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The Identity of the Church

1 Timothy 3:14-15 WAS written to a pastor struggling with the duties and responsibilities of church office.

Timothy was a disciple of Paul who labored with and beside Paul on his second and third missionary journeys (Acts 16:1; 19:22). Most likely having been converted by Paul on his first missionary journey, Timothy held a special place in Paul's heart. And so, Paul writes this Epistle to encourage and exhort Timothy to faithfulness with regard to his call.

Now of all the texts that could be referenced in this Epistle, 1Timothy 3:15 emerges as one of the most important verses. In fact, a theologian by the name of Spicq calls this verse, "...the

culminating doctrinal point and indeed the key to the Pastorals.” (Guthrie 1957, 87)

He’s right! As much of this epistle details how a healthy church ought to function, including its members, leaders, purpose, and procedures- 1 Timothy 3:15 gives a definition of the church which serves as a pattern or foundation in light of which the rest of the exhortations of this epistle must be interpreted.

Thus, 1 Timothy 3:15 is the key verse of this epistle. If a church functions in light of this verse, it will be Biblical. If the church neglects this verse, all kinds of problems inevitably will arise. And thus, as we ourselves continue to seek to be a Biblical church, we must bear in mind how exactly this verse describes the church.

1 Timothy 3:14-15, “These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.”

Paul wanted to be with Timothy to instruct him personally. But “if he were delayed” (which the verse implies that he probably would be), Paul wrote this epistle for the purpose of giving direction to Timothy (chapter. 1-5), who in turn would direct the church to which he was a pastor. Now notice Paul could have stopped at v. 15a with his statement of purpose, “...I write so that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the [church]”- *in the local gathering of God’s people defined NOT by its leadership, BUT by its Lord*. And yet he doesn’t. Rather, he goes on to describe the church which effectively gives gravity and weight to the instruction of this Epistle. It serves to frame everything Paul says in this epistle.

And how applicable to us? Donald McGavran was a missionary kid who in his adult life genuinely wanted to remove all hindrances to the gospel going out to the world. This passion led him to Fuller Theological Seminary where in the 1970’s he pioneered the church growth movement. While his intentions may have been noble, nevertheless the net result of this movement was to pattern church ministry after the perceived needs of the non-believer. The result is that advocates of this movement became “need driven” when it came to ministry.

In time, it was determined that the local mall was one of the greatest competitors to the church on Sunday morning. As a result, ministers began patterning their churches after the mall whose architectural and shopping design were given to provide an experience for the shopper. You see, the mall became a place that went beyond providing a product for a consuming crowd. Now the designers of the mall endeavored to produce an experience for the entire family with its food courts, playgrounds, stores, and entertainment. And so the church followed with its multipurpose buildings designed to provide an experience for the entire family with its food courts, playgrounds, stores, and entertainment.

Now in the early 2000’s many people aren’t too familiar with the movement, nevertheless they will be with that which drove it, specifically the “need driven” ministry. What ought Bethel

Presbyterian Church to look like in the coming decade? What ministries ought it to engage in? If we allow the needs of our people or culture to answer the question we will compromise our ministry. Whatever answer we give, we must begin with 1 Timothy 3:14-15 and Paul's statement here regarding the church.

Notice how Paul describes what we are as a church body: Many translations read, "household of God." However based on the immediate context (where Paul is using building terms, cf. vv. 4, 5), the better translation is "house of God" (Hendriksen 1979)

Now as seemingly insignificant as this reading ("house" instead of "household") may seem, there is a distinction to be made. "Household" conveys the idea of God's rule as manifest among His people, whereas "house of God" denotes the place in which God dwells (which includes the nuance of "household")! So let us understand what we are as a church: The Dwelling Place of God. Every church that genuinely is the body of Christ is the "house" of our Lord- THE Place in which God Dwells!

1 Corinthians 3:16, "Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?"

This is speaking about the corporate body of Christ.

The significance of this title is seen when we look at passages in the Bible which speak of God's "dwelling place." And when we do this we discover that the place where God dwells is always characterized by one word: Holy.

Isaiah 57:14a, "For thus says the high and exalted One who lives forever, whose name is Holy, 'I dwell on a high and holy place...'"

The "dwelling place of God" is always a "high and holy place!" Now to say that the place wherein God dwells is "high and holy" is to say that it not only is a place in which sin is not welcome/tolerated, but also to say that it is a place "different"/"unique" from anything else in this world. And thus we read in the Bible of...

- The Holy Spirit, Matthew 1:18.
- The Holy City, Matthew 4:5.
- Holy Angels, Mark 8:38.
- Holy Prophets, Luke 1:70.
- The Holy Covenant, Luke 1:72.
- Holy Ground, Acts 7:33.
- Holy Brothers, 1 Thessalonians 5:27.
- A Holy Priesthood, 1 Peter 2:5.
- Holy Nation, 1 Peter 2:9.
- Holy Women, 1 Peter 3:5.

- A Holy Mount, 2 Peter 1:18.
- Holy Men of Old, 2 Peter 1:21.
- A Holy Conversation, 2 Peter 3:11.

How is it that all these things are “holy”? Because they are associated with the Divine! And that is what we are! We are a holy congregation. We are a gathering that is unique and different from any gathering of the world by virtue of He who gathers with us! Speaking of the local body, Paul wrote this:

1 Corinthians 3:17, “If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.”

And thus as Timothy was instructed regarding the conduct of the local church, he and the church were to carry out Paul’s instructions with sobriety, a Holy God dwells among us!

Recall in Matthew 27, where after Christ died, the temple curtain was ripped in two. What was the significance of this rending? So often you hear it said, “God tore the temple curtain to show that the path to fellowship with Him now is opened through Christ” - but this isn’t quite right. The tearing of the temple curtain was not to allow us into God’s presence, BUT RATHER it was the bringing of God out to ours!!! See the Holy Place was the place of daily devotion to God. Accordingly when the curtain was torn, God extended the place of His dwelling to the place of our daily living (n.b., this is the same lesson we learn from Jacob’s ladder, Genesis 28; John 1:51)!

Matthew 28:20, “...and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Consequently we confess that when the body of Christ gathers weekly for worship, they constitute a special/unique dwelling place of God.

Matthew 18:20, “...For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst.”

Never is the veil between this world and the next so thin as when the Church gathers as a body for that purpose for which it has been made: worship (cf. Hebrews 12:22-23). This is why our bulletin reads as follows:

Worship, as God intended, is a supernatural event. As we enter into this service of worship, we cross the threshold of the secular to the sacred, from the common to the uncommon, from the profane to the holy. Prepare yourself therefore for this most holy convocation!

Because the church is the place in which God dwells, we conclude that the primary PURPOSE of the church is NOT the provision of..:

- A place of comfort and calm amidst the storms of life.
- Exciting and entertaining worship.
- Moral activities for the young.
- Social activities for adults.

BUT Worship! In fact, one of the chief areas of sin on the part of the body of Christ today is in her worship of the living God! R.C. Sproul recently said it, “The greatest crises facing the church today is the question of... her worship!” He’s right! Never before has the church been filled with so many practical atheists who are ignorant of this truth. See, we don’t gather with the knowledge that as a corporate body, God dwells in our midst in a unique and special way. Thus we design our services of worship accordingly; for God’s glory, praise, or enjoyment!

So many of those designing and participating in worship today don’t believe this passage, thus they gather:

- For Evangelism.
- To Celebrate.
- To get a blessing from God.
- For entertainment.
- For uplifting messages.

While all these may be good to do, this is an amazing abuse when you consider what we are as a corporate body of Christ! Don’t ever forget, when the people of God were traumatized by the Lord when first they arrived at Sinai, God condescended to His people such that the quaking mountain, the fire, smoke, and the lightning and thundering were replaced by the still small voice of the prophet!

Exodus 20:18-19, “And all the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw *it*, they trembled and stood at a distance. Then they said to Moses, ‘Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, lest we die.’”

Because God was pleased to acquiesce to His people, today we have the foolishness of preaching and NOT the trauma of Sinai! Yet may we never forget that behind the quiet and calm of our worship is the living God! Truly if we could only believe that the church is the dwelling place of God, our worship today would take on a whole new form and meaning! Notice another description of the Body of Christ...

The Church of the Living God

The emphasis with this description is on “living.” Unlike the many temples in the ancient world

that housed DEAD gods, our God is LIVING. In fact, “living God” is a common Biblical theme. Throughout the Old Testament the Prophets continually paraded before God’s spiritually adulterous people that the One whom they had forsaken was the LIVING GOD (Joshua 3:10; 2 Kings 19:4, 16; Psalms 42:2; Isaiah 37:4, 17; Hosea 1:10; Daniel 6:20). And this truth weighed so heavily upon the minds of the first century child of God that in the New Testament “living” is used 15 times to describe our God.

Now of all the nuances that arise from this phrase, one emerges as the chief: A Living God is an ACTIVE GOD! In contrast to the idle idol, our God:

- Delivers, Psalms 97:10.
- Provides for the needs of His people, Psalms 127:1-2.
- Upholds us, Psalms 94:18-19.
- Strengthens and protects His children, Isaiah 40:28-31.
- Fights for His people, Deuteronomy 1:30.

Isaiah, distinguishing God from the idol, wrote this:

Isaiah 64:4, “For from of old they have not heard nor perceived by ear, neither has the eye seen a God besides Thee, who acts in behalf of the one who waits for Him.”

Speaking of the folly of idolatry, Isaiah wrote this:

Isaiah 44:15-17, “So he takes [a tree] and warms himself; he also makes a fire to bake bread. He also makes a god and worships it; he makes it a graven image, and falls down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire; over this half he eats meat as he roasts a roast, and is satisfied. He also warms himself and says, ‘Aha! I am warm, I have seen the fire’ But the rest of it he makes into a god, his graven image. He falls down before it and worships; he also prays to it and says, ‘Deliver me, for thou art my god.’”

And thus, to say that the body of Christ is the “Church of the LIVING God” is to say it is a “gathering of people” through whom a living and active God Reigns.

Now family of God, if the church truly is:

- The dwelling place of God.
- The place where God confronts this world with Himself.
- A place where our active God reigns and rules.

Then we would expect the church to manifest His power, wouldn’t we? We’d expect it to be a place where something happens! And yet, we don’t see “this power” today, do we? The church seems dead, impotent, and powerless! Why is that?

We turn on the TV and occasionally we see the charismatic service where God's power seems to be manifesting itself. But, we are quick to reject all of this because... "We're Presbyterians and we don't believe that stuff." And yet, we walk away- and if we were honest we would say that we walk away with a tinge of jealousy.

Again I ask, "If when we gather we constitute the church of the living God, why don't we see the power of God manifesting itself in the church today?" Because we don't know what to look for!

We don't expect the "power of God" to be manifested in healings and miracles today- these gifts of the Spirit were for the foundation of the church, Ephesians 2:20; 4:11. Well then, what is the power of God? And how do we expect that it should be manifest today?

Romans 1:16, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."

Do you understand how the power of God is manifested today in the "church of the Living God?" It is NOT in healings, miracles, and the like- signs given to testify to the authenticity of the prophet or apostle. Rather, the power of God is manifested in the church by it being a place:

- Where grace not only is proclaimed, but lived.
- That not only speaks of the gospel, but demonstrates its life changing power in the lives of its people.
- Where love of the brethren abounds.
- Where forgiveness is freely offered and received.

1 Timothy 1:5, "But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith."

If we would set our focus on being the church/community/family that God intended us to be, the power of God would be boldly seen and experienced as enemies became brothers, etc

The Pillar and Support of the Truth

This is an important description that requires some analysis:

- Pillar: refers to that which supports the roof of a structure. In the Old Testament, this word was used in reference to the pillars of Solomon's Temple (cf. 1 Kings 7:15ff; 2 Kings 25:13ff; 2 Chronicles 3:15ff; 4:12ff).
- Support: refers to the foundation or the support upon which rests the pillars.
- Truth: is a clear reference to the Gospel or the orthodox faith (i.e., the Bible or Biblical Doctrine, cf. Galatians 2:5, 14; 5:7; Eph. 4:21; Colossians 1:5; 2 Thessalonians 2:12-13).

- Together, these words convey the idea that the Body of Christ is that upon which the Gospel rests. Take the church out of the world or corrupt it, and you effectively take the Gospel out of the world or corrupt it. But labor to grow a healthy church- with Biblical worship and loving gatherings- and you do more for the proclamation of the gospel than if you sent out a multitude of missionaries.

Now in what way does the church (the local called-out body of Christ) function as a foundation for the Truth of the Gospel? The church functions as the foundation and upholder of the Gospel not by interpreting the truth or exercising authority over the truth but by:

- Obeying it, Matthew 13:9.
- Handling it rightly, 2 Timothy 2:15.
- Digesting it, Psalms 119:11; Rev. 10:9.
- Defending it, Philippians 1:16; 2 Corinthians 10:3-6.
- Proclaiming it, Matthew 28:18-20.
- Living in light of it, Colossians 3:12-17.

Essentially, being the stage on which it is worked out! All of this could be summarized by one phrase, “The church upholds the gospel by being a body that accurately DISPLAYS the Good News!” (cf. 1 Timothy 4:1-5). It was Christ who said:

John 13:35, “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Within the boundaries of Ephesus was the magnificent temple of the goddess Artemis (cf. Acts 19:26-28). It was 275 ft. x 180 ft. and had 60 ft. marble columns. Of all of its features, one stood out: Its 127 Pillars! All were made of marble. Some were studded with costly jewels. Others were overlaid with gold. As such, these pillars were not meant to be mere supports of the building, but also were to function as DISPLAYS of Artemis’s greatness!



The same holds true for the body of Christ. Each genuine body of Christ- each local church- is a DISPLAY of the greatness of God and the mercy He has exercised through Christ. As we live in light of the saving grace of God, we magnify and proclaim the truth of the Gospel. And thus to pervert, weaken, or remove the church from the world is to pervert, weaken, or remove the Gospel from it as well!

Years ago I read with the following testimony of a Christian who lived through Hitler’s Germany:

A railroad track ran behind our small church and each Sunday morning we could hear the whistle in the distance and then the wheels coming over the tracks. We became

disturbed when we heard the cries coming from the train as it passed by. We realized that it was carrying Jews like cattle in the cars! ¶ Week after week the whistle would blow. We dreaded to hear the sound of those wheels because we knew that we would hear the cries of the Jews en route to a death camp. Their screams tormented us. ¶ We knew the time the train was coming and when we heard the whistle blow we began singing hymns. By the time the train came past our church we were singing at the top of our voices. If we heard the screams, we sang more loudly and soon we heard them no more. (Lutzer 1998, 99-100)

This was not a rare occurrence in Germany. In fact, at the time of Hitler many, many churches in Germany endorsed the Nazi party with full knowledge of most of its atrocities.

- How could the church have been so blind... so silent?
- What happened to the church that it could endorse a man such as Hitler?
- WHERE WAS THE GOSPEL/TRUTH?

About fifty years before Hitler rose to power, the church in Germany fought a battle: The Battle of Liberalism and Neo-Orthodoxy! And rather than emerging victorious, the church lost such that by the time of Hitler

- The church was dead- irrelevant.
- The Orthodox faith corrupted.
- The Gospel effectively destroyed.

The tendency of the world is to look at Auschwitz and say: “What is God?” “What is this Gospel you preach?” And “What good did it do for the millions killed by Hitler and his army?”

At the time of Hitler, Germany had lost its Gospel because its churches had themselves gone into eclipse! With the foundations and pillars removed, the Gospel had nothing on which to stand and from which to be catapulted into the German World. In Revelation 12 when Christ was taken into Glory and Satan no longer could attack Him, the devil turned his focus on the church (cf. v. 13). This is no fluke! Satan knows the key position that the church holds in reference to the Gospel. And thus, as in Germany, to destroy the church effectively rendered the gospel impotent!

And with this we must ask ourselves, “What role will we play in Satan’s assault on the church?” Will yours be a participation in his schemes? Will your “rights” supersede that of another brother’s? Will your pleasure be at the expense of the weaker sister? Will your desire for “Political Correctness” mean a compromise in the truth of God’s word? Or will you labor for a healthy, strong, and unified body of Christ? Will you strive for a better grasp of the truth of the word? Will it be your passion, with Paul, to know Christ?

We do more for the proclamation of the Gospel than a multitude of missionaries when as a

church we reflect the Lord who bought us! Let us therefore pray that God gives a greater understanding of these fundamental truths- that

- We are the House of God.
- The church of the Living God.
- The Pillar and support of the truth.

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