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

## Characteristics of a True Church, Part 3

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

Code: 90-458

Well as you know, we've been talking on Sunday nights about the church. I've been more of an instructor than a preacher, I think, and that's fine. Preaching and teaching are both legitimate uses of the gift and we've delighted to be able to share with you some things that sort of fit into theological categories.

We're talking about the church, and understanding the church is a very foundational and very basic necessity for those of us who make up the body of Christ. I am convinced that most Christians, most professing Christians, don't really understand the church. There are people in denominations, traditional denominations, that essentially are run or operated the way they've been operated for years and years, and people are familiar with the way they operate. But it may not necessarily reflect a clear biblical ecclesiology. And then there all of those little pop-up churches that are all over everywhere all the time that by profession call themselves churches but when you look a little more closely at them, you wonder if those people really understand what a church is. And I'm not so much talking about the size of a church, although I am convinced that the larger the church, at least with some sense of reasonableness, the more likely it is to be able to provide the ministry of the spiritual gifts that God has designed for His people. In fact, I'm not convinced that having a whole lot of little groups and a whole lot of little churches all sort of carving out their own corner really brings together the body of Christ in its strength. And I'm also not convinced that it is the clearest and most powerful testimony of our unity in the Lord Jesus Christ.

When the church gets fragmented into little groups which all have their own pet philosophy, we send a very confused message to the world. A unified church, fully flourishing with manifold gifts of the Holy Spirit and extensive ministry, being able to do what we're able to do with folks that you saw tonight, makes an impact on the world and a declaration of the unity in the body of Christ and its collective power, as all the gifts are operating.

It was Michael Griffiths some years ago who wrote a book called *God's Forgetful Pilgrims* who said this: "Christians collectively seem to be suffering from a strange amnesia. They go to church but they've forgotten what it's all about." And he went on in his book to try to help Christians understand what the church is all about. One writer said, "Church is like a merry-go-round, lots of music, people going up and down, some movement and good feelings but you always get off exactly where you got on."

And I think churches today struggle with an identity crisis. There was a time when they were struggling with the philosophy, and now the struggle seems to be with this sort of entrepreneurial attitude that anybody, anybody who chooses to, anybody who wants to can just sort of launch a church out of nowhere and stylize that church to whatever preference he has and that's legitimate. As the professing church struggles to figure itself out, one can only guess that if the picture is unclear to the people who profess to be Christ's, how unclear must the picture be to the outside world?

I remember doing an interview with NBC locally and I will never forget it. I was sitting on a stool; it was an Easter weekend and they were trying to do a story on local churches and they sat me on a stool and at that time there were lots of scandals in the evangelical world and that was on everybody's mind. And the anchor/reporter looked at me on the air and said, "By the way, who is in charge of your movement?" He was coming from a Roman Catholic background where there is one man who is supposedly in charge of the movement, and I think my answer was something like, "No one, from a human standpoint."

It has way too much freedom to reinvent itself over and over and over again as it wills. I love the church. It thrills me to serve the church. It is the commitment of my life to labor for the church, with the church, in the church, on behalf of the church. But I understand what the church is and have endeavored to convey that to you and to many others--to many who come to Shepherds' Conference every year, and through our missionaries and other media means to communicate the true identity of the church, all around the world.

So we've been talking about that, how to recognize a church, a real church, a church with impact, a church that is faithful, a church where things are happening that honor the Lord, and in a full and rich way. And I want to just go back a little bit and re- sort of structure the church for you, picking up the last six weeks and maybe shaping it in a little different manner.

I love the church, first of all, because the church is being built by the Lord Himself. We started there, didn't we? We started in Matthew 16, "I will build My church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." And we began with the idea that the immutable, sovereign, faithful, omnipotent Lord of heaven--whose Word can never return void but always accomplishes what He says, whose purposes always come to pass, whose will is always fulfilled ultimately, whose plan is invincible--has spoken, and He has spoken about the ultimate triumph of His church. He knows His sheep. He knows them by name. Their names have been in His book since before the foundation of the world. He chose them. He called them to Himself. He regenerated them. He redeemed them. He transformed them. He's in the process of sanctifying them, and He will ultimately bring them to glory. The Lord is building His church.

And the goal of all of this is to make His church a visible image of Christ in the world. One way to look at it would be to say that Christ was God incarnate in the world, and the church is Christ incarnate in the world. And so the goal of Christ in His church on earth is to conform us to the image of Christ. That's the prize of the upward call. And Paul says, "I'm pressing toward that. What I will be in eternity is what I long to be here--to be like Christ, to be shaped into His image." Not only to look like Him from a moral standpoint, but to teach like Him from a theological standpoint, to love like Him from the standpoint of virtue, and to minister like Him from the standpoint of behavior in the world. Christ is building His church, and He's building His church to look like Him. Hence, His church has greatly benefited and the world has benefited when the church has the full range of the gifts of the body of Christ functioning together. And we'll say a little more about that in a moment.

I love the church because Christ is building His church. It's the only thing He's building in this world; He's building His church. His redemptive work goes through His church.

Secondly, I love the church because the church is our Lord's most precious reality, it is His most precious reality. We got a bit of a glimpse of that today when we looked at the story of the Samaritans and our Lord and He told His disciples, "My food is to do the will of My Father who sent Me," and what He meant by that is the world of redemption for which He was sent. He was sent to seek and to save the lost. And He says, "That's what satisfies Me." They thought He needed to eat the physical food, that He was hungry. And He said, "What satisfies Me is this incredible ministry that the Father has given to Me." It drove Him all the way to the cross.

In 2 Corinthians 8:9 we read that "though He was rich"--He was infinitely rich as God is rich--"yet for your sakes He became poor that you through His poverty might be made rich." "He became poor" doesn't mean that He didn't have any money. It doesn't mean that. It doesn't mean that He was limited in His wardrobe. It doesn't mean that He didn't own an estate. It's not talking about poverty in a temporal sense. It's talking about poverty in a divine sense. He became poor in the sense that He divested Himself of His eternal riches. He wasn't poor in this life. He came from a working family. His father had raised Him as a builder, as a carpenter, perhaps stone masonry along with that. Had a small family business in Nazareth. When He became an itinerant preacher, He was dependent on gifts of people. But even then, He was not in abject poverty. That's not what that means. What it means is, He divested Himself temporarily of His riches as God in heavenly glory and came to earth. The gospel, the incarnation, the condescension of Christ for the purpose of redeeming the Father's elect was His joy. This is the most precious thing He has on earth.

And as such, His people are to be cared for with consideration of who they belong to. When I understand that I'm shepherding not my sheep but His sheep, when I'm caring for not my children, but His children; not the folks that are who they are because I love them, but the folks who are who they are because He loves them. That raises the responsibility to a very high level.

When it talks about Him becoming poor, it means He took on the form of man, the form of a slave. Went all the way to the cross, died there for us, completely bereft of all His heavenly riches, including even His relationship with the Father, for it was then that He said, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" How precious is the church? It is the most precious thing on earth because it cost Him His life. I love the church because He's building it. I love the church because it's the most precious thing on earth as evidenced by the highest price being paid for it.

Thirdly, I love the church, and so should you, because the church is the only earthly expression of heaven. Heaven doesn't come down anywhere but in the church. And we've talked about that many times. When the Lord taught us to pray, He said, "Pray this way, 'Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." That only happens in one place, that's here. Heaven comes down here. Ask yourself, "What's going on in heaven?" The worship of God, the exaltation of Christ, and the presence of holiness--the worship of God, the exaltation of Christ, and the dominating presence of holiness. That doesn't happen anywhere on earth but in the life of the church, and it is in the church that God is glorified, Christ is exalted, and holiness comes to earth. Righteousness comes to earth through us, the church. We are unlike anything in the world, unlike anything of the world.

Fourthly, I love the church because the church is the source of divine truth. And we talked about this last time, two times ago. We made a very important point out of it, that the church is the pillar and ground of the truth. What truth? Saving truth, gospel truth. And what is gospel truth? Everything: the Triunity of God, the eternal one, the Creator, all the way through to the establishment of His righteous standard, His judgment on sin which the Old Testament does--it talks of His holiness and talks of His willingness to save. It also talks of His judgment and wrath on those who refuse to acknowledge Him and put their trust in Him. All the way through to the coming of Christ, the incarnation, the sinless life, the substitutionary death, bodily resurrection, ascension, intercession, and return--all of those things are truths related to the gospel, which believed brings salvation.

Timothy was ministering in Ephesus when he was told by Paul in that letter that the church was the pillar and ground of the truth. In that town where he was ministering was the impressive Temple of Diana, one of the seven wonders; it was known for its pillars. Historians tell us the Temple of Diana had 127 of them; each one of them was a gift from a different king. All of them were marble. Each pillar given by a king was then a tribute to the king who gave it, so each king tried to outdo the other kings. They were amazing statements of the majesty and the glory of a king. And they held up the immense roof. And so it is that the Word of God is a magnificent, bejeweled, glorious pillar that supports the truth. As the pillars of the Temple of Diana were testimony to the gross errors of false religion, the church is the testimony to the true religion, divine revelation and the true gospel. So it is the solemn duty and responsibility of every church to lift up the truth, hold it high, let people know that it is unshakeable, immovable, unalterable. It cannot be replaced, and it cannot be lowered from its place of priority. The church then is the one institution in the world that has the stewardship of divine

truth. This, of course, is all through Scripture, both Old and New.

One final note about why I love the church, just in an introductory form. I love the church because the church is the agency for evangelism. This is the launch point to evangelize the world. And you heard a little more about that tonight, of course. The church, from its inception, was the vehicle, the instrument that the Lord designed to reach the world. Israel failed to be that missionary nation that they were called to be. God carved out a new people, made them Jew and Gentile--the church--gave the Great Commission. We're to go to the ends of the earth and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, to tell the world that God is a saving God who has sent His Son to be the Savior of the world, as we learned this morning in John 4:42. And we have the responsibility to go to the ends of the earth and proclaim the gospel of salvation.

There's the essential elements of the church. And those are the things that draw me to the church. Now, having said that by way of sort of a recap on the main foundational features of a biblical ecclesiology, let me go back to the list that we've been giving you. All right?

So what are the marks of such a church? When a church is that kind of church, what characterizes that kind of church? This is what you look for when you're looking for a real church.

So let me go back and tell you what we've already covered. That kind of church will be marked by the absolute authority of Scripture. That church that understands that it is called of God, that it is built by Christ, that it belongs to God, has been purchased by Christ, that it is responsible to be where heaven comes down, that it is the pillar and ground of the truth--that church will live under the absolute authority of Scripture.

Now I don't want to back up and get caught up in some of these things because I can preach on these same truths for a long, long time. But it is essential to understand that we live under the authority of Scripture.

I wrote a book some couple of years ago called *Slave*. That identifies a believer as one who is bound to be obedient. It might surprise you to know that that simple, foundational truth of evangelical Christianity, that simple New Testament truth is under assault from people within the evangelical movement even today, who are saying that our lives are not to be marked by obedience for the sake of obedience. That somehow being obedient because it's right, being obedient because He is Lord and you are His slave, is a wrong approach to sanctification.

There is a new wave of sanctification, and it's typically called "cross-centered sanctification." And this is kind of what it says, that the key to being sanctified is to become emotionally overwhelmed with the wonder of the sacrifice of Christ. You should be overwhelmed with the wonder of the sacrifice of Christ, but this idea says that if you really want to be sanctified, you will only be sanctified when you

look at the cross, and when you're looking at the cross is so constant and so full that you become emotionally overwhelmed with the cross. You'll hear people say, "If you have a problem in your life, preach to yourself the gospel; go back to the cross."

This is a...this is a fast moving, very popular movement. And what it says, in fact, is this, that what drives your sanctification is your emotion. And so what you want to do is activate your emotion and you want to activate your emotion in a way that is almost a mystical, extensive kind of contemplation of the cross. And the other side of it is, don't ever get caught up in being obedient just because you're supposed to be obedient. That's an unacceptable legalism.

So, you've got to find a way, some kind of mechanism, to become so enamored with the cross that you shun sin. Well, there's nothing in the New Testament about that, and there is everything in the New Testament about being obedient because it's right, being obedient because if you're not obedient, guess what? You're going to be disciplined. Being obedient because if you love Me, you will keep My commandments. Being obedient not because of emotion but because of love and because of faith, because you believe that obedience brings blessing and disobedience brings discipline.

If you haven't seen this or picked this up, just know, this is a wildfire, this idea of preaching to yourself the cross all the time and getting swept up in some emotion. I don't think the New Testament even suggests such a thing, and that is why there is nothing in the New Testament about the details of the suffering of Christ. The only thing the New Testament describes about the suffering of Christ is its significance, not its details. There's not a lot of discussion about the actual pain, the actual agonies, the physical suffering and all of that. There is full explanation of the meaning of the death of Christ. Trying to find some internal mechanism to fire up your emotions and think that will deter you from sin and sanctify you is a path to nowhere, is a path to nowhere. You need to know the Word, love the Lord of the Word, and understand by faith if you obey the Word you'll be blessed; if you don't, you'll be disciplined. And you want to keep yourself in the circle of blessing and obedience.

So churches have to understand to begin with that believers live under the absolute authority of Scripture. If you try to train a congregation to depend on their emotions for sanctification, even though you point their emotions in the most noble direction, you're going to have chaos.

Well, a lot more could be said about that, but then a lot more could be said about a lot of things and I won't do that tonight. But we started there with the absolute authority of Scripture. Then we talked about the priority of worship. Then we talked about doctrinal clarity. Then we talked about spiritual discernment, and then we talked about the pursuit of holiness. Those are the first things that are the marks of a church. When you find a church that understands who it is, this is what you will find: people who submit to the authority of Scripture, people who worship from the heart, people who are clear on doctrine, people who by virtue of their submission to the Word of God and doctrinal clarity, have discernment, and people who live lives pursuing holiness. And they understand that it's not an

emotional thing. Paul said, "I beat my body to bring it into subjection." Obedience is an act of the will and the will is informed by the mind and the mind has the revelation--obey and be blessed.

All right, so we covered those five already. So it took me a long time to tell you what we've already covered. All right, let's move on a little bit here.

This next point gets us sort of out of all of that theology for just a moment into something that's very practical and yet it's clearly New Testament. A true church will be marked by a plurality of godly leaders, it will be marked by a plurality of godly leaders.

Can I add a plurality of mature, godly leaders who are called in the New Testament "elders." You know what "elder" means? It means older people, older people. The plurality of godly leaders.

Turn for a moment to Ephesians chapter 4, Ephesians chapter 4. I'm not in any hurry to move through the list. That's unlikely that I'll be able to do that because I want to lay these out for you so that you really understand the church. But let's...this is a good place to start.

In Ephesians 4, and we can actually pick it up in verse 11. "He"...that is Christ... "gave to His church some as apostles, and some as prophets." Now that's chronological. The first leaders of the church were the apostles. The Twelve, minus Judas, plus Matthias, plus Paul; they were the original leaders of the church. And you remember that Paul went everywhere, ordaining elders in every city. Subsequent to the apostles there were certain preachers or prophets that the Lord placed in churches, and the New Testament epistles refer to them as well. They weren't apostles; that is a very unique office. They had to be eyewitnesses of the risen Christ. They had to be called specifically by the Lord Jesus. Even Paul had his calling on the Damascus Road. So the next generation of leaders in the church that follow the apostles are the prophets, and they fill a gap between the apostles and the elders. They were the ones to whom God gave revelation for the church. Sometimes they preached new revelation; sometimes they reiterated revelation that had already been given, but they were the early preachers.

Then, following them chronologically, the Lord gave to the church some as evangelists and some as...I think the best way to acknowledge this is pastors/teachers, pastors/teachers. It can be pastors and teachers, or pastors/teachers. So that's kind of the chronology. Starts with the apostles, then the prophets, then come the leaders of the church, the remaining on-going leaders of the church once the apostles and prophets have passed away. We know they passed away because Ephesians 2:20 says, "They were the foundation of the church." The foundation was the apostles and prophets. They disappear and in their place come evangelists and teaching pastors. And that's permanent. The church today still led by those who are evangelists and teaching pastors, those whose responsibility it is to mobilize the church for evangelism. They become our missionary leaders. They become trainers of others to evangelize. They become...they are not only individually, passionately committed to the

proclamation of the gospel, but mobilizing the church for the gospel. I would say it's this simple. When you think about pulling together leaders for the church, they should fall into these two categories. They are either evangelists who see the responsibility of extending the gospel into the community and around the world, or they are teaching pastors who see the responsibility to nurture those who come to Christ and build them up in the faith so that out of those who are built up in the faith there can be another generation of evangelists and teaching pastors. And those are the two gifts.

When I first came to Grace Church in 1969, I knew that the calling of God on my life was to be a teaching pastor. Not that I'm disinterested or uninterested in evangelism; not true at all, and even Paul told Timothy to do the work of an evangelist. We all do that. But I knew that because my passion was the teaching of the Word of God to the people of God, feed the flock of God, that I needed to call around me some who had the desire to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. And so through the years, that's been the dual emphasis of leadership in the church as it should be, as it should be. So the church then is led by these who are identified as evangelists and teaching pastors.

Now they also are identified in the New Testament in the term "elder." Elder simply identifies the fact that they're the mature ones. Of course in the early church they had to mature pretty fast because they were all very young in the faith.

In Acts chapter 14 and verse 23 we read, concerning the apostles, concerning Paul and those who were traveling with him, that they appointed elders in every church. They appointed elders in every church. Praying with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. This was the pattern and we could show it in many other places in the book of Acts. Elders, in the plural. You never see the word in the singular except when it refers to the elder John who is an elder. But whenever an elder is spoken of, it's always a plural word. This is because the church is to be led by a plurality of mature, godly men.

In the twentieth chapter of Acts, you go over to verse 17, and it says, regarding Paul, "From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church." Now this becomes established. The gifted pastor/teacher, the gifted teacher, and we see there are also teachers from 1 Corinthians, that's clear. So you have pastor/teachers, teachers and evangelists. They compose this group called the elders of the church. And Paul calls the elders together, verse 17, "When they had come to him, he said to them, 'You yourselves know from the first day that I set foot in Asia how I was with you the whole time, serving the Lord with all humility," and he describes how he ministered. And this is the pattern for how they are to minister as well. He sets the model for their ministry, a model of humble service, warning, watching, teaching, giving the full counsel of God, shepherding the flock of God which the Lord has purchased, verse 28, "with His own blood."

He tells them, "Be on guard for yourselves." Guard your own life. Paul says that to Timothy, "Take heed for yourself, and then guard the flock." Hebrews says, "You'll give an account for guarding

them." You are an overseer, you are an overseer. You elders are also overseers. Elder is the word presbuteros from which the Presbyterians have taken their name. Elder means an older, mature believer. They are also overseers; that's the word for "bishop." A bishop is no different. A bishop is not somebody higher than an elder, just a synonym. Those of us who are elders are the mature people in the church who had the responsibility to feed and lead the flock according to verse 28--to guard our own lives because of the preciousness of the flock. We are to do that also with a responsibility as overseers, overseers. That's the word episkopos, and that's the word from which the Episcopalians took their identification. It's the same function; it's the same office. We are feeders and leaders who have oversight of the flock.

The very nature of our ministry here is "to shepherd," that's the word for "pastor"--poimen, poimen-that's pastor. So *elder*, *overseer*, *pastor--*all the same thing. Elder describes his age, his maturity. Overseer describes his responsibility. And pastor describes his personal devotion and care of his flock.

These are the godly leaders, and their ministry goes along the lines defined in Ephesians. They are responsible for mobilizing the congregation for evangelism and also feeding them the Word of God. Every church needs to be led by a plurality of these men. The stronger the men, the stronger the church. The more mature the men, the stronger the church. The more faithful the men in overseeing, the stronger the church. The more compassionate and caring the shepherds, the stronger the church. It's a flourishing church. I would think that people who are in Christ would run to a church with that kind of soul care and that kind of feeding and leading and responsibility.

What are the characteristics of these men? How does someone qualify for this? Turn to 1 Timothy 3. How do you know if you're called to this? Well, it's a trustworthy statement, it's axiomatic, spiritually axiomatic. If a man aspires or desires the office of overseer, that's elder, pastor, overseer, whatever term you use, it's axiomatic that men will desire it. So this is a very important principle.

Let me just lay this one in your mind. How do you know you're called to this? Do you have some kind of esoteric, supernatural experience? No. Why am I a pastor? Why do I do what I do? Why have I done what I've done all these years? It's pretty simple. This was my desire. This is what I aspired to do. People used to say to me, "What would you be if you weren't a pastor?" And my answer was, "I have no idea. I have no second thought. This is a short list. I want to be a pastor, and I do not want to be anything else, nothing else."

People say, "Well you're pretty good at presenting a case and arguing, do you want to be a lawyer?" Never had the thought, not for two seconds. "Well, you know, you can lead people, have you ever thought about, you know, being in the corporate world?" Never, never had a thought about that; never. I've never had a thought about anything. This is all I ever desired to do. That's all I've ever desired to do. Oh yeah, when I was a kid, of course, I wanted to be a baseball player like all kinds of

little kids do, but beyond that in the adult life, this is that to which I aspired. What was going on in me? I have to believe was the work of God driving me in the desire that He had for my life. This isn't some kind of mystical calling. And I tell young men that all the time. If you would be content to do something else, do something else because there's going to be a lot of days when you wish you weren't doing this. It's a heavy burden to bear. And if it isn't the passion of your heart, and you have no second choice, maybe you should try something else.

And this is axiomatic. I mean, this is...it is just obvious. You do this because you aspire to do this, and if you aspire to the office of an overseer, it's a fine work; it's a noble work; it's a glorious aspiration. However, that in itself is not enough. That's not enough. There are lots of people who would say I desire to do that, but you have to be qualified. And here come the qualifications in verse 2.

"An overseer then must be above reproach." What does that mean? That you have nothing in your life that calls your integrity into question. That you've done nothing in your life to bring reproach on the name of Christ or scandalize the church. And it starts with the husband of one wife, which literally means a one-woman man. You say, "Well, I could be a pastor then 'cause I only have one wife." No, that's not the point. The point is that the one who is a pastor, the one who is a pastor/teacher, the one who is a leader in the church, must be a one-woman man. That is, he must be a man fully devoted to the woman who is his wife, it's a moral qualification. Why is that at the head of the list? You tell me why. How many scandals do we know about at that level?

"Must be temperate, wise or prudent, respectable, hospitable." And here's the one...the one skill, just one skill. Everything else is a character qualification, a moral qualification. There's only one skill, didaktikos, "skilled in teaching." Why? Because that's the only thing that separates me from you. The rest of you men, are you supposed to be faithful to your wife? Yes. Why is it sorted out for me as a pastor that I have to be faithful to the woman who is my wife? Because that sets the example for all of you. That's no different than anybody. Aren't you supposed to be temperate, wise or prudent, respectable, hospitable?

Pastors are not to be "addicted to wine or pugnacious," meaning people with bad tempers who get mad and angry, but "gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money." They must be able to manage their own household well, keep their children under control with all dignity, because if a man doesn't know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God? He can't be a new convert, or he'll become conceited, fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. And he must "have a good reputation with those outside the church so that he doesn't fall into reproach and the snare of the devil."

Let me ask you a question, Should that be true of all of you? Of course. The only thing that sets me apart from you is the one skill, the one gift that is given to the elder, and that is skill in teaching. That word also implies teachableness because the most effective teachers are the most teachable people.

I will tell you this, the greatest teachers are the greatest students. If I have been at all used in your life to teach you, it is because I have submitted myself to others to teach me. An unteachable is the least effective teacher because he thinks he knows everything. The most effective teacher is the most teachable man. Teachable is even inherent in that term *didaskalos*. Some commentators would say that's the primary strength of that term.

So this is how the church is led, by a plurality of godly leaders. And since the church, listen, is to be dominated by the Word of God, the more skilled the teachers, the more strong the church. And the more teachers, the more strong the church. You could never have enough teachers. One of the great riches of this church is the amazing number of skilled teachers of the Word of God, and more coming all the time as they come through the wonderful ministry of the Master's Seminary and become a part of our church and churches all over the world, and how grateful we are.

And by the way, leadership comes down to service, not about authority. I don't have any authority because I'm the pastor; I don't have any. I don't have any ecclesiastical authority; there's no church hierarchy. I don't have any educational authority; I can't throw my degree around. I don't have any experiential authority because I've been around a long time. I only speak with authority when I speak the Word of God. That's the only time I speak with authority.

If I go to an elders' meeting, and many of you have been there, and I sit in an elders' meeting with the rest of the elders, I don't lead the meeting. I hope I don't dominate the meeting. I give a brief report or sometimes not so brief report to the elders. But I sit like every other elder and I listen and I try to understand and I try to give some direction. I have no personal authority. I have no educational authority. I have no authority by virtue of the fact that I stand in this pulpit. The only authority I have is the authority of the Word of God. And at that point, I am equal to every other person who has the Word of God in his hand and teaches it accurately.

You say, "Well you sure preach a lot." I do because I understand that even among men who are teachers, God may design that one is a dominant teacher. You can see that with the apostles. You can see with the apostles there were twelve of them. There was a very, very well-known leading group of Peter, James and John. We don't have any sermons from John and John traveled with Peter through the first part of the book of Acts and never preached. And then there was Paul, and he had men with him but Paul was even recognized by the pagans as the chief teacher, the chief speaker. You have leaders, and then you have leaders within leaders and leaders over leaders. And based upon the uniqueness of their gifts, they serve in teaching and different places in different ways. And that's what's so amazing about this church. The gifted people start teaching your children, and then they teach your teen-agers and the college students, and on and on it goes by God's design. We're not all...we're not all, you know, little ducks put out of the same mold, quacking the same way. There are variations in our giftedness, and they're leaders among leaders, and leaders over leaders. But the

strength of our leadership is bound up in our handling of the Word of God and our ability to apply the Word of God with wisdom to the issues of life, to the issues of the church.

So leadership is service. It's not about authority, it's about service. And that is exactly what our Lord said in that most notable passage in Matthew chapter 20. He's talking about leadership there and it's different than leadership in the world. You remember that the mother of the sons of Zebedee comes and says, "Can my boys sit on your right hand and left hand in the kingdom," and they're trying to push themselves. And so the rest of the disciples got mad at them for doing it. Verse 25, "Jesus says to them, 'You know that the rulers of the nations lord it over them.'" That's a worldly approach, dominance. "And their great men exercise authority over them. It's not this way among you. Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant. Whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave, just as the Son of Man didn't come to be served but to serve and give His life a ransom for many." There's the model.

So what does it mean to be a leader in the church. It means to be a slave, to sacrifice yourself to the needs of the people. You know, a teacher of the Word of God essentially does what he does for the people he teaches. I don't need to do this for me. That's the process of study, and then my soul is satisfied. This is all about serving you. This is what identifies a church, men of character—back to 1 Timothy for just a moment, chapter 3—men of character with stable families, children under control with all dignity because if they can't manage their house, how they going to take care of the church? Because the church does have unruly people and many challenges. And these men are particularly gifted for handling the Word of God accurately and effectively. That's what sets them apart from deacons, who are serving the church but are not the teachers, the primary teachers in the church.

Having said that, I want to encourage you that we all need to be teaching somebody what we have learned. Turn to Titus chapter 1, Titus chapter 1, because here we have a second giving of the list of qualifications. Titus has been given the responsibility to strengthen the church in Crete. Part of it is putting leaders in place. Verse 5, "I left you in Crete for this reason, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you." So this same pattern of taking the most mature Christians, who are to be identified as leaders in the church, and putting them in place. And here again is the list of qualifications and they have to do again with character. "If a man is above reproach," the same thing. It doesn't mean we're perfect because no one is and no one would be qualified. It doesn't mean that they lived a perfect life before they were converted to Christ, but Paul was a murderer before he was converted to Christ. But he means that, since coming to Christ, their life is impeccable, it is above reproach. There's no blight; there's no scandal. There's nothing that would bring a reproach on the name of Christ. And then again, there's that first thing in the list, "A one-woman man," because that was so characteristic of sinful human behavior, to be immoral.

And then it says, "Having children who believe." Now we go from children that are small, as in 1 Timothy 3, and in submission with dignity, to children who believe, who are not accused of dissipation

or rebellion. Now that...that is a clear-cut statement. Never in the New Testament is that verb *pisteuo*, "who believe," used of anything but a person who believes savingly. Children who believe, not dissipation. You know what a dissipated life is. And not in rebellion against the gospel.

"For the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick tempered, not addicted to wine"-—again—-"not pugnacious, not fond of money, sordid gain, hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled," and then here it comes, "holding fast the faithful word, which is in accordance with *the* teaching, *the* doctrine so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and refuse those who contradict, for there are many rebellious and empty talkers and deceivers."

So what do we do? We handle the Word of God in a kind of a two-edged way. In one it's the positive teaching to grow the people of God. In the other, it's the negative exposure of error to protect them from deception. In other words, you have the skill of teaching and you have faithfulness to a true understanding of what is revealed in Holy Scripture so that you can both exhort on a positive level and you can refute on a negative level those whose error threatens the church. Paul in Acts 20, when he was talking to those Ephesian elders, says, "I have not failed to declare unto you the whole council of God and night and day for a space of three years I have warned you. And I warned you that evil men would arise from among you and that wolves would come in from the outside and both would be a threat."

The leadership of the church then are the feeders and leaders and overseers and caretakers of the souls of the flock of God who also have the responsibility to protect them from corruption inside the church and wolves coming from outside the church. And according to Hebrews 13, this is such an important duty that we will give an account. Listen to verse 17, "Obey your leaders and submit to them," that's your responsibility, "For they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account." They will give an account.

The church then is marked by this plurality of godly leaders. The strength of that church will be in great measure connected to the strength of that leadership, to the strength of that leadership. Please note, this is male leadership in the church. Paul instructed Timothy, "I permit not a woman to teach or take authority over a man, but to be in subjection, to be quiet and if she has a question, to ask her husband." It isn't the woman are inferior; spiritually they're not--they're equal spiritually. In Christ there's neither male nor female. We're talking about divinely designed roles in the church.

When you're talking about a church, you're talking then about a plurality of godly feeders, leaders, overseers who take responsibility, and compassionate shepherds who care for the souls of God's people. How do they do that? By nurturing them, they are sanctifying shepherds, nurturing them in the Word of God, and protecting them from the wolves.

Let me just suggest one other point for tonight. And I knew I would get stuck on that because it's so important. So we're talking about the marks of a church, absolute authority of Scripture, priority of true worship, doctrinal clarity, spiritual discernment, pursuit of holiness, plurality of godly leaders...give you one more...commitment to discipleship, commitment to discipleship.

That is to say there is a commitment to the full spiritual development of every believer. Against the bizarre background of the modern church, I have to comment. It is amazing that there is a new trend to tell people that their church exists to bring people to salvation and once they're saved, they need to get out, they need to get out. In fact, pastors--they are all over the Internet, by the way--pastors who literally have said, and I could give you quotes on it, "If you've become a Christian, get out. If you expect us to feed you and to do expository messages, and to give you Bible lessons, you're in the wrong place, get out." Very popular; very large churches with that kind of mantra. And yet, what is the Great Commission? What is the Great Commission?

Listen to the words of our Lord, Matthew 28:19, "Go therefore and make"...What?..."make disciples of all the nations." How do you do that? "You baptize them in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit," and then you do this: "You teach them to observe all that I commanded you." That's what you do, that's the Great Commission. You don't go and give them the gospel, have them pray a prayer and then kick them out. That's not the Great Commission.

Oh, by the way, did you notice? It doesn't say, "Teach them to feel emotional about the cross." It says, "Teach them to observe everything I've commanded." Put them under orders. "And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age," which is to say, "I know it's a challenging task, but I'll be there with you." We have to be committed to your spiritual development. It's not enough to be preaching and teaching sound doctrine and clear exposition of Scripture. We can't be satisfied with the sermon. I'm not satisfied; I'm not satisfied with any sermon I ever preach, that's why I don't listen to my own preaching, because all I think about is how much better it should have been.

But my task is not over when I've handed the truth off to you. That's not the end of my passion, that's not all I want. That's only the beginning of everything. The apostle Paul had this longing in his heart and he said, "I have birth pains," to the Galatians, "I have birth pains until Christ is fully formed in you." "I have birth pains until"--that's severe agony. It's hard for men to identify those. But we've heard the complaints enough to know that it's a very painful experience. Paul's saying, "I have birth pains until Christ is fully formed in you." It's like as far as a man could understand giving birth to someone. It's an agonizing thing until the child is born. I have birth pains until Christ is fully formed in you. Paul writes to the Corinthians and expresses his desire for them in 1 Corinthians chapter 4. He says, "I write to you," in verse 14, "as beloved children. You have countless tutors in Christ. You have a lot of people that have spoken into your life"--been like a tutor, like a teacher--"but you don't have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel." I care about you in a way

that nobody else does because I was your spiritual father. I care about you. And he cares about them so much that he says to them in verse 19, "I'm going to come to you soon if the Lord wills and I'm going to find out, not the words of those who are arrogant but their power. I'm going to come and check on you. I'm going to come and find out the true story about you."

In fact, he even warns them that when he comes, he doesn't want to come with a rod, he doesn't want to come and inflict pain on them. He doesn't want to come and have to disciple them. He wants to come and embrace them and love them. That would be his desire. Verse 21, What do you desire? "Shall I come to you with a rod? Or with love and a spirit of gentleness?"

Why does he care? They're in Christ; they're going to heaven. Because part of being a pastor and a shepherd is this commitment to the full maturing of the believer, to the full devotion of the believer.

Why do you think he went through what he went? Why had he been in Corinth after 18 months and then gone away and written four letters to them? Four letters: two of them are not in the New Testament; two are in the New Testament; the other two he refers to. Why all of this agony? Why all of this pain? And it was profound pain dealing with that church. I mean, they're going to heaven, essentially, you could say that. But when he writes to them, for example, 2 Corinthians chapter 12, verse 15, "I most gladly spend and be expended for you. And if I love you more, am I to be loved less." This is a hard thing, that the more I love you, the more I spend my life for you, the less you love me? What is that about?

Paul says to Timothy in...and this is such a simple and yet such a rich passage. Paul's instruction to Timothy in 2 Timothy chapter 2, verse 1, "You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus and the things you've heard from me in the presence of many witnesses. Entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. Take everything I've taught you and teach it to others, teach it so fully and so well that they could actually teach others."

You have four generations: Paul to Timothy, to faithful men, to others also. The truth is passed down. The saints are nurtured and developed and strengthened and built up. A real church is committed to the full discipleship of believers. To take them in the language of 1 John 2, from being spiritual babies to spiritual young men who are strong in the world, to spiritual fathers who know God in an intimate way. You want to see that progress, that spiritual development.

And one of the wonderful blessings here at Grace Church is that there are so many people, so many gifted people, so many dedicated people, so many Christ-like people who are pouring their lives into your little children from the time they show up here at Grace Church. And you watch them being nurtured, not only by you and your family, but by these people in the body of Christ who are bringing their lives and their spiritual strengths and their giftedness to bear upon the lives of your children as they flourish in the life of the church, because we're all committed to the process of discipleship, to

bringing believers to being fully formed into Christ's likeness.

Let's go back where we started and wrap up in Ephesians 4. Why does the Lord give to the church apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers? "For the equipping of the saints, for the work of service to the building up of the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith, of the knowledge of the Son of God to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ so that we are no longer children."

How could you say to somebody, if you've come to salvation, "Get out"? That would be like dropping your baby in a dumpster. You are responsible for the full development of that spiritual life. That's the work of the leadership of the church, "till we all come to the fullness of Christ and are no longer children tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine by the trickery of men, by craftiness and deceitful scheming but speaking the truth in love, we're to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ."

A real church is completely devoted to the spiritual development of the precious people for whom Christ died.

Well, next Sunday night is seminary graduation so we'll skip a night and then the following, we'll come back and try to finish up the list.

Lord, it's just a real joy for us to rehearse these great truths in Your Word. We are blessed because we are surrounded by so many people who here in this church understand these things and are committed to these things. So grateful. Thank You for all that You're doing here and in many, many other faithful churches in this country and around the world. We're thankful for all those gatherings of Your people who are endeavoring to be faithful to what the Scripture lays out. May they increase to Your glory, we pray, in Christ's name. Amen.

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