

The Pillar (Part 1 of 6)

What in the World is a Church? An Introduction to the Pastoral Epistles

1 Timothy 1:1-2

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1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope, 2 To Timothy, my true child in the faith:

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. (1 Tim 1:1-2)

There are some words or concepts in the Bible that are far more loaded than what we realize. These words carry an additional level of complexity or complication because the idea may, at first, seem very familiar, and then we discover another layer that opens up new questions and issues. In other words, there are some things that seem simple until you get into the details and the nuances.

So what word or idea am I thinking about? Answer: The Church.

The word is loaded. If you were to close your eyes, and I said “church” what image would come to your mind? I recently asked our entire staff to describe the church in which they grew up. They described their church in a variety of terms. Small, red carpet, musty, dysfunctional, personal, active, in-grown, and helpful were some of terms that they used. What kind of words would you use? Does the word church illicit good memories? Does it illicit bad memories?

Moving beyond the personal memories and individual experiences, let’s think about the concept of the church from a spiritual perspective. Let me ask you a few difficult questions:

- Is the church absolutely necessary? Why?
- When does a group of people become a church?
- Is there salvation apart from the church?
- Can someone really grow spiritually apart from a local church?

Now I’m not going to answer all of these questions for you, and let me reassure you that I’m not asking questions just to ask them or asking you questions to which I have no answer. What I’m trying to show you, though, is something very important. Namely, that **thinking about the church is really important**. In fact it is probably more important than what we realize; it is probably more complicated than what we even realize.

Why “The Pillar?”

Today we begin a new expository series on the book of 1 Timothy, a book that is written to a pastor about how to conduct himself in the house of God, a pillar and buttress of the truth (1 Timothy 3:14-15). For the next six weeks we’ll be studying the first chapter of this personal letter written from the apostle Paul to a young man about how to lead “the church,” and we’ll pick up the remaining chapters in January-May of next year.

We are going to learn many things about the church, but I hope that you will see one very important over-arching point: the church is vital to God’s mission, the gospel message, and your spiritual maturity. The church is a central part of a huge plan (God’s mission). It is the one entity on the earth that holds the divinely-given deposit of the gospel (the message). And it is an enormously important and even critical part of your spiritual growth (maturity). Think back on a season of your life where you were really growing, really becoming more like Jesus. For most of us those seasons were somehow connected to local body of believers.

For some time I’ve wanted to do a series on 1 Timothy, and you might wonder why. Let me give you three reasons:

1. After looking at the centrality of Jesus in Colossians, applying that to suffering in Job, and learning about the life of Jesus in Matthew, I thought we should see how igniting a passion to follow Jesus works in the church.
2. Since we’ve recently moved into a new facility, it seems like a good time to look at what the Bible says we should be as a church. In the midst of all that has changed, it is good to remember what shouldn’t change.
3. The doctrine of the church (ecclesiology) is often a neglected area of theology, yet it is the one area with which we are most personally familiar and involved. This is a very practical area of doctrine, and it is possible that our practice, while familiar, is less orthodox than what we’d like believe. We neglect this subject at our own spiritual peril.

The book of 1 Timothy is a practical and pastoral letter that covers a wide range of subjects and themes. The issues it addresses are broad because that is the nature of the church – as broad and diverse as the people who are a part of her. Just to give you a sense of this, 1 Timothy talks about the following issues: true doctrine, false teaching, the priority of prayer, gender roles in the church, relationship between the church and the state, church leadership, eligibility for the pastorate, conduct of young pastors, social responsibilities, money, holiness, and world evangelization.¹ So this is going to be an exciting and varied study.

The Unique Value of the Pastoral Epistles

The Bible is filled with different genres of literature (e.g., narrative, poetry, wisdom, and letters), and 1 Timothy is one of three books commonly referred to as the Pastoral Epistles. In addition to 1

¹ John R. W. Stott, The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus, (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1996), 10

Timothy, we have 2 Timothy and Titus. It is helpful to understand something about each of them as we begin our study.

The Pastoral Epistles were written to specific people who were a part of Paul's ministry team as they dealt with real-world scenarios connected to leading a church or a group of churches. The letters are personal, pastoral, doctrinal, and practical. Unlike other epistles (i.e., Romans) whose primary aim is the delivery doctrinal truth, the Pastoral epistles are concerned with the application of the truth. So they are doctrinal, but their purpose is more practical, instructional, and specific.

All three letters seem to be written during a particular time period in Paul's life. It seems that they were written after Paul's third missionary journey, after his arrest and release in Rome, and approximately five years before he was martyred in Rome. 1 Timothy and Titus were written before 2 Timothy. We know this because Paul's tone in 2 Timothy anticipates a coming trial and even death (2 Tim. 4:9-18).

Timothy and Titus had been given particular responsibility to carry on the missionary work in city of Ephesus and the island of Crete. In both cases, they were charged by Paul to provide the necessary spiritual leadership that we needed in these unique areas of the world. They were sent there for the purpose of teaching (1 Tim. 1:3) and setting things in order (Titus 1:5). The environment and the issues were unique, but their charge was the same: take care of God's church. Ephesus was a thriving port city, and the church (or churches) was fairly well-established. Before 1 Timothy was written, Paul addressed the Ephesians Elders in Acts 20:

8 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. 29 I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. 31 Therefore be alert... (Acts 20:28-31)

So it seems that Timothy was sent to an established church that needed reformation. Titus, on the other hand, was sent to an island in the Mediterranean Sea that was a pioneering work. The island was known for its immorality and decadence:

12 One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons." 13 This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith... (Titus 1:12-13)

It would be similar to planting churches in Las Vegas and saying, "Many people call this place 'sin-city,' and rightly so!"

All of that to highlight the simple fact that Timothy and Titus were called to similar tasks in very dissimilar places. And that is exactly what the church is: similar in doctrine and mission, dissimilar in context and method. So these epistles share common themes, but their tone and application is as varied as the people and locations involved.

Who was Timothy?

1 Timothy begins with a common introduction:

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope, 2 To Timothy, my true child in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord" (1 Timothy 1:1-2).

From the outset we learn that the letter is written from the apostle Paul who was the famous persecutor-turned-missionary (see Acts 9), and we see the centrality of the gospel. Paul, more than any other person, shaped the doctrinal core of the New Testament, identifying the meaning and the application of the Good News. Paul's introduction of himself identifies that he has an apostolic mission given by the direct command of God (Acts 9:15) through the person of Jesus Christ (Acts 9:4). The message is summarized by the three words used in his greeting: grace, mercy, and peace. Through Christ God has treated us kindly (grace); he has granted pardon for sins (mercy); and he has made reconciliation with a holy God possible (peace). Paul was obviously a man captured by the beauty of the gospel.

In verse two we find something interesting and important. Paul refers to Timothy as "my true child in the faith" (1:2). He says the same thing about Titus (Titus 1:4), but it illustrates the personal nature of Paul's relationship with these men. The term is meant to convey legitimacy and authority. Timothy and Titus were to view themselves and to be treated as a vital part of Paul's apostolic ministry. Paul could have used another word-picture. He could have called him his lieutenant, his assistant, his vice-president, or his ambassador. But he chose the image of fatherhood intentionally. Timothy was deeply connected to Paul. In many respects he was Timothy's spiritual father, and Paul treated him as a spiritual son. For the churches, this would mean that Timothy carried an implicit authority beyond his role.

This title fits with Timothy and Paul's relationship because there is no young man with whom he is closer. We first hear of Timothy in Acts 16.

16 Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. 2 He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium (Acts 16:1-2).

Timothy was apparently to son of a religiously mixed marriage, and it seems that his mother and grandmother were converted during Paul's first missionary trip to Asia Minor (see Acts 13:49-14:25 and 2 Timothy 3:11). When Paul returned for his second missionary journey, he was so impressed with Timothy's godliness and reputation that he decided to take him with him. Since Timothy's family and his lack of circumcision would have been controversial to the Jews, Paul personally circumcised him (Acts 16:3). Thus began a long and trusted ministry relationship.

Timothy is mentioned frequently in the New Testament, and he is given a number of important pastoral assignments: Thessalonica (1 Thess. 3:1-10), Corinth (1 Cor. 4:16-17), and Philippi (Phil. 2:19-24). Additionally, he collaborated with Paul in six of his epistles (1 and 2 Thessalonians, 2

Corinthians, Colossians, Philemon, Philippians).² Each assignment was temporary, and his present ministry in Ephesus seems to be the most difficult one yet. This established, wealthy, intelligent church was probably not an easy place to lead.

Complicating matters was Timothy's temperament. As you study first and second Timothy, there is a clear sense that he struggles with being timid. Paul's tone with Timothy is remarkably different than how he writes to Titus. For example:

- Paul opens the letter by encouraging Timothy to "remain at Ephesus" (1 Tim. 1:3).
- He frequently seems to bolster Timothy's confidence: "*God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control*" (2 Tim. 1:7).
- He charges Timothy to not let people despise his youth (1 Tim. 4:12).
- Timothy seems to suffer from stomach problems (1 Tim. 5:23).
- Paul instructs the church at Corinth to "put him at ease" when he comes to them and not to let anyone despise him (1 Cor. 16:10-11).
- He talks about Timothy's tears (2 Tim. 1:4).
- He frequently reminds Timothy about the gifts that he has been given (1 Tim. 1:18, 4:14).
- Paul bluntly calls Timothy to steadfastness and perseverance (1 Tim. 6:12, 2 Tim. 1:8-9).

Paul sometimes reminds me of a boxing coach who is telling a weary, worn-out, ready-to-quit fighter "Get back in there and hit harder!" Just listen to this passage through that lens:

12 Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. 13 I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus... keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ... (1 Tim. 6:12-15).

This book is personal! And it ought to be because church work is personal. Paul has left Timothy in the important church at Ephesus. They are fighting big battles over important doctrinal issues all over the known world. People's eternal destinies are on the line; the truth of the gospel is being compromised. Paul needs his spiritual son to get back into the battle, to keep striving, and to not quit. This book is wonderful in that it contains great doctrine, practical truths, but also a tone that says "Don't quit! This is too important!" No wonder Paul views himself as a dad because this is what good fathers do – they love you, mentor you, push you, and encourage you.

The Message of 1 Timothy

Now that we understand something about Timothy, let's get an overview of the teaching of this book. Let me walk you chapter by chapter through this great letter and point to one illustrative verse so that you can get a sense of what we'll be looking at for the next nine months.

² Gordon Fee, The New International Biblical Commentary – 1-2 Timothy, Titus, (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 2

If I had to choose one verse that captures the entire book and maybe all of the Pastoral Epistles, I would pick 1 Timothy 3:14-15

14 I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, 15 if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of truth (1 Tim. 3:14-15).

This book is about the church which has been entrusted with the truth. And as we study the whole book, you'll see that this is not theoretical truth. This is practical, life-transforming truth. The aim is godliness. I would summarize the entire book like this:

Guard the truth that leads to life

1 Timothy circles around this concept and applies it to every aspect of church ministry. Let me show you this chapter by chapter:

- **Chapter 1** – Teaching true **doctrine** and refuting false teaching is the basis of the ministry to which God has called the church. *“As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, 4 nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith” (1 Tim. 1:3-4)*
- **Chapter 2 – Worship** is important, and how people conduct themselves in a church is vital to a healthy church. *“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, 2 for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way” (1 Tim. 2:1-2).*
- **Chapter 3** – Godly **leadership** of the church is essential to the church’s mission. *“I am writing these things to you so that, 15 if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of truth” (1 Tim. 3:14-15).*
- **Chapter 4-5** – The church needs to live out the truth through a global **mission** in practical and specific ways. *“For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe. 11 Command and teach these things” (1 Tim. 4:10-11).*
- **Chapter 6** – Personal **godliness** should be the hallmark of every church. *“But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. 12 Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses” (1 Tim. 6:11-12).*

If you boil down the five different themes and the verses that I just read you would find the following key words: **doctrine, worship, leadership, mission, and godliness**. Each of these is an important aspect of what makes the church a church. Remove any of them, and you have a gathering of people but you will not have a biblical church. Certainly there is more to this list (e.g., church discipline, prayer, etc.) but think what this church would be without doctrine or worship or leadership or mission or godliness.

What in the world is a church? That is a very important question, and I think that the Pastoral Epistles help us to answer this question.

Why Church Matters

1 Timothy helps us understand why the church of Jesus Christ and why this local church is important. So let me give you three reasons why the doctrine of the church (ecclesiology) is an essential issue about which to learn and think.

1. **The Gospel** - The Church must guard the truth that leads to life. The gospel is the essential message that God has made a way to reconcile sinful people to himself. In 1 Timothy 1:15 Paul says, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the foremost." He experienced the beauty of the gospel truth and how it transforms people's lives. Paul was formerly a blasphemer, persecutor and an insolent opponent (1 Tim. 1:13), but God was merciful to him and saved him. His life was radically changed.

This is the story of anyone who has received the mercy of God through Jesus Christ. The truth that Jesus came into the world to save sinners is a truth that must be guarded not just because it is right; it must be guarded because it is the only path to life.

God has given the church a sacred deposit of truth that leads people to life. And it must be guarded, protected, proclaimed, and heralded. This is the church's singular and most important mission.

2. **Your Godliness** – The gospel was meant to radically transform your life, and without the body of Christ that simply will not happen. Godliness, personal growth in holiness, and progressive sanctification were never meant to happen alone. A triune God has designed spiritual growth to be individually secured and corporately lived. That is why the Belgic Confession lists the following characteristics of the true church: preaching of the gospel, administration of the Lord's Supper, and the practice of church discipline. Why add the last one?

It is a recognition that if the gospel really works, it should work in the lives of the people who claim to believe it. Personal godliness validates the gospel message; personal unrighteousness invalidates it; and this is not something that is supposed to be accomplished alone. Paul tells Timothy to keep a close watch on himself and on the teaching because his godliness and the godliness of those who hear him is on the line (1 Tim. 4:16). He wants Timothy to "practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress" (1 Tim. 4:15).

The gospel, rightly understood, will lead to a life rightly lived. And you cannot do that without being a part of the church.

3. **The Glory of God** – The final reason as to why the church matters relates to the ultimate aim of all things: the glory of God. The Reformers used to say it this way: Faith Alone, By Grace Alone, Through Christ Alone, According the Scriptures Alone, To the Glory of God Alone. The end game of all things, including the church, is the glory of God. After talking about the way that

God displayed his perfect patience in saving Paul (1:16), he breaks out in the doxology: “To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen” (1 Tim. 1:17). He is left marveling at the beauty of God.

Soteriology (salvation) should lead to ecclesiology (the church) which should lead to doxology (worship). The aim of the church is to make much of the glory of God while in the world. Our aim, our ambition, and our purpose is to point people to him.

The church exists to guard the truth, cultivate godliness, and display the glory of God. Therefore, if you love the gospel and if you love the glory of God, then you should love the church. Sure she isn’t perfect but that doesn’t mean that she isn’t beautiful!

A father who walks his daughter down the aisle knows full well that his precious little girl is far from perfect. He’s seen it all, and he knows her struggles, issues, and short-comings. But she is still beautiful. Imperfect? Yes. But still beautiful.

It is no wonder that God calls the church the bride of Christ. The beautiful thing about that image is that right now the church is still imperfect, and one day that will eternally change as the Church/Bride is completely renewed and presented to the resurrected Christ.

The church will be gloriously beautiful in glory, but she is even beautiful now. Sure, the word “church” is a loaded term. But it is loaded with the beauty of the gospel and the glory of God.

When pure doctrine, vibrant worship, biblical leadership, global mission, and personal godliness converge in a group of people who love the gospel, godliness, and the glory of God – there is nothing better.

In fact, it is so sacred that it is no wonder that Paul would write a letter to help a young pastor know how to live and lead in this place called the household of God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.

“To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen!”

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