

## **Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time***

### **The Calling of the Church**

Scripture: Ephesians 1:4-14

Code: 1284

As we began our service this morning, I read to you from the first chapter of Ephesians. I would like to invite you, if you will, to open your Bible to that chapter as we share some of the great truths out of that portion of Scripture, as we think on this, the 25th anniversary of our church. Ephesians chapter 1. Grace Community Church is unique. It has been the subject of much discussion throughout the years among people, pastors, leaders, laymen, and even the outside world. Magazines have written articles about us. Several doctoral students have written their theses on our church. Reports, seminars, newspapers, journals, tapes, books, all of these have undertaken to analyze Grace Community Church. We have been dissected, examined, studied, labeled, categorized, scrutinized, copied, blessed, cursed, defended, ignored, endowed, publicized, and even sued.

Now, what has caused all this attention? Why is it that Grace Community Church has so much of the focus? Grace Community Church has become a haven, a home, a harbor for those in need; a family for the needy, the lonely; a school for the untaught; a fortress for the fearful; an open door for those who are shut out; offering love for the unloved; peace for those in chaos; acceptance for the rejected; forgiveness for the guilty; hope for the hopeless; bringing light to darkness; giving life for death. I remember when I first came here in February of 1969, several of the young people had a T-shirt on. And on that T-shirt it said, "Grace is where it's at." People through the years have been trying to figure out what it is that's at Grace. Why is this place so special? Why is it so unique? Why is it the object of so much interest, and the channel of so much power?

Well, I think the key to understanding Grace Community Church and its amazing 25-year history is not to analyze its pastors, nor its staff, programs, methods, its leaders, its elders, its congregation, its growth, its size, its location. Though all of those are essential to what it is, they are not really the key. The real key, and I think it can be simply reduced, is to understand what Grace is by its very name. I think it's all revealed there. And I don't believe it's in the word Grace, although that's a wonderful word. There is also a Grace Petroleum Company, and a Grace Shipping Company, and a Grace Investment Company, and would you believe, a Grace Fertilizer Manufacturing Company. I'm quite confident it is not in the title Community, because there are a myriad of community agencies.

The key to our identity is in that last word: church. That's it. That sums up everything we are. We are not Grace Community Club. We are not Grace Community Company. We are not Grace Community Recreation Center. We are not Grace Community Childcare Agency. We are not Grace Community Self-Help Association. We are not Grace Community Divinity School. We are not Grace Community

Convention Center, Grace Community Theater, nor are we Grace Community Psychological and Religious Maladjustment Center. We are Grace Community Church, and that's the key. That's why the world has such a difficult time understanding us, because they don't understand what a church is. That term sets us apart from all other human institutions. And if you really understand the word church, you understand 25 years of history at this particular place. We are the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, purchased with His own blood. No other institution in the world is in any way like the church. And if we can understand what it means to be a church, then we can understand what we are, what we have been, and what we will continue to be.

Now, when I say the word church, just the term itself doesn't give you all you need to know about what it means. In fact, the word church has sort of lost its profound richness. When we say the word church, we usually think of bricks and mortar and a building on a corner or in a street somewhere. Or maybe we think of church as a hierarchy of orders, an institution of some kind. We've really lost the richness of the word church. We should feel too bad. Most languages somehow lose the meaning of that by which they designate the body of Christ. I read this week, that in Japanese, Korean, and Chinese, there is the same root for the word church in all three languages, and it means a teaching society where people gather in a classroom to be lectured by a professional religious teacher.

Well, a church cannot really be defined as some building in the middle of a block or on a corner, nor can it be defined as a teaching association where there are lectures given by a religious teacher. So, the terms themselves don't really help us. We've got to go behind them. So, let's go back. In the New Testament, we find the word church used repeatedly. It basically is a translation of a Greek word *ekklesia*. I wish, in a way, that the English translators had just transliterated and given us the word *ekklesia*, so we'd have had a unique word for ourselves. But it comes from a verb root *kale*, which means to call, to call. And there is a very good word for what we are. We are the called. In fact, I think we are wonderfully defined in the end of Romans 8:28. "We are the called according to His purpose." The church can best be understood as the called ones. That's what we are. We are the assembly of the called. We are Grace Community Called Ones. We are a group summoned together by God, for His purpose. We are not a human organization. We are not the result of man's ingenuity or man's power. We were not built by good, religious people. We are called by God into existence. We are the congregation called together by God. That is our definition. That is our identity.

The church, then, beloved, is not the subject of the sentence. The church is the object of the sentence. We are the called, and God is the caller. When people ask me, and they ask me all the time, how did we build Grace Church? I give them the same answer. We didn't. God did, and that doesn't seem to help them. They want to know, "What did you do? How can I take what you've got and make it into what it is that you're seeing in terms of results in my own location? How can I reproduce what you've got? How can I do this?" But, the problem is we are what we are because God called us into being, not because we made ourselves into what we are. We are the called.

This is emphasized throughout the New Testament. If you are to look, for example, at Romans chapter 1 for just a moment, you would find there in verse 6, Paul writing the church at Rome says, "Among whom are ye also the called of Jesus Christ." That is the best definition of a church, the called of Jesus Christ. "To all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints." First Corinthians, you hear the same thing to the Corinthian church, verse 2 of 1 Corinthians 1. "Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called saints," then listen to this, "with all that in every place shall call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord." In other words, anybody in anyplace who calls upon the name of the Lord Jesus is a called one. Called saints. We have been called together. In 1 Corinthians 1:26, "You see your calling, brethren," and then he goes on to describe the nature of the makeup of the church. "God has called you into existence."

You find in Ephesians chapter 4 verse 1, "Walk worthy of the vocation to which you are called." Verse 4, "You are called in one hope of your calling." You find, similarly, in 1 Thessalonians 2:12, "Walk worthy of God, who has called you unto His Kingdom." Second Timothy 1:9, "God saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose." And it goes on like that. In fact, that term appears in Scripture either in Old Testament form or New Testament form over 700 times. The church is best identified as the called. The called according to His purpose. Peter picks up the same thing in 1 Peter chapter 5 and verse 10, and basically says identically what Paul said. "The God of all grace who hath called us unto His eternal glory by Christ Jesus." We are called of God. That is the reason we are what we are, and that explains us, basically.

Now, if there's anything I believe about this church, if there's anything at all, the bottom line of everything, I believe this church is called into existence by God Himself; and I believe what we are, we are because God has so ordained us to be that. It is not due to the expression of the religious genius of man, or the charisma of some leaders, or the power of persuasive speech, or the affluence of our membership, or the effectiveness of our facility, or the wisdom of our committees, or our programs or the result of hard work or brilliance. It is the work of God. This church has never been led by men. It has only been served by men. It has always been led by God through the lordship of Jesus Christ mediated by the Holy Spirit through the Word in the lives of obedient people. It is Christ's church, and I confess to you, and I like the name Grace Community Church very much. But if I had a choice for the name of a church, I would name a church Christ's Church, so that nobody would have any question to whom it belonged. It is His church. He builds it. He leads it. He is the caller. We are the called.

Now, that fact, beloved, explains all our goodness and all our success and all our power and all our blessing and all our spiritual richness. That explains all of that. On the other hand, may I hasten to add, the weakness and the failures of our church are explained by the fact that God has chosen to work through human agencies. When we succeed, it is Him, not us. When we fail, it is us, not Him. Wherever God moves, the flowers bloom. Wherever we walk along, they die, and that is why it is so

very difficult to analyze us. One seminary used to bring its students here to analyze us, and they stopped doing that, because it confused the students, because we didn't fit the standard pattern. They couldn't figure out how we did things, and how things got done without following certain procedures.

You know why it is difficult to analyze us? It's easy to analyze our failures. Those are human; but nobody cares to analyze and repeat those. It's well-nigh impossible to analyze our success, because that is supernatural, and you can't can it. And so, when we succeed, it is Him; and when we fail, it is us. Now, what I'm saying is that Grace Community Church for 25 years has been blessed only when it has fully functioned as God's called people. Not some human organization. The single great goal of this church is to let God work, to let God be active, to let God build His Kingdom, build His church, and to clear a path for Him through our obedient submission to His Word and His Spirit. We are the called.

Now, look with me at Ephesians chapter 1, and I think I can maybe begin, at least, to fill up in your mind, a comprehension of what it means to be called or to be the church, by just taking the word called and adding a string of prepositions to it, all of which are pointed out in the first chapter of Ephesians verses 3 to 14. And the reason I chose Ephesians 1 is because this chapter, more than any other, presents the definition of the church theologically, and also because it's been such a blessed chapter in the study through the years that we've engaged in here at Grace. Let's begin at the beginning.

First of all, we are called before. Now, remember, we are the called. That's what church means, and the first thing we have to understand is we are called before. That is our election, and you can follow your outline, by the way, in the bulletin if it helps you to stay along. But notice verse 4. In talking about the church, Paul writes, "He hath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world." In verse 5, "He has predestinated us unto the adoption of sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will." Verse 11, "He has predestinated us according to the purpose of Him who works all things after the counsel of His own will." He hath chosen us by His will, by His own will before the foundation of the world. We are called before, beloved. This is not something that just comes into being adlib. This is not something that men build by their own wisdom, or ingenuity, or promotion, or publicity, or whatever. This church, as the church in total, is a result of God's predetermined, sovereign, pre-Creation call. In 2 Timothy, I mentioned a verse earlier. I'll just reread it. It says, "We have been saved and called, not according to our works," 2 Timothy 1:9, "but according to His own purpose and grace," listen to this, "which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began." We were called before. We were picked out by God for God before the world began.

Now, it's very difficult then, isn't it, to can that and pass it around. The uniqueness of this church is bound up in the sovereign call of God before the world began. We are what we are because of God's sovereign, independent, unaffected choice. George Chadwick said, "I sought the Lord, and afterwards

I knew He moved my soul to seek Him seeking me. It was not I that found, O Savior true. No, I was found by Thee." If you're at Grace Community Church, you didn't find us. God found you, and you're here by divine appointment, and so am I. That's why we are what we are. We are fulfilling a predetermined destiny, a calling from beyond space and before time. We are called before the world began. You see, in God's conscious mind, there is no time, and everything is in an immediate eternal present, and we were as real before the world began as we are now to Him.

God adds to this church those that He determined before the world began would be added to this church. Think about it. When there were only eight people left in the world, He had drowned everybody else. God knew that out of the loins of those eight people would come the pastors and the leaders and the people of this church, and He knew it would be a symbol in the way that it is assembled. I look at my childhood, and it's getting harder to see all the time as it gets further away, I admit, but I look at my childhood. I think about my mother who prayed that God would give her a son who would preach. And then when I was born, she kept asking God, "Is this the one? You got a little work to do, Lord, if this is the one." Through the years of all of my difficulties. I didn't know where I was going in life. Oh, when I was a little kid, I would stand on a soapbox in the backyard and preach at my sisters, but that was because I was kind of copying my dad. That's what I heard him do, and I went through life. A couple of times almost lost my life. One time I fell off a cliff up by Forest Home. Another time, a car accident almost took my life. God spared me both times.

Breaking my own human will, my own desires, charting my course all through the years, God knew exactly where I'd be. All before the world began. You know, that gives me such a tremendous sense of confidence, that I belong in this place in this little piece of history, redemptive history, and so do you. I was on the staff of Talbot Seminary before I came here, and about three months before I was contacted to come here and to be considered as a possible pastoral candidate, another church called me. At that time, it was a bigger church, well-known church, wonderful church. And they called and said, "We would be interested in talking to you about being our pastor," and so we began to talk, and we talked over a period of a month and so forth and so on. And, finally, after all these conversations, they said to me, "You know, we just feel that you're too young and inexperienced for our church, and so we're going to go find someone else."

Well, I was open to whatever the Lord wanted me to do, I that's where He wanted me to go. I was disappointed, but that wasn't where God wanted me. The plan wasn't for me to be there. The plan was to be here, and before the foundation of the world, God knew that He would use this church to redeem souls, and that I would be a part of that process. We're all here, folks, for just such a time as this. This is destiny. Every time I hear about somebody being saved in this church, something just clicks in my mind. That's another fulfillment of God's destined plan. And those of you who have joined our church, and now for 13 years I've been going to new member's meetings, and I always feel the same thing inside. These people aren't here by accident. The Lord is building His church. Every one of you are here because you're here under His sovereign plan. That just takes a tremendous

pressure off me. I don't have to build the church, you know that?

In fact, a reporter asked me some years ago, he said, "Do you have a great desire to build the church?" I said, "I have no desire to build the church, none at all." He was surprised. He said, "I've talked to other pastors across the country. They don't answer that way." I said, "I have no desire to build the church." He said, "Why?" I said, "Because Christ said He would build the church, Matthew 16, and I certainly don't want to compete with Him. I just want to be a part of what He's building, that's all." It's His church. This is not the result of some brilliant mind or some human organization. This is Christ's church. You don't understand that, you don't understand us. And you know what that does for me? There's no sense of panic in the ministry. There's no sense of frustration. There's no reason to seek worldly means, or worldly promotion, or worldly systems to try to stir it all up. All you need to do is rest in the Spirit of God. Be faithful to give your life in commitment to Jesus Christ. He'll build His church. And I never wanted to do it artificially, because I was afraid it might be my church, not His, and then I wouldn't be able to tell the difference.

I can't find words to express the very special sense I feel in my heart knowing Christ has built this church; and I'm part of that; and you're part of that. This little, small chunk of redemptive history is our destiny. And so, we've always had at Grace Church a strong emphasis on the sovereignty of God. We're His church, called before the foundation of the world.

Second, we're not only called before, we're called out. We're called out. This is our redemption. Called before is our election. Called out is our redemption. It says in verse 7, that it is in Christ, "In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace." Then, it says further in verse 13 that "We heard the word of truth, the gospel of our salvation. We believe and receive the Holy Spirit." And Paul here identifies the church as those who have been redeemed. Those who have been forgiven. Those who have received grace. Those who have heard the Word. Those who have been saved because they believed. The church, then, is called out. It is a redeemed, regenerate group.

What do you mean called out? Called out of sin. Called out of death. Called out of darkness. Called out of despair. Called out of lost-ness. Translated, Colossians 1:13, "From the kingdom of darkness into the Kingdom of His dear Son." Romans 6 tells us we were involved in death, and we were called out of that into life. We are called out of the world. We are a redeemed community. We are regenerate. That is the only reason we are the true church. If we're not redeemed, we're not a church. People running around under a religious banner with a title church who are not redeemed are not the church. The church is the called out. Called out of the world, out of sin, out of the kingdom of darkness.

Now, we realize that the great concentration of the church has to be on a regenerate membership, redeemed people. I mean, this is the church. There are quote unquote churches all over the place

that have a name that they live, but they're dead. There's no regenerate people there. That is not a church. They are not called out. They are a part of the world. They're just religious. And, you know, so important is this to me, that the first Sunday I was here, I preached on this subject. The first service I ever preached as pastor of this church in February of 1969, my text was Matthew 7:21 to 23, "Many shall say unto Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and I'll say unto them, 'Depart from me. I never knew you.'" Now, some people might think, "Well, boy, I mean you could at least warm up a little bit to them before you hit them between the eyes." But, you see, I was concerned that there would be people who thought they were part of the church who weren't the church. And you need to understand from the very beginning what the church is, so you know where you're going. We are a called out group, and I remember preaching that sermon, and several couples left the church. And we had even, I can think of at least one elder that was not a Christian.

I told them, "You have to distinguish between the wheat and the tares, the true and the false, those who play church and those who are the church." In fact, the title of that first sermon was "How to Play Church." And I quoted Luke 6:46, "Why call ye Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not the things I say?" And I read them an old slab engraving from the cathedral of Lebach, Germany, and this is what it said. "Thus speaketh Christ our Lord to us. You call Me Master and obey Me not. You call Me light and see Me not. You call Me the way and walk Me not. You call Me life and live Me not. You call Me wise and follow Me not. You call Me fair and love Me not. You call Me rich and ask Me not. You call Me eternal and seek Me not. If I condemn Thee, blame Me not."

And then, I gave an illustration. The first illustration I ever gave here. There was an old pastor, so old that he had been forced to retire. His voice cracked from years of preaching. He was a humble old gentleman. He was invited to a high society kind of luncheon by a friend. He really was out of his league, frankly, but he went. And there was a famous actor there, and the one who was heading up the luncheon said to that actor in the midst of all of the folderol, "Oh, would you stand up and recite something for us?" And he said, "Of course, I have an endless repertoire. What would you like?" The old pastor thought this is his moment. He said, "How about the 23rd Psalm?" And the actor said, "Well, that's an unusual request, but I happen to know that, and I'll do it on one condition: that you'll do it after I do it." Well, the old pastor hadn't bargained for that, but for the sake of the Lord he said, "All right." The actor got up, and he recited the 23rd Psalm with great intonation, beautiful, lyrical voice, tremendous interpretation. And he finished, and everyone applauded. The old pastor stood up and cracking voice and just went through the 23rd Psalm in his humble way. And when he was done, there was not a dry eye in the room. And sensing the emotion of the moment, the actor stood and said, "I think I understand the difference in your response to me and to him. You clapped for me; you wept for him. The difference is: I know the Psalm, but he knows the Shepherd."

And if there's any one thing that a church must be, it must be the assembly of the people who know the Shepherd, right? That's a church. Anything less is not a church. There are a lot of people who know the Psalms. They just don't know the Shepherd. So, we've always been committed to the

preaching of the doctrine of salvation. We've always talked about the truth of man's sin and the need of a Savior. We have dealt with false securities and called people to genuine faith in Christ. We've stressed baptism. We've stressed evangelism, because a church is the called out ones; called before and called out. We are not a church if we're not redeemed.

Thirdly, we're called from. We are called from. Verse 4, that we should be holy and without blame before Him. Now, we have not only been called out of the world, but we've been called from the world in the sense of holiness. This is our sanctification. Our sanctification. First Peter 1:15, the Bible says, "Be ye holy as I am holy." We're called to be separated from the world. We are called to be non-compromising. The Spirit has told us to be unspotted with the world. "We are to be," Paul says, "without blemish and without spot." He says in 2 Corinthians, "I desire to present the church to Christ a chaste virgin." God has called us to holiness, to purity, to Christ-likeness, to virtue, and that's been our message. We preach about that. We pray about that. We talk about that. We are to manifest the holiness of our Father. We are to radiate the holiness of our Savior. We are to reveal the holiness of the Spirit who dwells within us. We are to come apart from the world. "We are to kill the deeds of the flesh," it says in Colossians 3. We are not to give any attention to the flesh, it says in Galatians chapter 5. We are not to love the world, 1 John chapter 2. We have been called to holiness, and so we have preached and preached through the years that we are to be a holy people. We are called from.

When God calls, He calls before. He calls out of, and He calls from. Holiness. We've emphasized humility. We've emphasized the confession of sin. We've emphasized church discipline. We have put people out of our church. We've emphasized the worship of a holy God, the exaltation of a holy God. We have focused on the nature of God, the character of God, the attributes of God, so that in seeing the holiness of God, we might live in fear of Him.

Now, when a group is unholy, they may call themselves a church, but that is not a church, because they are a called from people if they are a true church. You show me a church that doesn't preach on sin, and I'll show you a church that's full of unholiness, and that's not a church in the fullest sense. We are called to the Lord's Table here constantly. Why? Because we need to face the constant self-examination of the Lord's Table as we look deep into our hearts with the searchlight of the Spirit of God to see if there's anything between us and Him. Our recent communions have illustrated how we have dealt with sin in an effort to purge and purify the church. We are called to be a holy people. The church cannot tolerate unholiness. You can't preach against sin and do nothing about it, or people think preaching and living are two different unrelated things. We have sought holiness in the lives of leaders, in the lives of those who follow.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:23, Paul calls us to this with the words, "The very God of peace sanctify you wholly, and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. And faithful is He who calls you who will also do it." He says, "I pray that you



would be blameless,” and so we have sought holiness. We have sought to see God so that we fear God, to see Christ so that we fear Christ. We have seen how Jesus traumatized people, how Jesus made them fear when they saw His glory, when they saw His holiness.

We’re a church. That’s how you explain us. Called before the world, called out of the world, and called away from the world, and there’s no place for compromise. That is our uniqueness. We are the called, according to His purpose, and that is His purpose.

Fourthly, we’re called to. We’re not just called out and from, but to. That’s our identification, and to what are we called? Look at verse 4. It’s beautiful. “Chosen us in Him that we should be holy and without blame before Him. Having predestinated us under the adoption of sons by Jesus Christ to Himself.” It says in verse 4, “In Him, before Him, and to Himself,” in verse 5. In verse 3, it ends with two words, “In Christ.” The end of verse 6, “We have been accepted in the Beloved One.” Now, notice this. We are in God. We are in Christ. That is our uniqueness. That is our identification. Called to Himself. The middle of verse 5, “By Jesus Christ to Himself.”

We are not a religious organization of people committed to a certain set of rules. We are not those who have been trained in a certain mode of religion. We are not those who are ascribing to a certain kind of ritual or routine. We are those who are in Christ, in God. In 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, verse 1, Paul and Silvanus, or Silas, and Timothy, writing to the church of the Thessalonians, listen, “Which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ.” That is a church. In other words, we are called to an intimate identification with God Himself in a personal union. So vital. We are in a marvelous fellowship. In 1 John 1:3, John says, “Our fellowship is with the Father and Jesus Christ.” We are in an inter-Trinitarian fellowship. Read John 17 where Jesus prays that we may be one with Him as He is one with God, and He wraps us all in the same package. First Corinthians 6:17 says, “He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit.” We have been made intimate. How intimate? We are adopted as sons, in verse 5. We are in Christ, joint heirs to the Kingdom of God.

So, you know, the church isn’t a group you join by signing your name. It isn’t some kind of a human society committed to a system of teaching. We are saved to enter a personal, intimate, unique relationship with the living God through Jesus Christ. “When you are saved,” the Bible says in Romans 6, “you are identified with Jesus Christ. You die with Christ. You rise to walk in newness of life.” Paul said in Galatians 2:20, “I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless, I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.” That’s our union. We’re different than systems of religion. I think that’s the reason we see so many ex-Catholic people who come and visit our church and come to Christ. They know what the systems of religion are. They just don’t know God. And people come out of all kinds of other cults and -isms, because they’ve been in the systems of religion, but they’ve never met God, and there’s no intimacy there. Our church is a church committed to being called to Christ, so that we celebrate our union with Him.

You know, as I look at my own life, I'll be very honest with you, I don't know where John MacArthur ends and Christ begins. Now, when I sin, I know who that is; but just as I examine my life, and as I do things, and as I serve the Lord, I don't know where I end and He begins. I'm like Paul. I'm crucified with Christ. "Nevertheless, I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me. And the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son." I mean, you know, that's what He's doing. It's Him and me, and it's me and Him, and I don't know where one begins and the other ends. You don't know that either. You just live your life, and you see God at work, and Christ, and it's very natural for you to talk to the Lord, and to sense His power, and to see Him answer your prayers, and to feel His direction, and His guidance, and His comfort, and His, in your life. And so we meet and we share about that, and we talk about that, and we pray about that, and we have our little intimate Bible studies where we talk about what Jesus Christ means to us. We don't believe God is some cosmic ogre waiting to step on us if we break one of His rules. We have an intimate love relationship with Him.

One writer said, "Near, so very near to God, nearer I could not be; for in the person of His Son, I'm just as near as He. Dearer, so dear to God. Dearer, I couldn't be; for in the person of His son, I'm just as dear as He." So, we are called to a sweet intimacy with Jesus Christ: a warm, personal, living relationship with God. That's a church. If you don't understand that, you don't understand us. Called before, called out, called from, called to.

Fifthly, we are called under. We're called under. We are the called according to His purpose. That's what a church is, and part of our calling is we are called under. What do you mean by that? I'm talking about revelation. We've talked about election, redemption, sanctification, and identification. Here's revelation. Verse 8, having been redeemed, verse 7, "God has overflowed toward us," that's what that verb means, "in all wisdom," and that word, *sophia*, has to do with the wisdom of eternal things like life and death, and God, and man, and time and eternity. "God has overflowed all of that to us, as well as prudence." That's practical. The wisdom of earthly things like solving problems. God has given us profound truth regarding eternal things. He's giving us practical implications in terms of living life, and He's given all of this to us in an overflowing way, verse 9 says, "because He has made known unto us the hidden elements of His will."

Now, you tell me, where did God reveal His will to us? Where? In the Word of God. Right here in this Book, the Bible. The New Testament is the revelation of His hidden will. We have the Word of God, and we are called under that, aren't we? We are called to obedience. Paul says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." We're called to submit to the Word of God. We're under authority. We don't chart our own course. We don't dream up our own destiny. You know, when we meet together to plan, or we meet together to pray, or we meet together to work in the church, there's one thing central in our mind. What does the Word of God have to say about this matter? What is God's Word? That's the focus of everything we do.

I recently received a compliment. I think it was a compliment. I was supposed to go to a luncheon of pastors, and I didn't go. And somebody got up at the luncheon and said, "I think I know why MacArthur isn't here. He couldn't find a biblical route to get here." Well, I think that was a compliment. I think he's got me pegged right. I guess the reputation of Grace Church is that it better be biblical or they're not interested. I think that's great.

You know, I'm so committed to the Word of God. If there's anything that's ever identified Grace Church through the years, it's been this, hasn't it? The Word of God. You know, when I was in seminary, by the time I got to my last year in seminary, I was a very frustrated person, because I did want to understand the Bible. For years, I had known what the Bible said. I just didn't know what it meant by what it said. I could read it. I mean I had reading down fairly well. I just didn't have understanding down, and I didn't know what it meant. And that frustrated me, 'cause here was God's Word, and I wanted to know what it meant. And I just, the reason I went to seminary really was to get the tools so that I could know what it meant. People say, "Well, when you went to seminary, what was your goal?" My goal was to get the tools to understand the Bible. I didn't think about ministering it to anybody else at that point. I wanted to understand it. And should God give me a ministry, that's an overflow.

I told the pastors at our recent Shepherd's Conference, "The joy of the ministry is not the preaching to you. That's the work. The joy of the ministry is the study that I learn to know what God means by His Word and, thus, to know Him better." It's just it's just the whipped cream on the top that I get to tell you what I've learned. And you only get a little bit of it. You get the tip of the iceberg.

But I always wanted to learn the Word of God. And in seminary, I started to get the tools, and I just began to hunger, and I just began to desire to devour the Word of God, so I could learn it and learn it, and then to be able to teach it was a special joy. And I believe that that's what a church should be. A church should be a place of people called under the Word of God.

Now, when I came here, they asked me if I would. I preached the Sunday after Pastor Elvee had gone to be with the Lord. And they said, "Will you come back and candidate to be our pastor?" And I said, "Okay," and so I did. And on the Sunday that I came to candidate, I decided I was going to teach them Romans 7. That's a tough chapter. I said, "I'm going to. That's on my heart. I'm going to teach them Romans 7." So, I just opened my Bible, and I was oblivious to what was going on, and I went ahead and just preached my way through Romans 7. I just had a great time, and I just had this burden to get this out and explain Romans 7, tremendous. You know how long I spoke that first time? One hour and 35 minutes. My wife said, "Well, there goes that church. And if the word gets out, you'll never get any other church, either." So, you people shouldn't complain. I've shortened up, so you ought to thank God you're here now 25 years after it began, or 13 years, anyway, since I've been here. But, say, "Why did you do that? I mean didn't you, weren't you sensitive to the nursery?" Listen,

only thing I was sensitive to was I was having a terrific time, you know?

You know what I found out? I found out in doing that whether the people had a mind to submit to the Word of God. They came to me afterwards and said, "That's what we want, but could you shorten it up just a little bit?" Hey, if I know I'm going to get to preach here more than once, I can shorten it up all you want, right? And the commitment to this, of this church, through its history has been to be under the Word of God. To be under the Word of God.

The first time I ever met an elder here, he talked to me about the church and being the pastor. He said, "We are ready to serve. We want to know what God wants us to do." The church is a called under group. Under the authority of the Word of God. And so, the motto through the years of this church has been the perfecting of the saints for the work of the ministry. And how do you perfect the saints? All Scripture is given by inspiration of God. "Why would the man of God," he says at the end of that next verse, "may be," what? "Perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." The perfecting of the saints is the work of the Word. I wanted to give people the sword, the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God. And that isn't owning a Bible. That's understanding the Bible, so that you can use it as a weapon and a defense. And so, the commitment has been to teach the Word of God so that we're under the authority. And I believe that's what's happened.

You know, the goal I've had, and I'll reveal a secret at this point, but the goal that I've had in my ministry here is to so teach the Word of God that you submit consciously to the authority of the Word of God in general, so that whenever you introduce any specific out of the Word of God, people will instantly respond, because they've already made the total submission.

You know, I had a pastor say at a pastor's conference I was at, he said, "You know, your view on a certain subject, if I tried to tell my people to do that, they'd throw me out of the church." I said, "But it's biblical." "That wouldn't matter to them." Well, if it doesn't matter to them that it's biblical, then they don't have the right perspective of the authority of the Word of God, right? All you want to know is: is it biblical? You know, the questions that I get are not, "Well, why did you teach that? Even if it's in the Bible, it's offensive." When people ask me a question that corners me, it's this. "Are you sure that's in the Bible?" I'm glad they ask those kind of questions. That's our authority. We're called before the world. We're called out of the world. We're called from the world, to the Lord, and under the Word.

Number 6, we're called with. We're called with. This is very important. This is unification. Verse 10, it says that the ultimate purpose of God, and of course, this is talking about the fullness of times, the great end time, the fullness of completion of redemption history. We're called to the point of "being gathered to in one in Christ." God's ultimate end is to gather everything in Christ into one, and the church is the emblem of that now, isn't it? We're called with.

You know, I grew up in a day when there was an awful lot of spiritual isolation. Everybody sort of kept his spirituality in. You just didn't talk about it. You just sort of smiled the Christian smile, you know, and carried the zipper Bible and went to Sunday School, and did your thing. And you didn't really get, you didn't let anything out. You didn't let anybody in your heart or in your soul. And fellowship was, you know, red punch and stale cookies, and little old ladies with buns serving doughnuts and coffee. I mean that was it. There was just no, there was nothing in deep about it. But we have been called together into a marvelous unity, a marvelous fellowship. Called with. That's our identification, or rather our unification. And Grace has set its sights on this kind of unity. We believe in Philippians chapter 2 that Paul says, "Be of the same mind." How are you going to be of the same mind? That's unity. Well, you have to be of the same love. You have to love people. How you going to be able to love people? Have to let each one not look on his own things, but on the things of others. What's that? Humility, the mind of Christ who humbled Himself.

So, what you learn is, if we're going to be one, we have to love each other. And if we're going to love each other, we have to be humble, because as long as everybody is looking out for himself, there's not going to be any give and take. Let me tell you something: that is why we have always focused on sin. We've always focused on human weakness in the Word of God that we might know how needy we are, that we might not be under any illusions, and that there might be a genuine humility in our lives. And that's why we don't preach the, what I call the self-help gospel or the macho message. You're okay. You're all right. You know, think positive. Be somebody. That kind of thing. You show me a church where that message is preached, and I'll show you a church that doesn't know the meaning of fellowship, because everybody's there for himself, not anybody else. You show me a church where you talk about humility, and I'll show you a church where people can love each other. And we are called with, to love each other, to give to each other. That's one of the things that's marked this place.

If you want to analyze Grace, we're a church. That's all. And a church is a called with group. There's always been that spirit of giving and loving and sustaining and caring. I remember Grandma Kelly, Frances Kelly died a few years ago, and she was the prayer warrior to end all in this church. Precious lady, and she used to come and give me neck rubs all the time, even when she was into her 90s. Terrific, strong hands, you know, she'd worry about me, so she'd want to rub and loosen up my neck. So when I'd get busy, she'd come by and help me relax a little bit. And she'd pray, you know. Well, she went to the hospital. Trish and I had gone to see her at home, and they finally had to take her to the hospital. She was going to die, and she was in the intensive care unit at the hospital. And so, I went over to see her. I said to the lady at the information, "Where is she?" And said, "Intensive care." So, I went up the elevator and down the hall and knocked on the door, and a cynical nurse came. And she said, "What can I do for you?" I said, "I'd like to see Frances Kelly if I might." She said, "You, too?" I said, "Well, yes." She said, "You know, you're going to kill that woman if you keep sending all these people over here." She said, "They've just been here all day long, and it's just not right."

I said, 'Well, I'm, I'm, I'm the pastor.' She said, 'I've heard that one before, too.' So, I said, 'Well, let's see, I got another one. I'm the president. Will that help?' 'No.' So, I said, 'Well, I, I'm, that doesn't make me any less the pastor, right? I'm still a pastor at the church. I think she'd like to see me. Could you ask her?' 'You sure you're the pastor?' 'Well, I'm one of the pastors at the church.' 'I'll ask her.' So, I got in to see her. But it's always been that way. Everybody meeting peoples' needs. That's because there's a focus on genuine humility, and that's that which love is born from, because we're not a bunch of people sitting here thinking, 'How can we improve our self-image?' We're hitting, we're sitting here thinking, 'How can we come to grips with our failures and how can we give to others who have need of us?'

This is a church. The church is a group of people called with each other. People here are not spectators. We resist that, and that's the reason we have fellowship groups and flocks and Bible study. We want you people to get together. We don't want people piling up on the fringes just spectating, just looking at it. We want accountability, and ministry, and love, and we're committed to teaching people to minister, and that's how we grow missionaries and pastors. That's why we've sent out missionaries and maybe nearly 20 pastors to other churches, because we're growing people who minister to one another.

Crowds have never satisfied me. Never. Ministering people is the goal. Well, let me give you two more, then I'll let you go. Just quickly. We are called unto. We are called unto. Look at verse 11. It says, 'We have obtained an inheritance.' Verse 14 again mentions our inheritance. Now, what is this saying? Peter calls it 'Our inheritance, undefiled, that fadeth not away, reserved for us in heaven.' We are a people committed to glorification. We've talked about election, redemption, sanctification, identification, revelation, unification, and now glorification.

What do you mean by that? I mean this. Our focus is future, right? Our focus is future. We're not citizens of this world. Philippians 3:20, our citizenship is not here, it's above. We're not earthbound. We're not tied to the system. We have been made heirs of a boundless, eternal inheritance, and that is our focus. We're a church, and a church is called unto glory. We're committed to an eternal inheritance. We're not stuck in the world. That's why we're not marching on city hall. That's why we don't preach a purely political message, or a purely social message. That's why we don't work with human agencies. We are the Kingdom of God, cutting its path by the power of the Spirit through the world of darkness. And we have a glory view of a coming Kingdom. And that's why in Colossians 3, it says, 'If you've been risen with Christ, then set your affection on things above and not on things on the earth,' right? I mean we look for Jesus to come. We look for His Kingdom to be built. We're not investing our lives and all of our assets into this passing world. I believe that's why Grace Church has been able to send missionaries out. I believe it's why we've been able to have a lovely facility like this. We've been able to have the ministries because people have given. And the reason they've given is because they don't hold those things to waste them in the earthly passing system.

I can remember when we built this building. The first Sunday we came in here it was paid for that very Sunday. Everything was paid for, and I remember how it was paid for. I remember when I went over to my office on the other side of the campus, and I saw a little paper bag in front of the door. One of those Ralph's Market shopping bags, the big kind. And I thought somebody'd left some fruit or something as sometimes they would do. And so, I reached down to pick it up, and I couldn't. It almost broke my arm. I couldn't get it off the ground. I opened the top, and it was filled to the top with silver bars. Had a little note that said, "This is to invest in eternity." And then, a little while later, a young couple came into my office who had saved a \$1,000.00 for their honeymoon, and he said, "We have decided that we want to give it to the Lord," and he pulled open his pocket and dumped it all out on my desk. Why would people do that? Why would a man or a woman or whoever give me all those, I never did find out who gave the silver bars. Why would a couple give their hundred, their \$1,000.00 honeymoon money? Why? Because they see eternity. See? They see the Kingdom of God, and the glorious eternal inheritance. They're not earthbound, and a church is a church that is called unto that inheritance. And that's why Grace people have been free to invest in eternity and not be bound by time. We look for a city whose builder and maker is God. Our message is Jesus is coming. That's our great hope.

Finally, we are the called according to His purpose, and we are called for. Called for. What do you mean? Well, this is our proclamation. It says in verse 6, "To the praise of the glory of His grace." It says in verse 12, "That we should be to the praise of His glory." It says in verse 14, "Unto the praise of His glory." Listen, people, very simply, and we'll close. We have been called for the purpose of proclamation, and what is it that we proclaim? We praise His glory. The church exists to be to the praise of the glory of God's grace. The world should look and say, "Oh, look at that group of people. What a gracious God is their God." Should He not be glorified in us? That's our proclamation.

There's a sense in which we proclaim His glory to Him. There's a sense in which we proclaim His glory to the holy angels. There's a sense in which we proclaim His glory to the world about us. We are to the praise of His glory. The point being this, people. The sum of it is this: you cannot understand us unless you understand the glory of God, for we are only its manifestation. We do not find ourselves subject easily to analysis.

More than anything else, I think, this last point has been the focus of my own heart. The greatest theme in the Bible is the glory of God. That's why we exist. In fact, every time Clayton makes me sing that same song about the glorifying of God. And on the one hand, I know people think I'm a one-horse operation. On the other hand, that is what my heart says is the most important thing: that God be glorified. That's the single checkpoint in my life. I only ask myself one question as I live day-to-day, when I come to a crossroads. One simple question. Will it glorify God? Simple checkpoint for everything in my life, because we are to be to the praise of His glory.

Matthew 5:16, our Lord put it in these words, "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and do," what? "Glorify your Father who is in Heaven." 25 years, God has allowed this church to be to the praise of His glory. We have been called for proclamation, and we've proclaimed His glory. You say, "What about the next 25, John?" You know what I really believe? I believe that we've just built the pad. I kept thinking of that as they were shooting off the Columbia. That's like Grace. We got the thing built, and we've just launched it. The future is infinitely greater than the past. But, may I warn you here? God called us into existence, and He can just as quickly call us out. We are His church. He controls our destiny, and you drive up and down the streets of American, and you will see mute testimonies to the fact that God sometimes blows out the candle.

Read Revelation 2 and 3, great churches, and God said, "I'm going to come and remove your candlestick." It can happen, and it will happen if Grace stops being a church, a called out people. If we're faithful by God's definition to be a church, we'll be to the praise of His glory till Jesus comes. Let's bow in prayer.

Our Father, we now gather our hearts to recognize that we are called according to Your purpose. That's what we are. Nothing less, nothing more. That we are called before. Help us to remember we are the church Christ built. We are called out. We must have a redeemed congregation. We are called from. We must pursue with all our hearts, holiness without compromise. We are called to. We must be intimately and personally committed to the living Lord Jesus Christ. We are called under. We must be willingly submissive to the authority of the Word of God. We are called with. We must continue to make deep, profound commitments to each other. We are called unto. We must pursue eternity, not the passing world. And we are called for. We must be to the praise, the glory of Your grace. Father, thank You for 25 years of faithfulness in building a church, a real church, Your church. Keep the light burning. May we be Your church till Jesus comes. We pray in His name. Amen.

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