

"THE CHURCH OF THE LIVING GOD"

I. Introduction

- A. One of the strengths of the Reformed tradition in comparison to the contemporary evangelical movement is how our tradition develops the Bible's teaching on the church as a visible institution.
1. We do not define the church merely as a spiritual organism that consists of all who have saving faith in Jesus Christ.
 2. We also believe that Christ has established his church as a formal organization with its own membership, offices, ordinances, constitution, and purpose.
 3. Christ works through this organization to administer the kingly aspect of his messianic office.
 4. In the words of a 19th century Presbyterian minister named Stuart Robinson, "The mission of Messiah, undertaken in the covenant of eternity, was not merely that of a teaching Prophet and an atoning Priest, but of a ruling King as well. His work was not to enunciate simply a doctrine concerning God and man's relations to God, as some Socrates, for the founding of a school; nor even merely to atone for sinners as a ministering priest at the altar: it was, as the result of all, and the reward of all, to found a *community*, to organize a *government*, and administer therein as a perpetual *king*." [*The Church of God as an Essential Element of the Gospel*, 39]
- B. Paul has been talking about church government all throughout 1 Timothy 3.
1. In the first thirteen verses of the chapter he set forth the qualifications that need to be met by those who serve in the church's special offices of overseer (or elder) and deacon.

2. In the verses that we are studying today, the apostle has several other things to say about the church.
3. And we should note that Paul's preceding discussion about church officers makes it clear that he has in mind the church as a visible institution.
4. As we study this passage in this sermon, we will consider what it teaches us about the church as God's household, as God's called-out assembly, and as the pillar and buttress of God's truth.

II. The Household of God

- A. Our text begins with Paul explaining why he has written these things to Timothy and the church in Ephesus.
 1. While he hopes to come to them soon, he suspects that there may be a delay in his ability to do so.
 2. But he does not want to postpone addressing certain matters, so he writes this letter.
 3. This may seem like a fairly mundane detail, but it contains an important lesson for us.
 4. From Paul's perspective, his plans were thwarted.
 5. But who was sovereign over the circumstances that resulted in Paul having to delay his trip to Ephesus?
 6. God was.
 7. And God's superintendence over this delay resulted in this portion of God's Word being written.
 8. If God had not providentially hindered Paul from getting to Ephesus as soon as he would have liked, subsequent generations of Christians would have been deprived of the teaching that has been

preserved for us in this letter.

9. This is a good reminder that even when our hopes and plans seem to be best from our perspective, God may very well have something better in mind.

B. Paul says that he has written these things so that Timothy and the other believers in Ephesus may know “how one ought to behave in the household of God.”

1. It is interesting that Paul refers to the church as God’s household.
2. This tells us several things about the church.
3. First, it tells us that the church is God’s domicile, God’s dwelling place.
4. Of course, as God he is present everywhere.
5. He cannot be confined to one place.
6. He is exalted far above the world that he has made.
7. Nevertheless, in his gracious condescension he takes up residence in the midst of his people.
8. He causes his favorable presence to dwell among us.
9. He makes his face to shine upon us.
10. This is what the Bible means when it says that as believers in Jesus Christ, we are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

C. Another thing that the word “household” tells us about the church is that as believers we are members of God’s household.

1. We are members of God’s family.

2. This brings to mind what Paul says about the church in Ephesians 2.
 3. He prefaces this by noting that as long as people are separated from Christ, they are alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and are strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.
 4. Then Paul says that through the blood of Christ we are brought near to God.
 5. This is really just another way of saying that we are received into God's household.
 6. We are no longer hopeless and homeless orphans.
 7. Because Christ has redeemed us, we have received adoption as sons, and we have an inheritance in God's kingdom.
- D. One other thing to point out about the word "household" is how it tells us that the church is governed by God's rules.
1. To belong to a household is to be held accountable to the standards of that household.
 2. Think of how parents expect their children to conduct themselves when they are in public.
 3. They expect their children to behave a manner that will reflect well on their family.
 4. When people see a child behaving in a rude or selfish or otherwise bad manner, they think ill of that child's parents and family.
 5. Those who belong to the family of God are called to behave in a manner that is reflective of the glorious privileges that have been bestowed upon us.

6. Our conduct as believers should be such that it shines a spotlight on our great and glorious God.
7. Notice also how this connects with what Paul said about church officers in the first part of this chapter.
8. All believers should be marked by the kind of godly character that is exemplified in the lives of the church's elders and deacons.

III. The Called-Out Assembly of the Living God

- A. The second way that the church is described in our text is by the phrase "the church of the living God."
 1. The Greek word for church is *ekklesia*, from which we get English words like ecclesiastical and ecclesiology.
 2. The word *ekklesia* is formed by combining two other Greek words: the preposition that means 'out of' and the verb that means 'to call.'
 3. Now, we cannot always trace a word's meaning back to its etymological roots, but in this case it works fairly well.
 4. The etymology tells us that the church is the community that God has called out of the world into covenant assembly in his presence.
- B. This is confirmed by the way the word *ekklesia* was used prior to the time when the New Testament was written.
 1. Jesus and the writers of the New Testament did not coin this word.
 2. In ancient Greek culture, it was used to refer to an assembly of citizens when they met as a counsel to decide on matters of concern in their society.
 3. And in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint, the term *ekklesia* is used to translate the Hebrew word "assembly" when it refers to Israel as God's covenant people.

4. This helps us understand what the New Testament means when it speaks of “the church.”
 5. The church is not a building.
 6. It is a people whom God calls into existence, and gathers to himself, and forms into a community.
 7. We have been called out of the darkness of this fallen world and into God’s glorious light. (1 Pet. 2:9)
 8. We have been called to belong to Christ, called to be saints of God. (Rom. 1:6-7)
 9. We have been called according to God’s purpose, the purpose in which he predestined us to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. (Rom. 8:28-30)
- C. Notice also that Paul refers to the church as the church of “the living God.”
1. This reminds us that our God stands in sharp contrast to the lifeless idols that are made by man.
 2. Most people believe in some kind of god, but the gods that they imagine for themselves have no real existence, which means their gods have no power to help them.
 3. Our God is the source of everything that exists.
 4. Our God rules over everything that takes place.
 5. Only this God, the living and true God, can be a refuge, and source of strength, and very present help in trouble to those who serve him.
 6. The living God is in the midst of his church.

7. She is his holy habitation.
8. Therefore, she shall not be moved.

IV. The Pillar and Buttress of God's Truth

- A. The third way that the church is described by Paul in these verses is by the phrase "a pillar and buttress of truth."
 1. This is a very helpful image.
 2. Think of what pillars and buttresses do.
 3. They hold things up.
 4. They support things.
 5. If a pillar or buttress in some large building were to fail, the integrity of the building would be threatened.
 6. In giving us this image, Paul is presenting us with a picture of the task that has been assigned to the church.
 7. The church holds the truth of God aloft so that it can be beheld by the world.
 8. Of course this does not mean that the church is the source of the truth, or is the infallible interpreter of the truth.
 9. Paul makes it clear in Ephesians 2 that the church is built on the apostolic foundation of God's truth.
 10. Having said that, the church is also God's appointed instrument for the proclamation and defense and passing on of the truth.
- B. This image of the church as a pillar and buttress of truth impresses upon us the great task and responsibility that God has given to his church.

1. We need to be vigilant in contending for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.
 2. God has placed the greatest of all treasures, the gospel of Jesus Christ, in the earthen vessel of his church.
 3. It is our calling to maintain, and teach, and defend this glorious message.
 4. How will the saints be gathered in, how will they be built up in the faith, if the church fails in its calling as a pillar and buttress of truth?
 5. This leads John Calvin to say, "How dreadful is the vengeance that awaits [pastors], if, through their fault, that truth which is the image of the Divine glory, the light of the world, and the salvation of men, shall be allowed to fall!"
 6. And what Calvin says of pastors also applies to all of the church's officers and members, because the calling to guard and proclaim the truth belongs to the church as a whole.
- C. Carl Trueman gives an apt illustration of what it means for the church to be a pillar and buttress of truth.
1. He tells of the marketing slogan for a high end Swiss watch, a watch whose entry-level models cost around \$75,000.
 2. The slogan for the watch is this: "You never really own a Patek Philippe; you simply look after it for the next generation."
 3. That slogan also describes what the church is called to do.
 4. The truth of God is not the church's invention.
 5. It is not even really our possession.
 6. We are merely stewards of the truth.

7. The truth has been entrusted to us so that it can be passed on to future generations.
- D. We are living in an age that is very confused about truth.
1. Many people define truth pragmatically.
 2. Truth is what works.
 3. For them, anyone who stands in the way of something that they want to see accomplished is going against the cause of truth.
 4. Many people also define truth emotionally.
 5. Truth is whatever makes them feel good.
 6. For them, anyone who fails to affirm the things that they believe to be essential for their happiness is denying what is true.
 7. The inadequacy of these conceptions of truth can be seen in the fruits that they produce.
 8. They result in cynicism and narcissism.
- E. The truth upon which the church of the living God is founded is not something that resides naturally in the heart and mind and will of fallen man.
1. Instead, it is a truth that stands outside of us, a truth that is firm and unchanging because it comes from God.
 2. And because it is the only true truth, it is the only thing that can give meaning in this vain and fleeting life under the sun.
 3. This is why the Lord Jesus said to Pilate, “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world — to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” (John 18:37 ESV)

4. May God give us ears to hear, and cherish, and preserve this truth.