

The Pillar (Part 3 of 4)

The Importance of the Church

1 Timothy 3:14-15

Mark Vroegop

¹⁴I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, ¹⁵if 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 the truth (1 Timothy 3:14-15).

Let me ask you a question that I asked in the introductory sermon to this series: *When I say the word “church” what comes to mind?* Do you have positive or negative feelings? Do you see a facility or a group of people? What time-frame or age in your life was this time period shaped in?

Here’s another question that is a bit revealing: *How many of you grew up in a church of 1,000 people or less?*

The reality is that we all have very different experiences that are wrapped up in this word “church.” For some of you the experience with the church was incredibly positive. For others, you are honestly in the “church-recovery” program. The fact of the matter is that every Sunday we bring our experiences with us.

But there is another reality when it comes to church as we know it: The church has changed fairly significantly in this generation. Consider the following:

- In the early 20th Century, there were only six churches larger than 2,000, and by 1960, the number had only grown to about sixteen.
- With the advent of television, the number of large churches grew rapidly, with an estimated 1,600 churches over 2,000 people in 2012.
- With the advent of the Internet, Christians have the widest access the best communicators like in no other time in church history.
- Multi-site (a church hosting multiple services in unique locations) has become one of the most popular strategies for church growth in the last decade, and there are twice as many multi-site churches as there are mega-churches.
- Post-modernity, the philosophical orientation that both challenges absolute truth and biblical authority, and exalts relativism, is now the dominant world-view of our land.

These are just a few of the changes that have affected the landscape of “the church” as we know it. The battle-lines have changed, the culture has changed, and the forms of ministry have changed. If you went to sleep in the 1940s and woke up in 2012, you might wonder what planet you are

living on. I can only imagine that some of you, those who grew up in an earlier generation, feel at times when you look at the state of culture and even how we do church. So much has changed.

However, not all of the change is necessarily bad. The church in the 21st century is doing a better job of fighting the right battles, reaching unreached peoples, planting churches, thinking more carefully, working better within Evangelicalism, and seeing the value of addressing social issues. The point of all this is to simply identify to you that a lot has changed, and it has changed quickly.

The Center of 1 Timothy

The book of 1 Timothy is exceptionally helpful in that it helps us to see what the church is all about, and it gives us some time-tested, culturally-transcendent truths regarding the church. In other words, 1 Timothy shows us some important aspects of the foundation regarding what it means for the church to be the church. This book was written to help a young pastor know what to do in a church that needed help.

Verses 14-15, our text for today, is the theme verse for this wonderful book. I love it when a single verse captures the message of a book, and we certainly get that here. We hear that Paul wants to visit Timothy, but that he is concerned that it may take longer than what he or Timothy would want. So he writes a letter to help Timothy know what to do.

¹⁴I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, ¹⁵if 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 the truth (1 Tim. 3:14-15).

Paul wants Timothy to know how one ought to “behave” in church. The noun form of this word is used in 1 Timothy 4:12 where Paul tells Timothy to be an example in his speech and his conduct. The NASB and NIV both use the term “conduct” in 3:15. So clearly Paul wants Timothy to understand how he and others are to live and act within the body of Christ. That’s the goal of this book.

Tucked within this pastoral admonition is a great description of the importance of the church. The phrase that follows “behave” gives the rationale or the basis for taking this church behavior issue so seriously. This description shows us the importance of the church.

Three Non-Negotiables for the Church

There are three phrases that we need to dial into today because they give us a clear sense of why the church is important, and they also give us some key characteristics that are non-negotiable for the church. In other words, while some parts of the church will continue to change as our culture changes, there are some things that need to be preserved.

In looking at these three non-negotiables, I hope to either remind you or maybe show you for the first time why the church of Jesus Christ is such a glorious entity. I hope you leave today more in love with the church. Today, we’ll see three concepts: Relationship, Presence, and Truth.

1) Relationships: Together as God's Children

The first phrase that Paul uses to describe the church is "the household of God." Other translations render this phrase as "God's house" (NIV) or "the house of God" (NKJV). Many of you, I suspect, heard this phrase growing up, but I suspect that it was a statement of reverence (i.e., "Let's not run. This is God's house.")

However, the meaning here is not about reverence as much as it is about relationship. The Greek word (*oikos*) can refer to either a physical building or the family that lives in the building. We do the same thing with the English word "household" and where we live. If you were to drive by our house you might say, "There's the Vroegops'" And you would mean both our house and our family. When you invite someone over to your house, you are not just inviting them over to spend time by themselves in your house. You are inviting them over to spend time with you. In other words, "household" usually refers to a location where relationships take place. As such "household" brings together the location and the people who are characterized by the location.

Therefore when Paul describes the church as the "household of God," he is speaking about being a part of the family of God. He is making a powerful and beautiful statement about the relational connection of God's people.

This relational connection is a product of a common relationship with Jesus Christ as one's Savior and Lord. The beautiful thing about the church is that we come from different backgrounds, different situations, and different cultures, and yet we all share one life-defining commonality: Jesus is our Lord and Master. We all have a common confession: "Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost" (1 Tim. 1:15). What's more, for those who've received Christ as their Savior, they are also filled with the same Spirit.

Those who receive Christ are brought into God's family. The miracle of salvation is that God not only forgives us through the death of his son, but he welcomes us into his family. He adopts us.

¹⁵For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" ¹⁶The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ (Rom 8:15-17)

And the result is a group of people who are marked by a commonality in Jesus. Look at how Paul described this, even using the term "household," in Ephesians 2:11-22:

¹¹Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— ¹²remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵by

abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace,¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit (Eph. 2:11-22).

In Paul's day, the cultural lines were drawn very strongly and definitively. And the miracle of the gospel is the way that God unites people who are very different. The gospel doesn't change your gender, your race, or your position in life, but it adds a transforming dimension to your gender, race, and your position in life. In other words, it is your relationship with Jesus that now shines through your gender, your race, or your position in life.

²⁶for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:26-28)

Now Paul is not saying that race, position, or gender are obliterated; rather, he is saying that the church's commonality, unity, and connectedness is something beyond the normal relational connections. The common denominator, the focal point, is our common relationship with Jesus.

What does this do to the church? It makes the collective gathering God's people like nothing else on the earth. In fact, it should be so transformative that it looks a bit like heaven. It means that we are all a part of God's family; we are brothers and sisters in the family of God. And the result is that we treat each other differently. We gather for the purpose of celebrating Jesus, and that changes how we interact with each other. It breaks down barriers, causing us to care for one another in a beautifully different way. Our love for Jesus eclipses all differences.

Listen, we do this in other arenas too. When I've had the opportunity to attend a Colts game, it never ceases to amaze me at the unifying power of a touchdown. People who don't even know one another cheer together and high-five each other. Their common purpose and celebration makes them unified. It makes sense, doesn't it? The beauty of the moment eclipses the differences. However, you wouldn't think of acting like that at Target when you find a good price on Starbucks coffee, or after a bank teller processes your deposit, or when a McDonald's employee hands you your food. Why? Because the common cause for celebration doesn't warrant it.

Now I'm not suggesting that you have to give high-fives in the hallway at church, but I would like you to consider the beauty of what we are celebrating today. Jesus has redeemed us. Jesus has saved us. God has adopted us. We are God's children – brothers and sisters in the family of God!

We are in God's house!

2) Presence: God is Here!

The second phrase is equally important and unique. Paul adds this description: “which is the church of the living God.” Let me explain the two pieces of this phrase and then draw it together.

First, let’s start at the end of the phrase with the statement “living God.” Remember that the Greco-Roman world was filled with all kinds of idols. In Acts 17, when Paul was in Athens, he was provoked in his spirit because “the city was full of idols” (Acts 17:16). When he addressed the Areopagus, the gathering of the Athenian political council, Paul referenced an idol dedicated to the “unknown god” (see Acts 17:23), a clear indication of the cultural fascination with idol worship. Idols were a part of their culture.

Ephesus was especially known for idol worship since the city featured a temple that was considered one of the seven wonders of the world. Idol worship and idol manufacturing was a major part of the fabric of the city of Ephesus, and when Paul’s ministry during his third missionary journey challenged this enterprise, he had to flee for his life (Acts 19:23-41). People in the city of Ephesus likely carried small replicas of the temple with them or placed them in their homes. Idol worship was that important.

When Paul says “living” he is taking swiipe at the lifeless idols that the people of Ephesus worshipped. In the city of Lystra, Paul’s message sounded like this: “we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God . . .” (Acts 14:15). Additionally, the miracles performed by Paul (see Acts 19:11) were designed to demonstrate the power of God and the impotence of the idols.

Therefore, don’t just hear “living” as if it were just a neutral description. You need to hear it like this: “Your idols are dead; our God is alive! You worship something fake; our God is real!” Paul is courageously making a statement about the power, authority, and the reality of Christianity. In other words, Paul is saying, “This is real!”

The second thing to note here is a word you are all too familiar with: church. The Greek word (*ekklesia*) is a compound word with a literal meaning “to call out.” The idea is assembly. Think about how one would assemble people in the past – before E-vites, Social networking, and MS Office invitations. They would sound a horn or ring a bell, and the people would gather. Some of you may even remember a church bell sounding as people gathered for worship. The church is simply an assembly, a called out group of people.

But it is not a normal assembly. It is an assembly to meet with God – the living God. The church is the gathering of God’s people in the presence of God. And this idea of God meeting with his people is part of the great arch or theme of the Bible. Just think of how it appears throughout the Biblical narrative:

- Genesis 3:8 - God walks through the garden in the cool of the day.
- Genesis 3:23 – a consequence of sin is banishment from the presence of God.

- Exodus 19:11 – After being delivered from Egypt, God meets with his people at Mt. Sinai.
- Deuteronomy 6:15 – the rationale for obedience to the law was because “God was in their midst.”
- Exodus 40:33 and 2 Chronicles 7:1 – the glory of the Lord fills the tabernacle and temple in the Old Testament.
- Isaiah 7:14 – the promise was given that a child would be born would be “God with us” – Immanuel.
- John 1:14 – the Apostle John describes the coming of Jesus as “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”
- 1 Corinthians 6:19 – the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit makes your body the temple of the Holy Spirit.
- Revelation 21:3 – the consummation of the biblical story ends with the New Jerusalem coming down and this proclamation made: “the dwelling place of God is with man, and he will dwell with them and they will be his people.”

This idea of being “called out” to meet with God is central to what the biblical story is all about and what the church is all about. The church’s uniqueness in the world is that it is the assembly of God’s people who have gathered for the purpose of meeting with the living God.

Now take this concept and put it together with the other piece regarding the “living God.” This essentially means that the church is a called out group of people who gather to experience the presence of God. The purpose of Sunday worship, the weekly gathering of God’s people, is for us to meet with the living God. Here is how John Stott explains how this happens:

In our worship we bow down before the living God. Through the reading and exposition of his Word we hear his voice addressing us. We meet him at his table, when he makes himself known to us through the breaking of bread. And in our fellowship we love each other as he loved us. And our witness becomes bolder and more urgent. Indeed, unbelievers coming in may confess that ‘God is really among you.’¹

The church is most glorious, alive, and vibrant when the gathered assembly knows that God is in her midst. In March we’ll talk about revival during THINK|12. Do you know what revival is? It is simply the manifest presence of Jesus in the church. It is when the dull, mundane, shallow, and carnal elements in the life of a church are confronted with the clear conviction of the presence of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. One of the reasons you need to read Colin Hansen’s book is to awaken you as to what those special and national moments looked like.

When I candidated here, I heard of people who were drawn to College Park because of the testimony of people leaving the facility who were saying, “God is in there!” And every Sunday we should set our sights on one goal: meeting with God with God’s people. This is the called out assembly of the living God. God is here!

¹ John R. W. Stott, The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus, (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1996), 104-105

3) Truth: Proclaiming Eternally Important News

The third and final phrase doesn't describe what the community of faith is to necessarily be like. Rather, it speaks to what the church is to do. Paul says that the church is "a pillar and buttress of truth." What does he mean by this?

By the truth, Paul means divine revelation – the message delivered from God to mankind. He means the truth about who God is, who we are, what is right and what is wrong, what is the meaning of the universe, what is the means by which people are made right with God. He means the gospel and all that accompanies it. God is known and characterized by truth.

In contrast, the devil is the father of lies and the great deceiver. He despises God, the truth, and the church. Satan's aim is keep people blinded to the truth (2 Cor. 4:4). And in the midst of the dark world of sin and deception, there is this entity called the church, whose mission is to guard this truth that leads to life.

The church is to be the instrument of God's life-changing, hope-bringing, devil and sin-defeating truth. The church is to be a pillar and buttress of truth.

The church at Ephesus would have certainly been familiar with pillars because they were the predominant feature of the temple of Diana. The temple itself was estimated to be 450 feet long, 250 feet wide, and 60 feet high, and it boasted 127 columns or pillars. In other words, the city of Ephesus was world-renown for pillars.

Now think of the role of a pillar. The purpose is not just to hold a roof up, but to thrust the building high enough to make a statement. Think of all the pillars that are featured on the front of important buildings in our nation's capitol. A pillar majestically adorns a building to make it seen or noticed.

Buttress is the other word in the verse fifteen that we need to look at. The Greek word here can refer to a foundation (NIV), a bulwark (NRSV), support (NASB), or ground (NKJV). The point is that the structure provides support and stability for that which it holds.

Think with me of the role of a foundation. Through time and testing the building will remain steadfast and whole only if the base, the support, or the ground is preserved. An entire building can collapse if the foundation is weakened or destroyed.

So the church has a dual role. First, as the foundation, she is to hold to the truth firmly so that it doesn't collapse under the weight of false teaching. Second, as the pillar, she is to boldly display the beauty and majesty of the truth of God. "To hold the truth firm is the defense and confirmation of the gospel; to hold it high is the proclamation of the gospel. The church is called to both of these ministries."²

² Stott, 105.

That is why we have to approach every Sunday as if heaven and hell were on the line, because the reality is that they are on the line. The church is God's vehicle through which the world comes to understand and know the life-changing message that Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

The church, whether as individuals or as a group, declares and preserves this life-changing message. We have eternally important news to share. We ought to protect it, guard it, and preserve it as if life depended upon it. We ought to boldly proclaim this truth of the gospel as broadly and as effectively as possible – as if life depended upon it. Because the reality is that life does depend on it – eternal life depends upon it.

Paul loved the church -- not just the church in Ephesus; he loved the Biblical idea of the church. Do you love the church? Why did you come today? I'm glad you came today, but I wonder why did you come? And for that matter, what keeps you coming back? Why does the church – even through all the changes – matter? What makes the church important?

Paul would tell you that the church is really amazing. Oh sure, she's not perfect. But there is something really beautiful about:

- Relationships with people when the single common denominator is Jesus
- That special sense that while you are a room with a bunch of people, God is here
- Knowing that what we are talking about is not only true but there is nothing more eternally important

The church is very special. It is no wonder that Jesus said, "...I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18).

© College Park Church

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. www.yourchurch.com

Scriptural Citations: Unless otherwise noted, all Biblical quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV).