

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

How to Recognize a Real Church, Parts 1-2

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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We've had a lot of discussions about the church, what the church is and the life of the church through the years here at Grace Church. In fact, we go back to the very, very beginning, the first sermon I ever preached here on February 9th, 1969, my first Sunday, was addressed at who really belongs in the church? Who is really and genuinely and truly a part of the church? That's where we started. And it has always been a very important part of the emphasis of all of our ministry and our teaching here to make sure that we understand the nature of the church and the function of the church, what the church is.

Which is to say, the church is not a building. The church is not an institution or an association. When we talk about the church, we're going to use that word that we talked about a few weeks ago, *ekkaleo*, "the called out ones." A church is a gathering of those who have been called by God to salvation, to redemption, to adoption, to conversion, to justification and ultimately to glorification.

So, when I talk about the church, I'm talking about the people who make up the church. Not the building, not the institution of the church, not a denomination, not a particular theology, not a particular style, I'm talking about the living, breathing people who are the church. How are we to understand the church and how is the church to function. So I think that we've been looking so much into the Old Testament at the person of Christ, and now in the gospel of John, that we've covered so much of that and you could never exhaust that subject. But I think it's maybe time to turn the corner a little bit and over the next weeks I want to talk to you about how you need to understand the church, the church of Jesus Christ.

I was listening to a radio program years ago, Christian radio station, and somebody called in--it was one of those talk programs--and said, "What do I look for in a church?" "What do I look for in a church?" And I turned up the volume because I wanted to hear the answer. And the answer was, and I wrote it down, you look for fellowship, caring, and sharing--that's most important. You might find that in a bar. You might find that in a club. You might find that in a thousand sociological associations and events; that's not the right answer.

How do you choose a church? Some people would be pretty superficial about it. There was a study done a number of years ago that said, "The most important thing that a church does to attract people is to provide parking." Parking was number one. Number two was nursery. And I kept reading, looking for pastor, but he didn't appear until number six or so. There were all these things that people

assumed were the important aspects--style, comfort, music, air-conditioning, friendliness.

What are you looking for in a church? And what should a church be? Well, that is a question that has very clear, biblical answers. But just to give you sort of a basic answer, and this would be Ecclesiology 101, there's really only one issue: How do those people who gather together handle Scripture? That's the issue. How do they handle the Word of God? What do they believe about the Bible? What do they believe the Bible teaches. How does the Bible inform their living and their preaching and their teaching?

I suppose it could be summed up by the psalmist in Psalm 119:161 who said, "My heart stands in awe of Your Word." "My heart stands in awe of Your Word." The purest demonstration of a true church is that it is an assembly of people who are in awe of the Word of God. In the language of Isaiah 66, they tremble at His Word. They tremble at His Word. Among those who are the architects of stylistic ministry today, it's very popular to say that the traditional church has failed. That's a very common thing to hear.

One of my friends recently wrote a little article on that, sort of pointing it out that the church is indicted repeatedly today as a failure--the church has failed. And they say the church has failed. Look at the world; that's evidence of the church's failure. Look at America and its moral decline and its abandoning of Scripture. And there's very little question that we're on a path and it kind of goes like this: eliminate the Bible; that's step one. Eliminate the Bible--out of the public discourse, out of everything. Step two, then, is reverse morality. Do what Isaiah 5 says, turn bitter into sweet, sweet into bitter, light into dark, dark into light, good into bad, bad into good. And now the crime is not to affirm homosexuality, not to affirm immorality. Flip morality on its head.

The third step is demand tolerance, demand tolerance. The fourth step is intolerance of those who are not tolerant. And the fifth step is persecution. And we're fast moving toward that last step of persecution.

You look at the world around you and people are saying, "Look, this is where we are, the church is about to be persecuted. That's how far we've gone and that's an evidence of the church's failure. The church has failed. Look at the state of the nations. Look at the state of the planet. The church has failed and so the church has to change its strategies, we're told.

But the truth is this, the church can only fail in one way. It can only fail in one way. If it has failed, it has failed in one way. It has failed to be biblical. That is the only way the church can fail. If the church is faithful to the Word of God, it cannot fail. It cannot fail. If the church lives and proclaims the Word of God, it does not fail. It cannot fail because God accomplishes His purpose through His Word. He saves through His Word, He sanctifies through His Word. He provides grace through His Word.

There's only one way the church can fail and that's to fail to be biblical. It isn't a question of failing in its strategies. It isn't a question of failing to connect with the culture. It's not failing in its marketing. If the church has failed, it has failed in one way, it has failed to be biblical. And frankly, there are many so-called churches who have really failed to be biblical.

There's only one way to do ministry right and that's to do it biblically. Years ago I read a book and shared this many years ago, a book by Alexander Calandra. This is a book on mathematics, you know, preachers who are desperate enough to even read a book on mathematics because there are some good illustrations there. He was a professor at the University of...or Washington University, actually, in St. Louis, Missouri--a very fine university; he taught math. And Alexander Calandra wrote a book on some of his experiences as a math teacher.

He wrote about a fellow professor who had a class, an upper division class in math, and he gave an exam. The exam only had one question, just one, and this is the question: "Show how it is possible to determine the height of a tall building with the use of a barometer." Did you get it? "Show how it is possible to tell the height of a tall building with the use of a barometer."

The students spent the hour writing their answer and one answer stood out. To this student who gave this answer, he gave a zero. Here was his answer: "Take the barometer to the top of the building, tie it to a long rope, lower the barometer all the way to the ground, measure the length of the rope and you have the height of the building with the use of a barometer."

Since that demonstrated no competency in physics, and you wouldn't want to put a student like that out with the illusion that he knew what he was doing, he gave him a zero. The student asked if he could have a second opportunity. And so the professor reluctantly said, "You can have a second opportunity, you have six minutes." After five minutes the student had written nothing. The professor looked at him and said, "Do you give up?" He said, "No, I just have many answers, I'm trying to figure out which would be the one you would like the best."

He quickly wrote, "Take the barometer to the roof, lean over the edge, drop the barometer, time its fall with a stopwatch using S equals one half of the power of two and calculate the height."

This just infuriated the professor even more. He said, "You have others?" "Oh yes," he said. "Go out on a sunny day, measure the shadow of the barometer, measure the shadow of the building by simple, proportional calculation. You can determine the height of the building because you know the height of the barometer."

"But, professor, here's one you'd like even better. Go in the building at the ground floor. Take a barometer, put it on the wall, go up the stairs, mark off a pencil mark, go all the way to the top, come

back down, count every mark and you have the height of the building in barometer units.”

But he said, “Sir, here is the best answer, the best answer. Go to the basement, knock on the door of the building superintendent, say to him, ‘If you tell me how tall this building is, I will give you this beautiful barometer.’”

And sometimes when I look at the life of the church, I see people doing that. You say, “What is the answer? What is the answer?” The answer has to do with the difference in air pressure. There is a right answer. There is a scientific answer to the use of the barometer. And there’s a lot of similar foolishness going on, demonstrating incompetency as to the nature of the church and the life of the church following the biblical pattern. There’s a right way for the church to function. There’s one right way for the church to function, and that right way has been revealed to us through the laws and principles of Holy Scripture.

Everything in the life of the church must conform to sound theology, sound doctrine and biblical truth. New Testament truth frames the church as it does every other area of theology. It eliminates these identity crises. It eliminates all these novel, substitute answers that demonstrate no real competency and no real bowing to authority. That student, by the way, was a rebel. He was tampering with the authority of his professor. There are many who do similar things, tampering with the authority of the Lord of the church Himself, by coming up with their own schemes rather than doing what God has ordained. The church is the kingdom of heaven. The church is the spiritual realm ruled by King Jesus. The church is the fellowship, the communion of all the souls to whom the Holy Spirit has given eternal life--the church belongs to Christ. The life of the church is under the rule of King Jesus. He is the head of the church. We’ll talk about that maybe next week a little bit, or the week after.

So as a pastor, I am compelled and confined by the theology of the church, by what the Bible says about the church. The Bible exercises all controls over the life of the church. The Bible has all authority over all ministry, all preaching, all discipleship, all evangelism, all mission efforts. And to be honest with you, I am completely indifferent to cultural expectations. I am totally indifferent. I am disinterested in cultural expectations. I am indifferent to pragmatic strategies. I have no interest in surveys, polls. I am not curious about the desires of unregenerate people as to what they would like the church to be. Nor am I particularly interested in the whims of the carnal and the immature who would want to define the church in a way that entertains them.

There’s really only one reality that compels me and compels any faithful leader in the church, and that is, What does the King command me as His slave to do on His behalf, in His kingdom, because this is His kingdom? Paul says, “It is required of stewards”...and this is a stewardship...“that a man be found faithful,” “faithful.” Faithful assumes simply being compliant, submissive, and obedient to what I have been given from God to do.

Being a pastor, or being an elder, leader in the church, places me immediately under Christ who is the great shepherd, as Peter calls Him. And I'm simply an under-shepherd, carrying out His orders as revealed in Scripture. I love the church. My life is the church. There are other things that I do, they're secondary to shepherding the flock of God, to being a part of the church. I could never leave the church. I could never do something else other than this. When I have been asked to do something else, to step out of being a pastor and go do some other ministry, as some kind of ministry executive, or ministry leader, or itinerant teacher, or preacher. The answer is always immediate and complete and absolute and it is, "No, I cannot leave the church." The church is the only institution that our Lord ever built and promised to bless. The church is His and that's all that is His. All the people of God in the world today are a part of the church. This is His body, the function of the kingdom. The functions of the kingdom all take place in the life of the church. Everything that God has ordained for His people takes place in the communion of the church, in the fellowship of the church, through the gifts and ministries of the people of God who make up the church.

The church is the only way to shepherd God's people. It is the flock of God. I can write books. I can do conferences. I can go here and go there and speak here and speak there. I can be on the radio. I can be on television. All those things are sort of alongside the church to help believers in other places, but those are the resources that come alongside to help strengthen the church. But anyone who is called into ministry is called to the church. Anyone who is called to shepherd is called to shepherd the church, the flock of God, to watch for their souls as one who must give an account, Hebrews 13 says. We have to feed and lead and prepare to feed, and prepare to lead. And we're accountable for that.

And all the rewards, in a real sense, all the genuine rewards, the great riches of ministry are basically enjoyed in the church, in the church. It is in the church that we see the power of the Word at work over the long period of time. It is in the church that we see people sanctified. I can write a book, I can preach on the radio, and I can meet somebody who tells me what that meant to them, but I only know the lives of the people I live with, in the church. And I can see the sanctifying work and I can taste the fruit of the ministry of the Word and the work of the Spirit in their lives.

I'm both afraid not to be faithful to My King, to My Lord, to the Head of the church. And at the same time, I am delighted and glad to be faithful. I'm afraid not to be faithful, and I'm joyful to be faithful. I want to avoid His displeasure, for sure, but I also want to enjoy His favor. And that sets the course for the church. The whole goal of leadership in the church is to conform the people of God to the Word of God. And the greatest model of that is Christ Himself. So to be used by God to be an agent by which the Word is brought to bear on the people of God to form them into the image of Christ, that's what the ministry is about. That's what it's about.

And this ministry in the church is driven by the supremacy of preaching and teaching. That's the heart of it all. Preach the Word, teach the Word. You have given to the church evangelists, teaching pastors. In either case they are proclaiming the truth. They are teaching the gospel, the truth. Teachers, preachers, feed the flock of God, feed them the Word of God. Preach the Word in season and out of season; you know all of those injunctions.

So when we think about the church--and I'm just giving you sort of a broad look at it--when we think about the church, this is what we're talking about. We're talking about that assembly of people who live under the authority of the Word of God, who live under a clear understanding of the Word of God brought to them by faithful leaders and teachers who proclaim these truths and who support their claims and their proclamation by the way they live. I could never be content outside the church. I could never be fulfilled outside the church. The church is my life. The church is where I live and move and have my being, as does every believer. That's why we don't "forsake the assembling of ourselves together." That's why, as we read in Hebrews 10, we "come together to stimulate one another to love and good works and all the more as we see the day [the day of our Lord's return] approaching."

Now if we want to get a biblical definition to start with, let me take you to Matthew 16, because this is the first place in the New Testament where church is mentioned. A familiar portion of Scripture, and in verse 18 you have this statement by our Lord, "I will build My church." "I will build My church." That's the first time in the New Testament we come to the word "church." "I will build My church." He's not talking about a building; He's not talking about organizations, institutions, programs, strategies. He's talking about people, people--"I will build My church." "I will build My church." The possessive pronoun, "My church," is a reminder the church does not belong to us, it is His church. It belongs to Him. In Acts 20 we are reminded that God purchased the church with His own blood. We have been redeemed, Peter says, not with corruptible things like silver and gold, but with the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, a Lamb without blemish and without spot. So at immense cost, the Lord has paid the price for His church and He is building His church. The only question that I ever ask is, "What does the Lord of the church ask of me to serve Him in the building of His church?"

Now with that introduction of the church in Matthew 16, we draw ourselves into this little section of Scripture, and I want to show you some wonderful, foundational truths that are here. I think it was about six or seven years ago that I went through--I think it was 2007 or 2006--that I went through this passage with the men who were at the Shepherds' Conference. And it is that definitive a passage to help you understand what constitutes a true church.

Here are the essentials that define a church. Number one, a church is a collection of redeemed people who make a great confession. Just put down "a great confession," "a great confession." Let's pick it up at verse 13, "Jesus came into the district of Caesarea, Philippi, and He was asking His disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, and others Elijah, still others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.' But He said to them, 'Who do you say

that I am?" That is the question that the church, the true church answers correctly. Okay? The church is first and foremost defined by its Christology, by its Christology. "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answers, and he answered not only for himself, but the rest of those believing disciples, "You're the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God," that's who you are.

Now we know from Scripture that Jesus also is presented as the cornerstone. Paul says, 1 Corinthians 3, Jesus is the foundation. Peter says He's the cornerstone. The church is built on Him. He is the foundation. First Corinthians 3, "No one can build on any other foundation. Again, Ephesians 2, Christ is the foundation stone, the cornerstone. So the first and essential and definitive characteristic of the true church is that it has a biblical view of Jesus Christ. It has the right view of Jesus Christ. It is not a superficial view; it is not a sentimental view of Jesus. It is not a view of Jesus that He is some prophet and nothing more, such as the liberals have. It is the true view of Christ. If anybody preaches another Christ, let him be anathema, let him be cursed. If anybody preaches another gospel, let him be cursed. This is Paul, if anybody comes to you with anything other than the true Christ, 2 John, don't even listen to him, he is in grave error. Everything starts at Christology.

Now let me back up a little bit in verse 13. Caesarea Philippi is a town on the north border, the Lebanese, of the land of Israel. It originally was known as Paneas. It was changed to Caesarea Philippi to honor Caesar. Paneas was its original name from the Greek god Pan. You've heard of Pan flutes. The little god who plays the flute was the god Pan. It was a center, actually, of Greek and Roman life. It was a center of idolatry. There were idols all over the place, from the Greek era. And with the arrival of Caesar, there was a temple built there to the god Augustus Caesar, and the town was renamed in honor of Caesar. It was the place in Israel where the cultures of the non-Jewish religions of the world had come to meet. There were Jews there but it was on the northern border and so it had absorbed all the paganism of past generations. It was the right place to clarify the nature of salvation, the nature of the church and the truth about the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is in that environment, an environment of idolatry, that our Lord asks the question, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" And to that, there are answers, John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, one of the prophets, that would be coming from the Jewish people. "Who do you say that I am?" And they affirm in verse 16 that He is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, the anointed one, the promised Redeemer; that He is deity; that He is humanity. This is the confession that establishes the true church. If that confession is not made, then you don't have a true church, you don't have true, believing people. The church is not a group of people who need a motivational talk. It is not a group of unbelievers who like the music. It is not a collection of unsaved people who need help for their addictions. It is not people who want to feel spirituality, who want to experience spirituality. It is not a collection of people who want to go through mindless rituals and traditions. It is an assembly of those who make this great confession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. To spread it a little bit, Romans 10, who believe in Him, who believe God raised Him from the dead and who confess Jesus as Lord. It is that assembly of people who believe in His name, John 20:31, and therefore have eternal life.

An early hymn that was obviously sung in the church gives us insight into this. If you'll look with me into Paul's epistles, I'll take you to his letter to Timothy. And in 1 Timothy chapter 3, and verse 15, we read this about the church, the church is "the household of God," it's the family of God. It is a family in the sense that we've all been born into it, we've all been regenerated. It is "the church of the living God." It is "the pillar and support of the truth." So those are all wonderful, instructive references to the church as the family of God by regeneration, as the church of the living God--that is possessing the very life of God, as the pillar and support of the truth, those who have come to the truth, believe the truth, embrace the truth, hear the truth, proclaim the truth.

But verse 16 then adds this, "This collection of people who make up the household of God, who possess the very life of God, who possess the truth of God, have a common confession." They have a common confession, *homologoumenos*, "without disagreement," "without disagreement"; they all say the same thing. *Logoumenos*, *logeo*, "to say"; *homo*, "the same." They all say the same thing. All believers, all who make up the true church have a common confession. And what is that common confession? But that Jesus is God in the flesh. He is Lord; He is Redeemer; He is King.

That is unanimous, and that confession comes in a hymn in verse 16. Six third-person, singular, aorist verbs in the original Greek; it is laid out as a poem with rhythm and parallels and the subject is Christ--"He who," that is Christ, "He who was revealed in the flesh"--that's the incarnation, the manifestation of the eternal Son of God in human flesh--"was vindicated in the Spirit. That vindication is *dikaionoma*, which is the word "righteous,"--who was righteous or was justified in the Spirit. You remember that He had yielded Himself up to the power of the Holy Spirit, through whom His righteousness was demonstrated and made manifest. He was observed by angels at His birth, at His temptation, at His resurrection--"proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up to glory," His ascension.

This is the common confession, we believe in Christ as God revealed in human flesh, as demonstrably righteous through the Holy Spirit, as attended by angels throughout His life, from His birth to His resurrection, as the one proclaimed in the gospel among the nations and for salvation, believed on in the world, the one taken up to glory. This is our confession, His deity, His incarnation, His virgin birth, His holiness. The affirmation and approval of God as attested by angels, preached by the apostles, preached by the prophets, believed on by sinners, taken to glory to be placed at the Father's right hand. This is not a sentimental view of Jesus; this is not the Jesus of the sentimentalists. This is not the Jesus of the prosperity preachers. This is not the Jesus of the mystics. This is not the Jesus of those who say Jesus is your genie, and you can call on Him to create your world any way you want it. This is the Jesus of Scripture.

A church is a gathering of people who believe in Him and say with Peter, "You are the Christ," and with Thomas, "My Lord and My God." And again with Peter, "To whom shall we go, You and You

alone have the words of eternal life.” A church is a gathering of people then who make this common confession about Christ from the incarnation to the glorification of Christ and everything in between. We are known by the accuracy and the faithfulness of our Christology, of our belief in Christ. And I would say, it’s pretty obvious to all of you, that if there’s anything that defines Grace Community Church, it is our preoccupation with Christ, is that not true? We never get very far from exalting Him. We sing about Him. We pray and worship Him. We preach about Him whether it’s the gospels or the Old Testament, wherever it is, or the epistles of the New Testament. We are always Christ focused and our view of Christ is completely informed by and confined by the revelation of Holy Scripture.

So, foundational to the life of the church, putting the church on a solid footing, the church is an assembly of people who make this great confession. That’s a church. A gathering of unbelievers, sprinkled with Christians, is a gathering of unbelievers sprinkled with Christians. It’s not an assembly of the church.

There are people today who do everything they can to gather unbelievers and they call it a church. Somebody said to me one of those kinds of places is called Grace Church. Does it bother you that they call it Grace? I said, “No, it bothers me that they call it church.” It’s not a church. I’m not against having an outreach to unbelievers. I’m certainly for that, but that’s not the church. You need to be part of the church; that’s where you live your life. That’s where you find your accountability, your strength; that’s where you minister and are ministered to. That’s where you grow. That’s where you serve. That’s where you find comfort. That’s where you share joy.

Now secondly, and there’s another foundation here in this passage, back to Matthew 16, there’s another foundational reality here. Let’s call it the great communication, the great communication. There is the great confession, which defines the church, and there is the great communication. I’m trying to do a little alliteration so you kind of have something to hang on to. Verse 17, “Jesus said to him”...Peter, after his confession on behalf of all the other believing disciples, he said...“You’re the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonas [that means son of John, or son of Jonas, his father’s name], because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.” Flesh and blood didn’t reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.

What is the great communication that defines the church? We go back to kind of where we started, the church has communication from God. And what is that communication? It is none other than Holy Scripture, none other than Holy Scripture. Peter’s confession came because God had revealed the truth. In fact, that’s exactly what it says here, “Flesh and blood did not *apokalupto* [“disclose, uncover, make known”] reveal this to you.” You know, we don’t get our orders from man. The true church isn’t led by the pope. The true church isn’t led by cardinals, a college of cardinals. The true church isn’t led by any kind of magisterial group of men. The true church isn’t led by one man. The true church is not led by Joseph Smith. The true church is not led by Judge Rutherford. The true church is not led by a

woman, Mary Baker Eddy, such as the Christian Science movement is. The true church is not led by any human; it's not flesh and blood. Ours is a revelation from our Father who is in heaven. The church requires the Word to come down from heaven, the blessed Word of God. This is the great communication. It's all we have. It's all we need. It's all we want.

I suppose you could come on a Sunday and I could figure out a way to read the phone book and make it interesting. It wouldn't be life changing. I suppose I could read a very insightful book on human psychology. Nobody would be transformed by it, although there would be some level of curiosity. It would be sort of like imitating Oprah. We don't do that. We don't do that. We open the one divine source of revelation, the Bible, and we hear from God, the divine communicator.

Verse 18 says, "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." This is a very familiar statement that has long been a staple in the Roman Catholic system. They say that this is where the Lord made Peter the first pope. Of course, that's not at all what it says. "You are Peter" (there's a kind of a tone that you're not really very important). You're just Peter, you're not Holy Father Peter; you're just Peter. You're just Peter. "But upon this rock, I will build My church." "You are Peter ["stone"], but upon this rock bed [different word], I will build My church."

What is the rock bed upon which He will build His church? I believe it is the affirmation of Peter that "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." The church is not built on the supremacy of Peter. It is not built on Peter, it is built on the revelation from God which Peter believed, okay? It is built on the revelation from God which Peter believed. The church is the gathering of people who are subject to the power and authority of the revelation of God. We are the people who are subject to the power and authority of the revelation of God--the Lord builds His church on the authority of His divine revelation. And there is so much authority in that revelation. Verse 19 says that I'll 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."

Now just exactly what is that saying? I'll give you the keys to the kingdom. What do keys do? They open. What is the ministry of the church? What is the mandate of the church? The mandate of the church is to open the door to the kingdom and invite sinners in. I'm going to give you the key to open the door to the kingdom. What is the key? The key is the Scripture. The Scripture gives all necessary truth about entrance into the kingdom. I'm going to give you the truth that opens the door of the kingdom. And you then can go out and "whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven."

Now does that give some kind of...some kind of independent authority to us, to pastors; did it to Peter? No, no. He is saying this: whenever you function with the Word of God, you function in harmony with heaven. That's the point. Whenever you say to someone, and this is rabbinic language,

you're bound in your sins because they have rejected the gospel. Heaven agrees. When you say to someone you're loosed from your sins because they've received the gospel, heaven agrees. As long as you are faithful to the Word of God, you operate with the full authority of heaven. If a person comes up and says to me, "I don't believe your message. I don't believe the gospel you preach." I could say to that person with full authority, "You are bound in your sin and you will perish." If someone comes to me and says, "I believe with all my heart. I've turned from my sin and fully embraced Christ." I don't know the divine transaction, I can't read minds, but on the basis of that testimony--an evidence of a transformed life such as we heard in baptism--I could say to that person, "You are loosed from your sins." I have the right to affirm the authority of Scripture. This is our great communication. This is all we have. This is all we need. And this is all we want. This is why you come and this is why you listen because you love the truth.

When anybody departs from the great communication, the divine revelation, he's in trouble. Verse 23, Peter suggested that this was a bad plan, Jesus dying. "No, no, Lord, this isn't going to happen to you"--that's a departure from Scripture. He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me"...What?... "Satan." When you deviate from Scripture, you have just landed in Satan's domain. You've just taken up His cause. When anybody departs from the revelation which is the will of God, he takes the side of the enemy of God, the side of Satan. But the church, making a great confession, and the church coming under the authority of the great communication, the revelation of God, is invincible. Go back, verse 18, "I will build My church and the gates of Hades will not overpower it." Death itself can't stop it. Nothing can stop it. And so I say what I said at the very beginning: if the church fails, it can only fail in one way. The only way the church can fail is to fail to submit to the Word of God. If the church is faithful to the great confession and the great revelation of Holy Scripture, then the Lord will build His church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. The church that is faithful to the great confession and to Holy Scripture is invincible and authoritative.

This is a declaration that stretches from Peter through the apostles, to whom the Lord promised that the Holy Spirit would come upon them and bring everything to their remembrance. And He promised them that they would be inspired writers, and they're associates of Holy Scripture.

Thirdly, there's a great contrast. There's a great contrast in verse 20. He warned the disciples that they should tell no one that He was the Messiah. The church is a spiritual entity; it is a spiritual reality. What a strange warning. Tell no one that I am the Messiah, He says. Why? Because it would feed their warped messianic expectations. The Jews were looking for a political, military kind of social messiah and Jesus would not be that. He came for spiritual ends, for the salvation of souls. And so here is the warning, that the church will live in great contrast to the world around it. We are an alien group. We are citizens of another kingdom. We're part of another city whose builder and maker is God, as we read in Hebrews 11 today.

So we counter the political entities in which we live in this world. We are against the grain of society. We have no role to play in the temporal realm, except to live out the gospel. We are a supernatural fellowship in the midst of a natural world. We are alive; everybody else is dead. We understand; everybody else is ignorant. We see; everyone else is blind. We are aliens in this world, strangers. And so we confront this world with the gospel of Jesus Christ. We offend sinners by the very nature of our message; we offend them, as we saw Jesus doing with Nicodemus this morning, stopping him dead in his tracks about the uselessness of his religion. In fact, you might want to approach evangelism this way, find out what people want to hear. Find out the message they would really like to hear and then tell them the absolute opposite. That's essentially what you have to do because the fallen human heart wants what the fallen human heart wants. We don't offer that. Tell them about sin. Tell them about judgment. Tell them about the uselessness of their morality. Tell them about the emptiness of their religion. Tell them about the curse of the Law. Tell them about eternal hell. Tell them about the end of the world. Tell them essentially that politics don't matter, economics don't matter, social structures don't matter. Tell them they're all living on borrowed time. Tell them the end of the world is looming near. Tell them of the damning sin of rejecting Jesus Christ. Tell them the only way to heaven is by faith in Him. Tell them all of those things. Those are not what they want to hear. But that is our message. So a church is this gathering of people who understand the great contrast between everything the world is engaged in and what we are engaged in.

All right, enough of that. Let's go to the last few elements here, features here of the church. The church is an assembly of the called and redeemed people who understand the great conquest. Just to keep going with our C's. The great confession, the great communication (meaning Scripture), the great contrast (meaning we are aliens in the world), and now the great conquest, verse 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."

This is the heart of our message, folks. It's the cross, isn't it? It's the cross. That's our message. It's the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As soon as our Lord introduces the church, He introduces His death because apart from His death, there is no church. If He doesn't bear our sins in His own body on the cross, then there is no church. There are no believers. No one is saved, ever. He must bear our sins.

I was so glad again to hear Isaiah 53. "He must be wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, the chastisement for our peace must fall on Him and we can only be healed by His wounds." That's why it pleased the Lord, in the language of Isaiah 53, "to crush him."

Again we go back to that verse that I go back to so often, 2 Corinthians 5:21, "He was made sin for us." The preaching of the cross again... "to the people perishing is foolishness, to us who are being saved, it is the power of God."

So what is the message of the church? It is the gospel of the cross and the resurrection. Everything that we preach, everything that we say finds its focal point in the cross. If we preach about love, we end up at the cross. If we preach about grace, we end up at the cross. If we preach about mercy, we end up at the cross. If we preach about forgiveness, we end up at the cross. If we preach about judgment, we end up at the cross. If we preach about God's wrath, we end up at the cross. If we preach about righteousness, we end up at the cross. If we preach about sin, it takes us to the cross. If we talk about sacrifice, it's the cross; substitution, it's the cross; satisfaction, it's the cross; expiation, it's the cross; imputation, it's the cross; resurrection, it's the cross; exaltation, because of the cross. It was because Jesus satisfied the wrath of God on the cross that God highly exalted Him, Philippians 2.

The true life of the church has no element of entertainment in it. This isn't about entertainment, it's about the cross. It's always about the cross. We don't have a superficial message. We're not interested in entertaining people. We're not interested in coddling people. We go to the cross, and when you go to the cross, you talk about judgment and sin and death and hell. But you also talk about love and grace and mercy and forgiveness and heaven. The cross can never be obscured, must always be exalted. And by the way, always empty because the cross leads to the resurrection. We don't have crucifixes. The cross is empty 'cause Jesus is alive. All the Old Testament drives toward the cross. And all the New Testament drives toward the cross. Everything focuses on the cross.

As the hymn writer said, "In the cross of Christ, I glory, towering o'er the wrecks of time." So when you ask, "Is this a church?", ask whether the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ are in a focal point, not architecturally, although that used to be the way they did it, ancient churches, and even some in a more modern era, were built like a cross, with a nave and an apse. You've been in cathedrals like that, I'm sure. That was the design, the cross—long, narrow center and a crosspiece. And behind that, the pulpit and the altar. And today the churches have crosses like we do, but it's not just the architecture of the cross. And, by the way, there are many new churches that are sort of modern, industrial buildings that do everything they can to sort of downplay that.

But we're not talking about architecture. We're talking about the message, the preoccupation, and the worship. I used to complain a lot when praise choruses were dominating experiences of so-called worship. That the cross was missing. Then years went by when we were always seeming to sing the Old Testament. And that's fine. But we need to get the cross in and it's been wonderful to see in the last ten or so years, more and more and more songs about the cross. That's the focal point of our worship. So a church is a gathering of people who don't come together to be entertained, to get a slice of the world that's sort of moderated and sanctified a little bit. They come together to look at the cross and celebrate it and the resurrection.

All right, number five, in just again kind of giving you some kind of a structure for understanding the church, would be a great conflict. The church is a gathering of people who understand a great conflict exists. Peter takes Jesus aside in verse 22 and here's where the conflict is demonstrated. Peter takes Jesus aside and he rebukes Him. Boy, that is pretty bold stuff. We know Peter was the apostle with the foot-shaped mouth. He was very good at saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. But to call Jesus aside, "Come over here a minute, I need to talk to you," and then rebuke Him. I mean, that is really brash.

He says, "God forbid it, Lord, You've got this all wrong. You're not going to die. This shall never happen to You." This is not a suggestion, by the way, this is a bold, demanding rebuke of the Son of God. Not going to happen, in the strongest language possible. "No, no, no, no, Lord, no, I forbid this." That's when a little power has gone to your head. Wow! What are you? You're just a loudmouth fisherman; get back in line.

He turned in verse 23 and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan." Wow! Take that, Peter. Anything said by, advocated by, anyone in the church that goes against the will of the Lord of the church is taking Satan's side. Okay? I'm afraid that if the Lord were here today, He might be saying that a lot to people who are part of His called. You've taken up Satan's side. You've taken up Satan's cause. Anything contrary to the will of God, anything contrary to the purpose of God places you on Satan's side.

Now it doesn't mean that Satan had taken over Peter. All it simply means is you've identified yourself with Satan. You've sided with the one who opposes God. Satan doesn't want the Son of God to go to the cross; he knows the meaning of that. "You're a stumbling block to Me, for you are not setting your mind on God's interest, but man's. You're hindering My work." What a frightening idea that is. "You're hindering My work. Get out of My way." Do not take Satan's side.

Now this is important. It is foundational to the life of the church to confront everything that works against the purpose of God. To confront everything that works against the plan of God. To confront everything that works against the will of God--whatever that is; whatever it is. Any cause that goes against the purpose of God must be confronted in the church. We get more of this in the eighteenth chapter, just a couple of chapters later, when we hear our Lord say this, "If your brother sins, do"...What?... "go to him"; confront him about his sin. If he repents, you've gained your brother and you've purified the church. If he doesn't, take two or three witnesses, go to him and if he still doesn't repent, tell the whole church and the whole church, go to him. And if he doesn't repent, put him out, put him out of the church, treat him like an unbeliever. Get him out because unbelievers in the church pollute the church.

This is the gathering of the redeemed for worship. Unbelievers can come and listen, as in 1 Corinthians, and be in awe and say, "God is in this place." But we don't do this for them. We welcome

them to see a worshipping people. And God demonstrated how He felt about that by saying, "Put them out of the church." And the illustration that's most dramatic is in the fifth chapter of Acts when Ananias and Sapphira brought sin in the church and He executed both of them in front of the whole church. While the church was gathered on a Sunday, they fell dead. The epistles of Paul and the other New Testament writers are just loaded with warnings to the church. Get rid of false teachers. Get rid of those who pollute. Read 2 Peter. Read the book of Jude. Read what Titus has to say about factious, divisive people who need to be rebuked a few times and then put away, put out.

Paul writes to Timothy in 1 Timothy 6, guard the truth, guard the treasure. He warns the Ephesian elders, "Beware of false teachers from the inside, rising up from the outside, coming like wolves to tear you to pieces."

So it is a foundational thing for the church that the church fights against and opposes against the will of God, whether it's unsound doctrine, false doctrine, false teaching, iniquity, sin, anything that comes against the will of God. The church needs to be as much like heaven on earth as it can be. You pray that, "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Your name, Your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven." Where's that going to happen? What's the kingdom in heaven? Well, God is honored, God is glorified, Christ is exalted, holiness dominates, and everyone is in praise to God. That's what the church should be on earth. Let that happen on earth. That means the church has to be at war; it has to be in an unending conflict with anything that runs against the will of God.

So we're not sitting around trying to figure out how much of the world we can get in. We're trying to do everything we can to keep it out while at the same time welcoming those who want to see and experience a worshipping people. So this is a true church. They make the great confession of Christ as Lord. They submit to the great communication, Holy Scripture. They live in great contrast as an alien society, separated from the world in which they are placed. They engage in worship, focused on the great conquest of Christ over sin on the cross, and they face the great conflict of Satan and sin that militates against the will and purpose of God.

Let me give you two more things that characterize the church: a great contradiction, a great contradiction. You know, if you listen to preachers today, the popular preachers, you know, the ones that have the monstrous crowds, their message is this: Jesus wants to make you healthy, wealthy, happy, just over the top. You can create your reality; you can have it all. You know what they say. You hear them--Joel Osteen and whoever they are, all of them. There are many; there are more than one could even count. He's kind of got the biggest crowds. That is contrary to what the church really offers. Listen to this. Go to verse 24. "Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must"...What?...." Huh, there's the end of that movement. That's it. It's over. "Deny himself, take up his cross, follow Me, for whoever wishes to save his life will lose it. Whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. What will it profit a man if he gains the whole"...What?... "world." If you get all the health and all the wealth and all the prosperity and every dream you've ever had come true, so what? If you get

all that and forfeit your soul, “what will a man give exchange for his soul.” I wonder if the crowd would be so big if the preacher said, “I want to ask you all to do something. I want you to deny yourself everything you’ve ever dreamed, everything you’ve ever hoped for, everything you’ve ever desired, everything you’ve ever wanted, every ambition you’ve ever had. I want you to deny all of that and submit yourself as if you were dead to the sovereign lordship of Jesus Christ as His slave and bow the knee to Him and ask Him to do in your life whatever it is that will make you holy.

How many would show up a week later? That’s not going to sell, but that’s the great contradiction that we gather to humble ourselves. We gather in brokenness and contrition. We gather to submit our lives. I wrote a book some years ago called *Hard To Believe*. It’s hard to cause people to want to embrace that message. The church is not in the world to help people find themselves, to find purpose and meaning and self-esteem and fulfill their ambitions and their felt needs and make something out of themselves. The church is composed of people who have literally denied themselves, people who have given up everything they are, everything they have, everything they ever hoped to be, people who have counted the cost, willing to hate father, mother, and even their own lives, willing to take up a cross and die. We don’t have some kind of psychological self-help message. We don’t have some message of elevating yourself. Our message is that you come and you humble yourself. “I am crucified with Christ. Nevertheless I live, yet not I but Christ lives in me.” I want to be no more than what Christ wants me to be. I want to have nothing more than He wants me to have. I want to do nothing more than He wants me to do.

This is the true church. The true church is marked by humility. That was the Beatitude attitude--spiritually poor, destitute, bankrupt, empty, coming to be filled. This is the true church. Christ-exalting, Scripture taught, separated from the world, centered on the cross and resurrection, engaged in the conflict with sin in doctrine and life--self-denying, self-sacrificing, humble, obedient and satisfied and joyful.

Finally, what marks a true church is a focus on the great consummation, focus on the great consummation. Verse 27-28, “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.” The Son of Man is going to come. Do you think anybody cares about that today? Oh people like to discuss prophetic stuff that might be happening in the news. And wow, what’s going on in the Middle East, is that the stuff that we’re reading in the Old Testament. How does the...how does the sort of set up in the world kind of connect with the prophecies? I’m not talking about that. Certainly we can see some of those things. This doesn’t get into that. This is Jesus saying to His disciples, “The Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels and repay every man according to his deeds.” It’s going to be a reward. It’s going to be a judgment. Going to be a reward.

Does the church live in the light of the great consummation? Does the church, the true church, really live looking for and hastening the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ--that which in the New Testament

is called our “blessed hope.” I love 1 Thessalonians where the wonderful church at Thessalonica is commended because it says they were characterized by having turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God and to wait for His Son from heaven. Is that what you’re waiting for? You waiting for your material ship to come in? Are you waiting for your career to advance? What are you waiting for? Are you waiting for the Lord from heaven? A true church is a Second Coming church, looking for Christ.

Well, there it is in the blessed words of our own Lord. So how do you recognize a church? Architecture? Tradition, ritual, liturgy? Good feelings? Good babysitting, nice parking lot? No, that’s not how you notice a church; that’s not how you define a church. You define it in all these heavenly ways. And sad to say, some people look very hard to find this kind of church. One of the reasons, of course, that we have Shepherds’ Conference is to help men to understand this because this is the kind of church God blesses. I will build My church.

Father, we thank You for the time that we’ve been able to spend tonight, just looking at these things. And I certainly realize that much, much more could be said and should be said, but thank You for giving us this passage which at first, as we read, it may seem historic and sort of locked in to a past time. But when we take another look, the pattern given here that transcends the moment in which You spoke and rushes its way through all of history to inform every generation of what a church is, we want to be a church like this. We know we aren’t everything we should be. But we can say with honest hearts, this is what we want to be. And if we can ever approximate that, it will be because that’s our commitment. If we don’t aim at the target, we’re not going to hit it. We want to be this kind of church, a church focused on Christ, fed by Scripture, separated from the world, centered on the cross and the resurrection, confronting sin and error, pursuing truth and holiness, humbly abandoning ourselves to the Lord and waiting eagerly to be in His glorious presence. This is a church that brings You glory. This is the church that You are building. We’re so blessed and so honored, and so unworthy to be part of it, but so desirous to be faithful that we might please you in everything we do. Enable us to do that, we pray by the power of Your Spirit. We pray in Christ’s name. Amen.

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