found a church, I mean the church that Christ is building? How do you know this is a real church?

I live in a community out here in Southern California that boasts 150 churches in a rather condensed area, 150 churches, and you might say to people, "Hey, they're all over the place. Just go pick one. They're all going to be saying the same thing." Well, nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, most of those places that call themselves churches are trying as hard as they can to say something that nobody else is saying because they are under the illusion that to find their place in the sun, they need to be different than everybody else; that somehow that they are going to attract people, they've got to do it differently rather than find some pattern of tradition or familiarity. That seems to be, for some of them, a kind of kiss of death.

How do you really find a church? I mean a church you can give your life to? And that's another issue, isn't it? There are people who hop from church to church to church to church, they go wherever the latest musical group is going to show up, or sermon series that interests them, or the latest person they met, or maybe they're looking for business contacts, or maybe there is something in the neighborhood that attracts them. How do you really find a church that you can settle down in and bury your life in for the duration? That is the real question and our Lord answers it in Matthew 16, because here we have the components of a real church. This is amazingly comprehensive.

Now, I have to tell you that Matthew 16 is the first place in the New Testament where the word "church" appears. This is the first time it appears and I also have to remind you that

the church wasn't invented yet, not even in Matthew 16. The church doesn't really come into existence, it isn't born until the day of Pentecost recorded in Acts 2 when the Spirit came down and the church was established. So you're in Matthew 16, this is before the church has come into existence but here is our Lord's pattern, here is his plan, this is the blueprint for the church that honors him, the church he is building.

Now in this text there is a familiar statement, it's in verse 18. You can just look at it. It's the statement, "I will build My church. I will build My church." Somebody said to me years ago, "Do you have a desire to build the church?" And I said, "I have no desire to build the church because I don't want to compete with Jesus. I'm not in the church building business. I'm not trying to build a church. The church has a builder and the builder is the Lord Jesus Christ. I'm not going to compete with him. He doesn't need my help in building his church. I'm merely called to serve him in the unfolding plan that he is doing to fulfill the promise to build his church."

In the words of our Lord in Matthew 16, we really see all the essential elements of a true church, and by the way, they become the standards by which you can measure a true church. So it's all sort of condensed in this blueprint that our Lord laid out even before the church was born. Now, if you get into the book of Acts after the church is born and you go into the epistles written by the apostles, all the letters to the churches, what you see in the book of Acts and the preaching of the apostles and the planting of churches and what you see in the epistles addressed to churches, is the outworking of these patterns, the outworking of these structures, these initial plans that our Lord gave in Matthew 16. The rest of the New Testament talks about the church but it builds on, expands, elucidates, the very principles that are in this passage. They are, I would say, doctrinal foundations. They are structural foundations.

So let's look at this text and we'll start in verses 13 and go down to verse 16. Follow as I read.

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ [or the Messiah], the Son of the living God."

Here is the first great reality regarding the church. The church makes, let's say it this way, the church makes a great confession. A true church is known by a great confession. I walked into the building here on our church campus to meet with you and to speak with you in this studio, and as I was coming through the lobby of this building, there was a huge sign hanging on the wall and what that sign said is, "We preach Christ," and then it went on line after line after line after line after line after line defining everything that the Scripture reveals about Christ in a summary of Christology, a summary of the doctrine of Christ. That is the church's great confession. It is its confession that, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

This is the foundation. This is the cornerstone of the church. Christ is the cornerstone, Ephesians 2:20. This is the first absolute in the true church. It is a biblical view of Christ. It is not as simple as a personal relationship with Christ. We hear people talk about that, "I have a personal relationship with Christ." I'm glad you do but I want you to know something: every single person on the planet has a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, he may be their Savior or he may be their eternal judge, but in either case it's very personal. To say you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is not to say anything unique. Everyone has a relationship with Christ. Everyone's life is fully known to him, the record of everyone's life is fully known to him. There is an accounting in heaven of everything every single person has ever done which will be used personally as the full indictment which is the cause of their eternal judgment. It's not about some sort of nebulous, undefined, sentimental idea that I have some kind of relationship with Jesus. It is a true confession of Christ that is the foundation of the church and the reality behind true salvation.

Now, let's look a little bit at this passage because I think it helps to force that to us with some strength. Jesus comes into our district called Caesarea Philippi. Once it had a name and the name was Paneas. Paneas, that region, was named for the Greek god Pan, and you may have heard somebody play pan flutes, a kind of mythical mystical instrument that is associated with ancient gods of love and romance. Well, it was the god Pan who supposedly was born in this region. It became a center for Greek and Roman idolatry. Caesarea Philippi became its name because it was a decision to name it after Caesar. Instead of being named after gods, it was named after Caesar. It didn't change the environment at all because it was full of idols, it was full of gods, they just added another temple, a temple to Augustus Caesar and renamed the city in his honor.

So here is this town and its history is full of idolatry, full of the pantheon of many gods in the Greek religious culture, and now there is a new one, Augustus Caesar, and it is in this place where all these cultures meet, where all these religions come together, where all these gods coexist, that you are to confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. He is not like dead idols. He is not like false gods. He is the living Son of the one true living God. He is the anointed prophet, priest and king, the promised Messiah, the promised Redeemer. The disciples said it also in John 6:68, "You have the words of eternal life. You are the holy one of God. To whom shall we go? There is no one else." He is one in nature with the Father, the one true God.

In the early church, there was a simple statement that identified the Christian confession, it summed it up this way: Jesus is Lord. If you ran into a Christian, that was the common confession, Jesus is Lord. And of course, that was God's desire. Jesus gave him a name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee would bow. That is the title, Lord. Every tongue shall confess that Jesus is Lord. You have the foundation laid for a true church when it is clear and accurate and biblical and committed to the confession that Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God and he is Lord. It amazes me how many so-called churches want to put Jesus Christ into some sentimental posture but don't want to make him a threat to anybody's lifestyle choices, and so they preach a kind

of minimal Christ who is not the true Christ but a false representation of Christ. They literally are proclaiming another Christ and to proclaim another Christ is to proclaim another Gospel, and that is anathema. That brings about a divine curse.

This is the confession that defines and establishes a true church. The church is not a group of people who need friends, although we have friends there. The church is not an assembly of folks who need a motivational talk. It's not a place where people with low self-esteem can meet so that you can make them feel better about themselves. It's not a place to help people with their addictions. And it's not a place for people to mindlessly go through routine rituals and ceremonies that they don't think about at all. It is an assembly of believers who all make the same great confession, Jesus is the Son of the living God. He is the Messiah. He is the Redeemer. He is Lord. And by the way, when you say Jesus is Lord, you are saying, "I am his slave." Krios/Lord is the topside of doulos/slave. When you confess someone as Lord, you have therefore confessed, "I am his slave." The church, then, is the willing slaves of Christ confessing him as Lord. Now, Jesus said in Luke 9:23, "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself." That's slave talk. You have no will. You have no ambition. You give up everything to be a slave of Christ, but slavery to Christ is true freedom. All the slaves of Christ will one day be crowned. All the slaves of Christ will one day sit on his throne with him in glory. But to say, "Jesus is Lord," is to say, "I'm not and no one else is, I am his slave." The church is founded on that confession.

I know one of the things that has marked Grace Community Church over the years is that we have spent so much time exalting Christ. For 10 years, I went verse-by-verse, Sunday after Sunday after Sunday through the Gospel of Matthew. Every Sunday. Every sentence. Every paragraph in the 28 chapters of Matthew was focused on Jesus Christ. Ten years of seeing the glory of Christ. Then we went through the Gospel of Luke, another almost 10 years, 24 chapters but more material than Matthew. This is 20 years and Christ is the theme of every text, every account, every story. And then we went through the Gospel of Mark and it was another several years. Every Sunday was the Lord Jesus. And then just recently we finished our second run through the Gospel of John, which I had done very early in the ministry long long ago. So if you just took the recent history of this church, 10 years in Matthew, 10 years in Luke, two or three years in Mark, two or three years in John, you've got almost 30 years of people seeing Christ on the pages of the four Gospels. Then, of course, we've gone through Revelation twice, and that's Christ exalted. And by the way, pastors sometimes say to me, "Well, I don't really preach in Revelation. It's kind of confusing." It isn't. It's one of the easiest books in the Bible to interpret. It's not difficult at all. But even more significantly, you mean you would teach the Old Testament which is the anticipation of Christ, and you would teach the Gospels which is the Incarnation of Christ, and you would teach the book of Acts which is the proclamation of Christ, and then you would teach the epistles which is the explanation of Christ, but you would leave out the book of Revelation which is the glorification of Christ? Why would you do that? That's where all the rest is headed.

We've been through the book of Revelation twice, through the book of Hebrews which is the superiority of Christ, through the book of Romans which explains the details of the

Gospel. We are now going through the book of Galatians for the first time since 1973. We did a series on the Old Testament, finding Christ in the Old Testament, that peaked out in a series in Isaiah 53, that great chapter on Christ. If there's anything that the people of Grace Community Church understand, it is the person of Jesus Christ and great is our confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus is Lord. That defines our church. That defines what it is to be a church. The church is the body, Christ is the head. There is so much more to say about that. Church is a gathering of people who would say with Thomas, "My Lord and my God, the Lord Jesus Christ."

It's really sad to me to see the absence of the preaching of Christ in churches. Now, most of my experience with other churches is I am there preaching and that doesn't tell me much about what's going on when I'm not there, but I get doses of it from listening to Christian radio and Christian television, and I keep finding myself saying to my wife, Patricia, "Why doesn't anyone preach Christ? Why doesn't anyone exalt Christ?" Even the Apostle Paul says, "That I may know him." That's the foundation. You can tell if you're in a real church by whether or not Christ is constantly being exalted. Is the focus vertical on the person of Jesus Christ?

So the first mark of a true church is its Christology, the great confession. The second, we'll call the great communication. Go back to the text and look at verses 17 to 19.

17 And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.
18 I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven."

This has been a very controversial passage. I'm not going to intend to unpack every detail of it, but let's get enough of it to know what it is saying to us that is so important. "Blessed are you, Peter." You are blessed. Why are you blessed? "Because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven." Peter's confession came because of divine communication. Peter didn't figure this out on his own by himself. He could make this confession, "not by flesh and blood," there is no human source for this, there is only one source, "My Father who is in heaven." So we say this: the foundation of the church requires divine revelation. The foundation of the church requires divine revelation. Salvation comes by the word. We are born again by the word of truth. Sanctification comes by the word, "Sanctify them by thy truth. Thy word is truth," John 17:17.

Peter received a divine revelation. That divine revelation, by the way, came through Jesus Christ. He received it firsthand, divine revelation through Jesus Christ. That was the uniqueness of the apostles. That was the uniqueness of the apostles. In 1 John, John says, "That which we heard, that which we saw, that which our hands have handled, we declare unto you concerning the word of life. It was manifested to us and we saw Him and we

heard Him." Christ was that divine revelation. Even the Apostle Paul in defending his own apostleship says to the Galatians, "Paul, an apostle. Not through man or by the agency of men but by Jesus Christ from God the Father." The Apostle Paul goes on in Galatians to say, "When I met the Lord on the Damascus Road, the Lord didn't send me to Jerusalem to be taught by somebody else. The Lord sent me into the desert, into Arabia," and he was out into that desert for three years before he ever showed up in Jerusalem. What was going on was he was receiving divine firsthand revelation. That was the mark of an apostle. That's what John is saying, "That which we heard and saw and touched, that's what we declare concerning the word of life. We were with Him." Paul is saying the same thing, "I encountered Christ on the Damascus Road and then I went into the desert and the Lord gave me His divine revelation."

Now, we don't have that anymore because there are no more apostles. Paul was the last of the apostles, but the apostles were given the responsibility by God through the Holy Spirit to write down the truths they received. That's why the early church is born on the day of Pentecost. In Acts 2:42, "they gave themselves to the apostles' teaching." There was no New Testament. They received divine revelation that came to the apostles through the apostles to them. We have that same thing. The apostles and those with the apostles were used by the Lord to write the New Testament. They wrote the New Testament and we have the New Testament which is the Holy Spirit-inspired writing of the apostles and those who were associated with the apostles. A church is known by its submission to divine revelation, to a divine communication from our Father who is in heaven. God has a revelation and he reveals it to us by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit through the apostles and associates of the apostles who write it down, and that's how the New Testament comes into place. The church, then, is under the apostles' doctrine as revealed on the pages of the New Testament.

Now, look back at this text for just a moment. Verse 18, "I say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church." "You are Peter," Peter means a small stone, but "on this rock," it means a rock bed, "I will build My church." What is the rock bed? The revelation of God. The revelation of God, the revelation, the truth that comes out of heaven. The church is not built on Peter as the Roman Catholic Church would want us to believe, it is built on the rock bed of apostolic doctrine as revealed from heaven. The foundation of the church is the revelation of God given through the apostles who are the foundation and recorded on the pages of holy Scripture. 1 Corinthians 4:6 says the church is "not to exceed what has been written." The church is not built on the supremacy of Peter, it is built on the revelation that Peter proclaimed. That is so very important. That is why the entire Roman Catholic system is a false church. A false church. No church is built on Peter. The church is built on the truth of divine revelation.

So what do we say about the church? The church is a gathering of people who confess Jesus as the Son of the living God, as Lord, and subject themselves to the authority of divine revelation. For us it is recorded in the New Testament in the word of God and it is the absolute and final authority, of course, for our lives. Verse 19 then adds this, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in

heaven." This is such an important statement. What is it talking about? It is saying this: we have been given the keys to the kingdom of heaven, what are the keys to the kingdom of heaven? What opens the door to the kingdom of heaven? The Gospel. The revelation of God. The Gospel of Christ. That's the key to the kingdom of heaven. So whatever opens the door of heaven is the key to heaven, and what opens the door is the Gospel. The church has been given, then, this divine revelation of the Gospel that is the key that unlocks the kingdom of heaven for men and women, and further, the Bible has such authority, the word of God has such authority that whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.

Now, in ancient times the rabbis talked about binding and loosing. They would say to someone, "You are bound in your sin because you haven't repented." You are bound in your sin. To someone they might say, "Because you have repented, you are loosed from your sins." They didn't do the loosing and they didn't do the binding, that was simply the reality of the person's relationship to God. If you had repented and turned from your sins, you were loosed from your sins. If you were committing sins and holding onto sin, you were bound in your sin. Well, we in the church as believers, can say the same thing. I can say to people, "You are bound in your sin if you reject Jesus Christ. You are bound in your sin if you do not repent and turn to Christ for forgiveness and salvation." To another person I could say, "You are loosed from your sins because you have believed the Gospel." Now follow this: that is how much authority the church has. A pastor, a Christian can say to someone, "You are bound in your sins because you have not repented and embraced the Gospel and Christ as Lord." To another you can say, "Because you have repented, because you have embraced the Gospel, confessed Jesus as Lord, you are loosed from your sins."

So the authority of the church doesn't exist in an isolated way. It is simply that we have the right to pronounce the judgments that Scripture has revealed. The judgments that Scripture has revealed. Look, Jesus said in the Gospel of John, "You will die in your sins because you do not believe in Me." I have the authority to say that because it's scriptural. I can say what Jesus says to someone, "You will die in your sins because you believe not on Christ." That is part of the church's role in the world. I think it ought to be pretty obvious to most of us that the church is happy to announce forgiveness but not so happy to announce judgment. Very little preaching on people being bound in their sins, on people dying under the judgment of God, headed for the eternal wrath of God and everlasting hell. What motivation is there to come to Christ, to confess him as Lord, to come under the authority of Scripture, to gather together with believers, what motivation is there if there is no judgment to escape? If there is no hell to avoid? The Gospel is only good news to people who have heard the bad news.

So how do we know a church? A church is an assembly of people who confess Jesus as Lord; a church is an assembly of people who come under the authority of the word of God and proclaim the fullness of the message of the word of God, both the promise of the kingdom of heaven and the forgiveness of sins, and the warning of eternal judgment and the kingdom of darkness in everlasting punishment where there is no faith and repentance. This marks a church. We have a delegated authority from the Lord himself.

This church, this church is fulfilling what our Lord intended. This is the church that he's building. Look at verse 18, "I will build My church; and the gates of Hades," meaning death, "will not overpower it." It is invincible as it is authoritative. The church is being built by the Lord himself and the gates of Hades, the gates of Hades simply means the gates that open up to let you into death, death itself cannot stop the church. Death itself cannot stop the church. Christ has defeated him who had the power of death, the writer of Hebrews says.

So the church exalts the doctrine of the apostles now inspired in the New Testament Scripture, and the true sign of a church is apostolic Gospel, apostolic doctrine preached from the word of God in its fullness, and it warns about being bound in sin leading to eternal judgment, and it offers the good news of being loosed from sin through faith in the Gospel. That's why we are told as preachers, "Preach the word. Preach the word in season, out of season." I don't know what specifically Paul had in mind, in season and out of season, but I do know this: you're either in or out of it. Those are the only two options, which is another way of saying, "Preach the word all the time. Preach the word." It's an authoritative word. It's not only an authoritative word, the word of God is alive and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword. It is the most powerful weapon God has placed in the hands of his people.

I hear pastors say they believe in the Bible, they believe the Bible is the word of God, and then they give their ideas. Really? If you say the Bible is the word of God, then why would you give your ideas? This doesn't make any sense. I can basically tell the true attitude of any preacher toward Scripture by what comes out of his mouth when he stands up behind a pulpit. If the word of God comes out, then he believes that it is the power of God. "I'm not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ," Paul says, "It is the power of God unto salvation." The power is not in the preacher, it's not in his cleverness, it's not in his stories, it's not in his insights, it's not in his experience, it's in the Scripture.

So how do you know when you come to a true church? There will be a dominating confession that Jesus Christ is the Christ, the Son of the living God, the Redeemer, and he is Lord, and a congregation of people will be exalting Christ. There will be a dominating force in that church and it will be the revealed written word of God, holy Scripture, so that the revelation of God is the only authority that reigns in that church. Even as a pastor for nearly 50 years, my education doesn't give me any authority. My experience doesn't give me any authority. My insight doesn't give me any authority. I don't have any authority unless I'm speaking the word of God and then Christ, the head of the church, is exercising his authority. I'm just delivering the message.

So Christ is enthroned and Scripture is expounded in a true church. Now, let me talk about a third thing that comes out of this passage, verse 20,

20 Then He warned the disciples that they should tell no one that He was the Christ.

That is not exactly the Great Commission. In fact, that is the opposite. That is so counterintuitive that you sort of stop and say, "Whoa, wait a minute, I thought we were supposed to tell everyone that he's the Christ?" "He warned the disciples that they should tell no one that He was the Christ." By the way, the warning here, very serious warning, this is, "Don't evangelize. Don't say anything." This is really strange. Tell no one that he is the Christ? Why don't we tell anyone that he is the Christ? Well now, think about the context. In Israel at the time of our Lord, the Jews had a view of Messiah. They thought Messiah was going to be truly a son of David in the Davidic line, he would be a man, he would have royal blood, he would have a right to the throne, and that his role was going to be to bring the kingdom and all its promises, the promises God gave to Abraham and then to David in the Davidic promise and then through the prophets, all the promises of the coming kingdom, and in their view it was an earthly kingdom and Messiah was an earthly ruler who would free Israel from all of its enemies including at this time, the Roman occupation, destroy all the enemies of Israel, exalt Israel, enthrone Israel as if they were the global king of the world, and fulfill all the promises in the Old Testament. That was Messiah's role. It would be a political role, it would be a military role, it would be a societal role, it would be a cultural upgrade, and Israel would be in the place of the fulfillment of all promises. They were looking for an earthly ruler. Jesus said, John 18:36, "My kingdom is not of this world." Not of this world. "If it were, My servants would fight." This he said when he had been arrested and no one had prevented the Jews or the Romans from doing that. The reason he tells them, "Don't tell anyone," is because their messianic understanding was so wrong that they would have forced things to happen that were not in the plan of God.

Do you remember when they tried to make him a king and he disappeared? He did not want to fulfill their current messianic expectation. To say it another way: he had no political agenda. He has no connection to earthly kingdoms. Let me make it real simple: what happened politically in Israel at that time had nothing to do with the kingdom of God. I'll bring it into our time. You hear people say, "We're watching the decline of our own nation. It's really sad what's happening to America." And I agree, it is, but I just want to encourage you what happens to America or any other nation in any other time in human history, has nothing to do with the kingdom of God. Nothing. It doesn't hinder God's purpose. It doesn't help God's purpose. It is irrelevant. It is simply the outworking of the fall and corruption and it cycles through all of human history. As evil men continue to follow the same patterns of self-destruction, so nations follow the same cycle and the patterns of self-destruction. This is just how it is. Acts 14, God allows all the nations to go their own way. Romans 1. The cycle just keeps going and going and the wrath of God keeps falling and falling in this cyclical fashion through the history of the world, but the Lord still builds his church.

Now, what the Lord is saying is, "Don't connect the church to any temporal politics or any temporal nation or any temporal achievements or morality or issues." Jesus didn't fight slavery. Jesus didn't fight economic disparity. Jesus didn't deal with social justice. The kingdom of God has nothing to do with the kingdoms of this world. The church is not a hybrid, part culture, part kingdom. No. There is no connection between a nation and the church. The church does not exist as a part of some sacral society. That was the

universal reality prior to the founding of America and yet Christians spent time and money trying to alter the culture.

Look, I believe in morality, I believe in fighting battles. I read an article yesterday that basically said this and I think it's true, the article said Christians, professing Christians, are the cause of all that is going wrong with America. I thought, that's interesting, and I began to read the article and this is what the writer said: Christians' unwillingness, churches' unwillingness, pastors' unwillingness to stand up against the destruction of marriage, against the destruction of the home, against the process of making homosexuality normal, have paved the way for all that we experience today. It isn't that we wanted it, it is that the church has been unwilling to stand up against it. In that sense, he said, they bear the responsibility. We do need to stand up for divine truth. We do need to uphold the standard of divine revelation and the purposes of God. We do need to protect people and to do what we can to see that they can live in a nation where they enjoy the best of what we call common grace, but that's a minor part of why we're here. We're here to advance the kingdom and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The time would come when Jesus would say, "Now go. Start in Jerusalem and then go to Judea and then go to Samaria and then go to the ends of the earth and preach the Gospel." But that couldn't be done yet because the Gospel wasn't yet set. He hadn't died. He hadn't been buried. He hadn't risen from the dead. So he says, "Don't say anything because this will be completely misunderstood. Wait until my death. Wait until my resurrection. And after that in appearances I will tell you when to go." Then when he says, "I'm ready to send you," he says, "Wait again. Wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit not many days from now." And finally when all the Gospel events were finished and they could preach everything from the virgin birth to the resurrection and were empowered by the Holy Spirit, "Now go into the world as My witnesses." A true church understands this: their responsibility is not political, it is not cultural, it is not social, it is not to rearrange the deck chairs on the Titanic. The Titanic is going down, it doesn't matter where the deck chairs are. The church's responsibility is to rescue the drowning people through the Gospel and that's why Jesus says to the disciples, "Don't say anything to anyone now. Wait until the Gospel story is complete and the Holy Spirit has come." So this is what I call a great contrast. A great contrast. You're in the world, you're not of the world. Great contrast.

There's a fourth principle, foundational principle in the church, and maybe we'll begin to wrap things up with this one. A true church centers on the great confession, the great communication, the great contrast, and the great conquest, verse 21.

21 From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day.

What do we have there? The cross and the resurrection and that's the Gospel. The priority of the church: the cross. The cross. The cross. The resurrection. The resurrection. The resurrection. We preach righteousness, sin, judgment, the substitutionary atoning death of

Christ. His resurrection. We preach the doctrine of imputation, our sins imputed to Christ, he dies in our place, his righteousness imputed to us, we live forever in his presence. Church is not a place for cheap entertainment. It's not theater. It's not a place for shallow psychology. It's really not a place for sort of Old Testament based praise. A church is a place for the proclamation of the cross and the resurrection. The cross and the resurrection. A robust, clear, defined, powerful presentation of the significance of the cross and the resurrection.

When you ask, "Is this a church?" ask yourself, "Is Christ exalted? Is the Scripture the dominating and sole authority? Are they separated from the passing world? Is there a transcendence here so that this is the kingdom of heaven? And does the cross and resurrection with all its truths dominate the lives of its people?" We live in the light of the cross and the resurrection. That's the Lord's table, isn't it, and that's baptism. The Lord's table, we remember the cross. Baptism, we demonstrate resurrection. Those are the two ordinances given to the church. And oh, by the way, in churches that are indifferent toward the Gospel, the Lord's table and baptism are depreciated, diminished, and maybe even disappear.

Maybe I have time to just mention one other thing: a true church is also engaged in a great conflict. Notice verse 22,

22 Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You."

This is Peter, brash Peter, telling the Lord, "You're not going to be arrested. You're not going to be killed."

23 But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's."

Let me tell you something about a true church: a true church is actively engaged in a war against Satan and sometimes that war against Satan is from the inside. Peter? Peter of all people is the instrument of Satan? So Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan"? How do you know when someone is representing Satan? Because you're not setting your mind on God's interest but man's. This is the strongest language imaginable. Peter uses strong language to contradict Jesus and Jesus uses even stronger language to denounce Peter. "You are a stumbling block to Me. You are hindering My work."

It is foundational to the church that its commitment be to the revealed will of God against all opposition. This is a true church. It will fight all that opposes the will of God. Foundational. The true church makes the great confession. The true church comes under the authority of the great communication. A true church lives out the great separation, the great contrast with the world. The true church proclaims constantly the great conquest at Calvary, the cross, the resurrection. And the true church willing to face the great conflict

with sin and Satan. Enjoy the triumph that the Lord gives when we fight for his cause and his will in his name.

So we've talked about a church. It doesn't say anything about pews or steeples or stained-glass windows or choirs. Those kinds of forms can change but the heart of the church are the things that were on the heart of our Lord here. This is the church. This is the church he is building.

He goes on to say verse 24, there it is again, it requires self-denial; it requires taking up a cross; "following Me"; losing your life. But in the end there is one other thing about a true church here: a true church participates in the great consummation. Verse 27,

27 "For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and will then repay every man according to his deeds. 28 Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom."

What in the world would that mean? They would see a preview of the Second Coming in the Transfiguration which happens in the next verse in chapter 17.

This is the final thing I want to say about a true church: it is related aggressively, eagerly, happily, to the return of Jesus Christ. That's how we set our affections on things above and not things on the earth. It isn't caught up in the prosperity Gospel and, "I need it now. I want it now. Make my life comfortable. Give it to me now." It's self-denial, cross-bearing, obedience, giving up your life, losing your life, and hoping for the glory to come at the return of Christ. A true church will not be consumed with the world. A true church will have its affections set on things above and like the Thessalonian church, and I love what it says about them in 1 Thessalonians 1:10, "to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come." A true church is waiting for Jesus to return. A true church knows the world can't be fixed. It's going to get more evil all the time. It's not going to get better. It's sinking fast. But the Lord Jesus is coming. That's his promise, "The same Jesus taken up from us will so come in like manner as you have seen Him go," Acts 1 says, and that's the hope of the believer that we call the blessed hope. A church without an understanding of the Second Coming is a church that is bereft of the final end of the story and the final glory of the Christ they love and proclaim.

This is the full range of the structure of a church. I know this for sure: I know that your dear pastor knows this, believes this, and is leading you to these same great convictions. You're blessed to have found a real church.

Bow with me in prayer.

Father, I thank you that we have been able to spend some time together with these precious people, and I pray that you will bless Don and his wife and family, that you will bless all the congregation and that, Lord, you would fulfill your will there and that that

church would be a beacon and a lighthouse of truth. What a great name, Truth Community Church, and that's what they proclaim, the living truth, the Incarnate truth, and the written truth, the scriptural truth. We know that your truth is the most important thing in the world, the most important thing that exists, for through the truth come salvation, sanctification and all comforts and all hope. So may the truth prevail and may you be honored. We thank you, Father, for giving us the privilege of knowing you and enjoying all the riches of your grace, and we thank you in the name of Christ. Amen.

Don: Before you go, we just want to thank you for spending the time with us this evening. Thank you for taking time to do that. We are so very grateful for the way the Lord has blessed your ministry, for the way that you have exemplified the priority of Christ in the church in all of your ministry, and it's our goal and our desire simply to somehow walk in the wake of what you have led so wonderfully for the past 50 years. Thank you so much for being with us.

John: Thank you, Don. Love you, my brother. Thank you.

Don: What a privilege that exposition was for us, and however far short we fall of what John expounded about the real church, that is our aspiration, those six points from Matthew 16. So we are just so grateful that you could be with us.

Thanks for listening to Pastor Don Green from Truth Community Church in Cincinnati, Ohio. You can find church information, Don's complete sermon library and other helpful materials at thetruthpulpit.com.