

Characteristics of a True Church, Part 1

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

Code: 90-456

In our times together on Sunday night we have been looking at the Word of God with a view to understanding the church. You might think it's pretty basic and pretty obvious what the church should be, but there's so many competing voices trying to define the church in cultural terms that it's good for us to go back and make sure we understand the foundation. And that's exactly what we are doing. This is message number five, someone must have thought, because that's what they put in the bulletin, number five. I don't remember how many because this is something I talk about an awful lot. But whatever number this might be, this gets down to some very important elements of life in the church.

Many, many years ago when I was very young in ministry here and trying to figure out just exactly what the Word of God said about the church and what the church should be, I worked on developing a simple sort of list of things that were the non-negotiable realities in the life of the church. And that has stood me in good stead for decades. And I've never edited it; I've never altered it; I have never added to it; I have never subtracted from it. The most I have done is maybe reorganized it in a different sequence, but all those things which were essential marks of a true church have remained the same because they come from the Word of God. And it's important for us to be reminded of the fact that as we saw when we began this brief series, the Lord said, "I'll build My church," and it's His church. He builds it His way and we know that He is revealed on the pages of Scripture how He builds His church.

Many, many years ago I developed that basic list and while it may have taken different forms and showed up sometimes in part rather than whole, the elements are identically the same. And over the next couple of weeks, these are the things that I want to speak to you about in helping all of us to understand the church.

Let me just give you a list, at least a partial list that we can begin to think about. What marks a true church? It begins with the absolute authority of Scripture. It begins with a commitment to the absolute authority of Scripture.

The second thing that marks a church is a commitment to worship. It is God-centered, it is Christ-centered. It focuses outside itself on the one who is the object of worship. Thirdly, it is doctrinally clear. A church is a collection of the people of God who know what they believe. There's nothing vague about it. There's nothing wavering about it. There's nothing simplistic about it. It is clear, it is

profound, and it is marked by strong conviction about what it believes.

A fourth element that flows out of this in the life of the church is that it's marked by spiritual discernment. The church, the body of Christ, the people of God, are able to look at the world and understand it. They have the capability to sort out the things that are happening all around them, both in the realm of the physical world, as well as the spiritual. A true church is marked by discernment.

Another characteristic of the true church is the pursuit of holiness, the pursuit of holiness--true spirituality, not legalism; Christ's likeness. Another characteristic is submission to the divine will. Another characteristic is devotion to discipleship. Another characteristic is that it submits to a plurality of godly leaders. Another characteristic is mutual love. And another characteristic is consistent service. And another characteristic is passionate evangelism.

Well there, I gave you the whole list and we're done. But that was only the introduction. I just want you to understand basically where I'm going to go with this. This is simply the list of things that I see as the foundational, non-negotiables of the church. And inside of those dozen that I gave you, there are all kinds of components and elements that I want to talk to you about. But I want to begin tonight with the first one. The first mark of the church is that it is devoted to the absolute authority of Scripture. A church has one authority, one authority and that is: God rules. Christ rules in His church and His will is disseminated in the church through the sole, single revelation from heaven, the Holy Scripture.

Truth dominates the church. Truth defines the church. Truth--divine truth, heavenly truth--reigns over the church because the truth revealed in Scripture is the extension of and the revelation of the mind of God, the mind of Christ. That's why 1 Corinthians 2:16 says we have the mind of Christ, we have the mind of Christ.

This is what we come for. This is why we're here, because we want the truth. The truth gives life. We're begotten again by the truth; we're sanctified by the truth. We're comforted by the truth. We're given hope by the truth. We understand everything that we understand because we see it through the truth of the Word of God. "All Scripture is given by inspiration." It is written by men who were moved by the Holy Spirit and wrote down the very words of God. Paul commends the Thessalonians because when they heard the message that he preached, they heard it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the Word of God. We know that. We understand that. We understand the mandate to preach the Word all the time, in season, out of season, both in its negative rebukes and its positive affirmations. This is the priority of the church, the domination of the truth of Holy Scripture.

What that means is that the preachers and the teachers in the church have the sole responsibility of proclaiming the Word of God. That's how God speaks in His church. That's how Christ exercises His headship and His leadership in the church.

Now you know all of that. But what I want to do tonight is address the impact of that in the world in which we live, particularly in the world in which we are now living and being rapidly submerged. I want you to understand that by sheer virtue of being totally devoted to the truth of God, we are an enemy force in the world. We cannot discharge that responsibility and at the same time be popular with the human system. And I want to show you why.

First of all, I want you to look at John chapter 8 for a moment--John chapter 8, verses 44 and 45. Our Lord is speaking to the leaders in Israel and He is identifying them as being children of the devil rather than children of God. But in verse 44 He says, "You're of your father, the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father." Now these are religious Jews. But anybody outside the true kingdom of God is a child of the devil, doing the desires of the devil. "He was a murderer from the beginning, doesn't stand in the truth because there's no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me."

That sets the church in direct opposition to the world. You have the family of God and the family of Satan. You have the children of God and the children of the devil. The children of God know the truth, proclaim the truth, live the truth of God. The rest of the world is dominated by the lies of Satan. There could not be a more obvious point of conflict.

In Paul's instruction to Timothy in 1 Timothy chapter 3 and verse 15, he says this, "In case I am delayed, I write you." He is giving Timothy instruction for ministry as a pastor of the church in Ephesus: "I write you so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God. You need to know how to conduct yourself in the household of God along with everybody else, in the church of the living God which is the pillar and support of the truth."

That is a definition of the church that cannot be missed. The church of the living God is the *stulos*, "the column, the support, the pillar" of the truth. We hold up the truth. Metaphorically that word *stulos* is used of authority, specifically of authority. The church is the authority. The church speaks authoritatively. In Galatians 2:9, "Recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John who were reputed to be pillars...pillars in the church." There the word refers to men who are the apostles, who gave the apostles' doctrine, which becomes the support of the church.

The second word he uses here, beside the word "pillar," is the word that NAS translates "support." It's *hedraïoma*, it means the "foundation"; *hedra* means "seat." It is the idea of being settled, seated, fixed, firm, steadfast. This then becomes the foundational definition of the church. It is the bastion of the truth of God. That is the church. It therefore is in absolute antipathy to everyone living outside the church. This has been pressed, I think, into bold relief in recent years in our country and in our world. There was a sense in which a biblical morality had prevailed in our nation for some centuries. That is

long gone, as I told you a few weeks ago. There's a flow that you can see happening. First, you abandon the Bible; then you create a new morality which is an immorality; then you demand tolerance. And for those who don't give you tolerance, you are intolerant, and that leads to persecution. We're somewhere between intolerance and persecution. And that, in all honesty, is as it should be expected to be.

Antipathy toward God--and this is something I want you to get--antipathy toward God's truth resides in the heart of all sinners. Antipathy toward God's truth resides in the heart of all sinners. They resent the truth. They are part of the system of lies. Popular evangelicalism has, I think, as its biggest fear the idea that they will somehow be rejected by the culture. The only way you could not be rejected by the culture would be to lie about the truth, or to hide the truth, or to cover the truth, or to compromise the truth. And then being bent on becoming the friend of the world in the words of James, you have become the enemy of God.

There are two kingdoms operating: the kingdom of God, the church with the truth; the kingdom of Satan, the world with lies. They are always on a collision course.

I was being interviewed on the phone a couple of days ago and the question was asked, "What position is your church going to take on gay marriage, homosexual marriage?" And I said, "The biblical position, the biblical position." Marriage is between a man and a woman for life. Homosexuality is a sin like a lot of other sins, but it is a sin. That's the biblical position. The question then followed, "But what's your position?" My position, and why was I asked that? Because there's an old Anabaptist tradition, the old Anabaptist tradition bifurcated between one's personal and biblical opinion, and one's social tolerances.

What's your opinion about gay marriage. Should it be legalized or not? The Anabaptist view was, "Well in the church we take the biblical position, but we don't care about the society. In the church we take the view that the Word of God articulates. But in the world, since we're otherworldly, since we're no part of that, we really don't care about that." I don't think that's a position a believer can take or it terribly weakens the position that is biblical. I think we do care about gay marriage because people who live that way go to hell. We care about people living together in sin, as we heard earlier in a testimony, because people who continue in that lifestyle do not inherit the kingdom of God. We care about all of those iniquities that alienate people from God and catapult them on their way to hell.

So what is our view in the church toward gay marriage? The biblical view. What is our view in the society toward gay marriage? The biblical view. We don't allow it in the church, and we want everyone to know that it is a total disaster and a crime of epic proportions to allow it in the culture because it puts a stamp of approval on people who are living in a way that will send them to eternal punishment. We can only take one view. We can only take one view. We can't hide from the world in which we live. We are aliens and strangers here. We are in conflict with the system around us. We

have to acknowledge that, and we can't have some kind of morality that we want in the church and not care how people live in the world. Of course we care how they live. We care that they continue in their sins, whether they're heterosexual sins or homosexual sins or any other kinds of sins--they damn people forever.

The church can never be the friend of the world because friendship with the world is becoming an enemy of God. There has been, there always will be a fundamental, irreconcilable incompatibility between the church and the world, between the truth and the lie, between God and Satan. True gospel faith involves a denial of worldly values. Biblical truth contradicts the system of Satan. That is why Jesus said to His disciples the very night that He was in the Upper Room with them, getting them ready for what they were going to face, He said, "The world hates you. Why do they hate you? Because they hated Me. You are not of the world. I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. But be of good cheer," He says in the next chapter, "I have overcome the world."

In fact, in Luke we read, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you. Woe to you when all men speak well of you for so did their fathers to the false prophets" (Luke 6:26). False prophets want the world to speak well of them. Why? Because they want to gain popularity, notoriety, money. There is this fixed animosity between the truth of God and the world, and therefore between the church and the world. John 7, our Lord says, "The world hates Me because I testify of it that its works are evil." Did you get that? The reason the world hates us is because we condemn its behavior. That generates hatred, animosity. Contempt for our convictions marks the world. Contempt for the gospel, and it's not because they don't buy the intellectual aspect of it; it's the sin, condemnation, judgment that they hate. Systematically you're going to see over the months and years in the very near future this hate reached the level of the powers that run the social and political systems of our nation. And you're going to see their animosity toward our view of premarital sex, extramarital sex, homosexuality--all of those things--become so intolerable that laws are going to be made to come against us.

What are we going to do? We have a fixed and established and eternal body of truth. We can't change anything. You're going to see, as you've already seen, churches and leaders who call themselves Christians make that sort of old Anabaptist distinction about, "Well personally and somebody who is a Christian, I don't like it, but I think politically we have to allow it." Which means inside the church we care about our theology, but we don't care if people go merrily on their way to hell outside. These are going to be very challenging days for us. Go back to my little list. The Bible has been totally rejected by the culture, by the power brokers. In the place of a biblical morality, they have put a morality they're comfortable with, which means an immorality has become the morality. Tolerance is demanded, intolerance becomes a point of anger and hostility, which leads to persecution.

Still, as clearly as the distinction can be made, there will be churches, Christian leaders who will try somehow to make the world like them, thinking that that's how you win people. Listen, the only time

the church has made any spiritual impact on the world is when the church has stood firm, uncompromising, unwavering, and boldly proclaimed the truth right into the face of the enemy. That's what the prophets did and they were killed; they were stoned. Jesus said to the people of Israel in His time, "Look at your history, you killed the prophets, you stoned the people that were sent to you and then they killed him." And then He says to His disciples, "They're going to hate you; they're going to kill you." And church history has gone like that, hasn't it? And we've had a bit of a respite in some parts of the world, not in all. I have a book that thick that I'm beginning to read on the persecution of Christians around the world now. There's always been this. And some kind of faddish attempt to appease the culture with music and some kind of soft-sell psychological message is to betray the only responsibility, the primary responsibility we have, and that is to uphold the truth.

So you have churches trying to find faddish entrees into the world, which become passé very soon and the church itself becomes obsolete when new fads develop. Biblical Christianity says there is truth and the truth is in the Word of God and all necessary spiritual truth is contained here and nowhere else. Postmodernism says there is no absolute truth. Moral relativism says there is no authority. Personal freedom says there are no rules. And humanistic, practical atheism says there is no judge. The Bible doesn't agree. The Bible says there is truth, there is an absolute authority. There are rules and there is a judge. And this is contrary to the world. That's where we are; that's where we're going to increasingly be.

I guess in a sense I'm saying to you, "Get ready," because we aren't going to change anything. I don't know how it's going to play out. I don't know how it's going to play out at the Master's College. I don't know how it's going to play out at the Master's Seminary. I don't know how it's going to play out in our church, in our communities. I don't know what they're going to demand that we not say from pulpits. But that's not going to change anything except maybe the consequences. But God will be glorified in the faithfulness whatever the consequences, right?

Let me give you a little paradigm. Some years ago I put together a little book called *Why One Way?* Just a little book, *Why One Way?* You can find a lot of this material there, but I thought it might be helpful just for another few minutes to work you through a paradigm. This is how I think about this, and maybe this is a good way for all of us to think about it. I want to give you six simple words to think about—six simple words to think about, key words. The first word and this has to do with how we deal with the truth. We're still on point one of our dozen points. Okay? But you're not going anywhere in the next few weeks and neither am I...so. So point number one is *objectivity, objectivity*.

So much of religion today is subjective. It's about feelings. It's about emotions. It's about experiences. And, of course, this is all led by the charismatic movement, which falls into bizarre kinds of manipulation and mysticism. But we start with objectivity; that's where we start our understanding of truth.

What do I mean by that? I mean that the source of truth is outside of us, not inside of us. If you talk about something being subjective, you mean that you're the source of it. It's intuitive. It's experiential. We don't accept the fact that truth is intuitive. We don't accept the fact that truth comes from you, your intuition, your insight, or your experience, or mine. It is objective; that is, it is outside of us. Martin Luther called it the "external word," as opposed to the internal. It is outside of us. It is fixed. This fact is profoundly essential.

The truth does not come from man. It does not come from the insight of man. It does not come from the understanding of man, and the Bible says "Eye has not seen, nor has ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man the things that God has prepared for those that love Him." They're not discernible by empiricism. They're not discernible by intuition. They're not discernible by experience. We are not the source of any truth, and yet we live in a world where people say, "I have my truth, you have your truth," and those are the people who have no truth, none.

Authentic Christianity understands that the truth is outside of us. It is inscripturated. This is the objective truth, the absolute divine truth, the mind of God, the mind of Christ. No person has ever had in himself any idea--listen--no person has ever had in himself any idea or any experience that determined truth. It comes from God. It can be discovered. It cannot be determined. No human is ever a source of truth, for establishing truth, nor is any angel a source of establishing truth.

Paul makes that clear in Galatians 1 when he says, "If I or an angel from heaven preaches anything else, let him be cursed." What someone thinks is true doesn't make it true. There is no individual truth, there is no intuitive truth. Truth is objective that comes from God. It is outside of us. Second Peter tells us that no interpretation comes by the will of man, but holy men of God were moved by the Holy Spirit and they wrote Scripture. Scripture is God-breathed. It is God's truth--listen--whether it affects somebody or doesn't. It is not existentially determined. Authentic Christianity has always held that the Scripture is absolute, objective truth. It is as true for one person as it is for another person. It is irrelevant what the person's opinion about it is, or experience with it. The meaning is determined by God and not by any human being.

In no way is the truth of Scripture decided by any humans. Even the truth of Scripture is not determined or decided by men. Just saying that deals a massive blow to a very large segment of professing Christianity where people say I'm listening for the voice of God, and God is speaking to me, and the Lord showed me this, and the Lord told me that, and some kind of an intuitive epiphany which is really ruminating in error and fabrication. Biblical truth is objective, it is true by itself, of itself, in itself, whether you exist or not. That is the very starting point of our understanding of truth.

Number two word--the first word *objectivity*--second word *rationality, rationality*. God has given us minds. We are the only creatures that God has made in the physical world that have the power to

reason. Animals have instinct, and they can be trained to certain behaviors because of instinct related either to fear or satisfaction. We have rationality. We can reason. That's why we're without excuse because when you look at the created world and know something about the Creator, that's reason. We have the law of God written in our hearts. We have reason. The objective revelation of God then in Scripture is to be understood rationally.

Now you say, "Well, isn't that obvious?" Not to some people, not to some people. There are those people who look at Scripture and think it is to be understood mystically. Again, intuitively. But Scripture is logical, historical, non-contradictory and it is subject to reason. It is subject to reason--real events happening in real time with real people, to be understood by other people through the normal process of reason. Real language with real meaning that can be grasped. There are no fantasies in the Bible. There are no absurdities in the Bible. There are no inconsistencies in the Bible. There are no allegories in the Bible. It is an infallible, inerrant revelation of God to be understood by normal human reasoning.

In Nehemiah chapter 8, the Scripture had been found, Nehemiah read the Scripture along with others, you remember, and it says he gave the sense of it, he explained the meaning of it. Ezra the scribe studied the Scripture to know the meaning of it and then to reiterate its meaning. Scripture is understood by the process of reason in exactly the same way you solve a math problem, in the exact same way you analyze a historical event, in the exact same way you diagnose an illness or solve a dilemma on a legal level--by the power of reason.

The Bible is to be understood the same way an engineer would take apart some machinery to understand it, and then to improve upon it, and put it back together again. The truth is in the meaning and the meaning is available to the human mind, to the human mind.

Ignorance, as Puritan Cotton Mather proclaimed, is the mother not of devotion but of heresy. Just get a whole lot of ignorant people together and tell them to stand there and wait until they grasp some great spiritual reality from God and you will not come up with truth, you will come up with heresy. It is not mindless, emotional, uninhibited pandemonium that results in a grasp of truth. We live in a pretty much anti-intellectual pop culture. The heroes of our culture are not the brilliant minds, they're the celebrities whose behavior is inexplicable from the standpoint of reason, sanity. We have elevated emotion and feeling to a point where it has become our God. Look at the fantasy books, the fantasy novels, the fantasy movies, the fantasy television programs. This spills over into life in professing Christianity where it's not enough to go and sit down and have someone explain the Bible; there needs to be some transcendental conversation with Jesus. And what comes out of it is ignorance, more ignorance, error, deception and heresy.

I hate to say this, but careful cultivation of the mind ought to be the highest thing on the list of the Christian's priorities. By rationality, that's what I mean, cultivate the mind. We want Christians who

can think clearly, who understand history, geography, who understand language, who understand all of the components and elements that give us access to a true interpretation of Scripture. That's why we're so committed to education at the Master's College, education at the Master's Seminary. There are no secret meanings. And you can stand in one spot and listen all you want and you're not going to hear God tell you something. If you want to hear Him speak, you open the Word. If you want to understand what He means by what He says, then get busy interpreting the meaning.

There's a third word in structuring this little paradigm and that's the word *veracity*. We go from objectivity, realizing we have a static objective text outside ourselves, which is accessible to us through the normal use of human reason. And then thirdly, which yields to us veracity. That's just another way to say truth. The objective revelation of holy Scripture interpreted rationally produces the knowledge of the truth in perfectly sufficient measure to accomplish God's intention for His revelation.

Now I've put that sentence together with a little bit of thought, so let me say it again, worth rereading: the objective revelation of Scripture interpreted rationally yields divine truth in perfectly sufficient measure to accomplish God's intention for His revelation. In other words, you can get what He wanted you to get by applying your mind carefully to the text of Scripture. And how bad has preaching become? How far from Scripture has it drifted when this is the only way we can come to the knowledge of the truth?

The purpose of Scripture is not to increase the quality of your life. The purpose of Scripture is not about relationships; it's not about success; it's not about feelings. It's about truth; it's about truth that the man of God or the woman of God may be perfect, mature, complete, thoroughly furnished to all good works. We want the truth.

You know, I understand that here at Grace Church, and I know you understand it. What an amazing, amazing journey it is for us, isn't it? To come together week after week after week, looking at an objective text of Scripture, going to it with the best that we can bring of our own reason, aided by the illuminated reason of other commentators and scholars and theologians through the centuries who help us to understand it, and coming out of that experience with the truth. Not our truth, but God's truth. And realizing that we have now acquired the very thing that God intended when He made the revelation. How many people are there in churches who have a Bible in their hand but absolutely no idea what God intended to communicate to them?

Now that leads to a fourth word and a fourth reality in this paradigm: *authority, authority*. Here's where we get into trouble. We have an objective revelation, understood rationally, it yields the truth that God intended when He gave it. That leads to authority. That's an inarguable consequence. If this is the truth, then it is the final word, then it is the authority. It is the oracles of God, 1 Peter 4, Romans. Divine truth, when proclaimed, has authority. Sometimes people will say to me, "You're very opinionated, aren't you?" Well, I'm not really so opinionated. I suppose I am. "Patricia, am I strongly

opinionated?” About the Bible, yeah. When we’re talking about something that’s not biblical, her opinion might just easily trump mine. This isn’t about opinions. This is about the oracles of God. Scripture is the final word. It is the mind of Christ; it is the Word of God. Now I know it’s not stylish to speak with absolute authority. I apologize if I overstep that privilege.

But I’m not here to share with you some authoritative opinion that I have about something. In fact, I work pretty hard to keep my own opinions out. I’m not interested in being opinionated. I am interested in having you know that the truth has authority, and it has singular authority. It has unilateral authority. It is not debatable; it is not arguable, which is always interesting. When I get into some kind of a debate with somebody who has a different view because I have the truth and absolute authority and they have only error which has no authority--but they don’t know that. And I come across as this almost...almost unbearable human being who is right--most of the time.

This is good. We live in an era which places a high value on hardness of heart. We can tell this by our love of soft teaching, this one writer puts it. We like to believe that this love of soft words, words which will trouble neither the mind nor heart, nor anything in between, is a deep love of tenderness. Such a conviction flatters us but our love is actually the opposite of tenderness. The one who really wants a tender heart would be calling for a jackhammer. Hard words, hard teaching, authoritative truth is the jackhammer of God. It takes a great deal to break up our hard hearts, and the God of all mercy is willing to do it. But He always does it according to His Word and His Word is not as easy on us as we would like. And you heard that quoted tonight. “Is not My Word like as a fire, says the Lord,” Jeremiah 23:29, “and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces.” I understand that the Word comes not like a soft glove, but like a hammer, to break up our hard hearts.

When Christians call for smooth words, easy words, the result is hard people. When we submit to hard words, we become tender people. Let soft words have their way. Let soft words dominate the pulpit and you’ll have a hard-hearted congregation. Let the hard truths of Scripture dominate a congregation and you’ll have soft hearts and loving people.

So, authority--a fifth--and this again is the logical process. This objective revelation, rationally and accurately understood, yields the truth that God intended when He gave it and is authoritative. And the next word in the little paradigm is *incompatibility, incompatibility*. The noose now is tightening around the neck in our paradigm. The victim can feel the rope burn right now because what we’re saying is this, truth is absolutely and finally incompatible with error. Truth is--listen--intolerant; it is intolerant of error. And that sets off all the alarms in our culture. We have no tolerance for error.

First John 2:21, “No lie is of the truth,” that’s incompatibility. That’s...that’s...if you took philosophy back in college, you remember the law of exclusivity. You know that. The law of logical contradiction. Something can’t be true and not true at the same time. Whatever is contrary to Scripture is a lie. And whatever is contrary to Scripture is incompatible with the truth. The truth is intolerant of all error, and

the source of truth, God, is intolerant of error. And those who proclaim the truth are intolerant of error. It doesn't mean we have to be ugly about it. It doesn't mean that we have to be vicious about it and unkind about it, but it does mean that we cannot find any agreement between truth and error. What fellowship has light with darkness? Christ with Belial?

And this is where we get into trouble, and I think the trouble is coming because what we believe is incompatible with the lies that are systematically taking over the thinking of our culture. They are incompatible. Scientists, evolutionary scientists, hate creationists. Sinners hate people who hold up virtue. The proud hate to be humbled. It's just the nature of being without God. Tolerance toward people, that's good. That's a virtue. Tolerance toward error--that's a sin, that's a sin.

That brings us to one final word in our paradigm and let's just use the word *integrity*. *Objectivity*, *rationality*, *veracity*, *authority*, *incompatibility*, and the final word, *integrity*. This is where it all sort of ends up. We have to live what we preach. We have to live what we preach. Obedience is the final issue. If we're going to preach it, let's live it. This truth has to be fleshed out in how we conduct our lives. If we believe divine truth is authoritative, if we believe divine truth is incompatible with error, if we believe that divine truth reflects God's holy revelation and will, if we believe that it is the truth and the truth alone that saves and sanctifies, rescuing souls, then it behooves us to live that truth carefully, thoughtfully. That's why Paul says to Timothy later in 1 Timothy, "Pay attention to yourself and your doctrine." "Pay attention to yourself and your doctrine."

Back to Ezra; Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord and to do it and to teach in Israel. To do it and teach it. Whatever Scripture says, we proclaim. And whatever Scripture says, we also live, we also live.

I don't know what the Lord has in store for us in the future in our world as true believers, but I think we're going to see churches trying to figure this out and end up compromising. You're going to see Christian leaders betraying the truth to avoid the hostility of the culture. We will not do that. And in the process, we will be, I pray, the most loving, gracious, compassionate, and tenderhearted purveyors of absolute truth anywhere on the planet because they will know we're Christians by our...What?...by our love.

Father, we thank You that we've been able to spend this evening together and be encouraged by testimonies and worship and by the Word and thinking through some of these things. Help us, Lord, to settle these matters in our hearts before we face the temptation to compromise so that we are steeled against those days when they come. We know that You will honor Your truth, that Your truth will prevail, that You will prevail in the world. We don't need to have power over the government. We don't need to have power over the oval office. We don't need to have power over the Senate and the Congress, over the capitals of states and the assemblies and senates of state governments. We don't need to have power over the courts. We don't need that. You have all the power needed to build Your

church.

What we do have to have is the truth, the truth. Give Your church the passionate devotion to the truth, knowing that that's what being a church is--the pillar and foundation of the truth. Help us to be a testimony to others in that regard, and we thank You in Christ's name. Amen.

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