

**The Preciousness of the Church in God's Sight
(or, "The Privilege of Serving as a Pastor")
(1 Timothy 3:14-16)**

--CEFC 5/1/22

I didn't come from an evangelical home.

And though he never told me outright,

I'm sure my father never wanted me to become a pastor.

And I can't blame him.

Not one bit.

You see, my father was a corporate attorney

who traveled in circles of power and influence.

He had been involved in politics and was friends with Senators and Governors.

He was engaged in the world of big business,

with its fancy board rooms and corporate jets.

He had lunch with university presidents and high-priced lawyers.

I had the impression that he thought the church may have been fine

for children and old ladies;

it may have been a place to get married or get buried;

but it never seemed to connect with real life--

at least, not with the areas of life that mattered.

After all, the only time a church ever made the newspapers

was when a pastor embezzled money or sexually abused children.

The pastors he knew seemed to have been the sort of milque-toast variety,

who knew how to handle themselves at afternoon teas,
and who delivered rather tepid moralistic messages about
how the world would be a much better place
if we all just tried a little harder to get along.

I think my father wanted more for his son than that--
and I respected him for it./

I became a Christian through YoungLife in high school.

He didn't understand when I went off to college
and got very involved in a church.

I could sense his confusion when I began to talk about becoming a pastor.

My older brother was also a lawyer,
so my dad joked about me balancing the honor of the family name,
but I don't think he meant it.

He didn't mind me studying theology in Oxford,
but he was baffled with my decision to pass on a Harvard or Yale
and, instead, attend a place called Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.
He'd never heard of it.

And when at 29, I went to pastor a church in Virginia--
a church of less than a hundred at the time,
meeting in a rather modest upstairs fellowship hall,
I assume he thought it was OK for starters, perhaps.
Surely, I could move up in time.

There are big, powerful, and impressive churches,

but this wasn't one of them--

and now almost 36 years later, it still isn't.

I could see how it was a disappointment for a father with high aspirations for his son.

It's true--pastors once held a prominent position

in the social makeup of American society,

but they no longer receive much respect.

That reflects the position of the church itself in our culture.

I remember when a reporter for the *Washington Post*,

described evangelical Christians in America as

"mostly poor, uneducated and easily led."

There was an uproar about that comment at the time,

but its accuracy really didn't matter much,

for it captured a real perception.

This is how the church, particularly the evangelical church,

is viewed by many on the outside.

It's not much to look at,

not something that successful people, thinking people,

really need to consider.

Increasingly, and unfortunately, evangelical Christians

are simply seen as another voting block

in the partisan world of American politics.

Where once the church occupied a privileged place in the American public square,

both literally and figuratively,

now the secular gatekeepers of our culture--
the journalists and political pundits and academic leaders,
and even some county zoning boards--
aren't quite sure where churches fit
in the American landscape.

In fact, in the eyes of many,
the church is not just a benign and irrelevant relic of the past,
it is now their enemy #1—
the central obstacle
to realizing their vision of social justice,
especially as it relates to full sexual liberation.

In one recent poll, a whopping 25% of Americans
said they would not vote for a candidate for President
simply because he or she was an evangelical Christian./

But unfortunately, this indifferent or even hostile view of the church
is not only a prevailing opinion of society at large;
it is found even in the lives of many Christians.

"I can be a Christian without going to church, can't I?"

And even many who do "go to church"--an expression I hesitate even to use
and which, in a virtual Zoom world, doesn't even apply--
even many who "go to church" are often very tentative and half-hearted
in their commitment.

In our consumer culture, they go when it's convenient,
or they go when it "meets their needs."

We have a whole culture of "Lone-Ranger" Christians,

who keep a safe distance from any of the complicated connections
created by a church community.

Who needs a church?

I can hear good preaching online.

I can read Christian books on my Kindle,

I can listen to Christian music that suits my taste on Spotify,

and of course, I can pray remotely whenever I like.

What's the big deal about the church.

Isn't it just a big waste of time and energy?//

But as we turn to the Bible,

we see that for the Apostle Paul,

this community of Christians which we call a church

was more than just a convenient spiritual support group.

It was more than a social club meant to lessen our loneliness.

Paul had a view of the church which was very different.

And his divine perspective puts our understanding of the church

in a whole new light.

Far from being an irrelevant relic of a previous generation,

I believe the church of Jesus Christ is at the heart of the gospel

and at the center of God's purposes in the world.

The church is precious in God's sight,

and Paul's words help us to see why that is so.

So we turn to 1 Tim. 3:14,15--

Paul, writing to Timothy in his role as a pastor, says this--

"Although I hope to come to you soon,

I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, . . ."

(and can I reword that a bit—

"Knowing that I am leaving,

I want to give these instructions so that when I am gone . . ."

"you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household,

which is the church of the living God,

the pillar and foundation of the truth."

Robert Mounce, in his commentary, says this—

"it is now generally recognized that this paragraph

is the heart of the Pastoral corpus."¹

In this pastoral epistle, Paul, the Apostle,

is speaking to Timothy the pastor

about the church.

And here, he insists that their behavior ought to be a result of who they are as the church,

and their identity as a church is based on three descriptions

embedded in these two verses.

First, Paul says

that Timothy must know how people ought to conduct themselves,

literally, **"in the house of God."**

And, of course, by this phrase, we know Paul is not talking about a building,

¹ *Pastoral Epistles* (Word series) p. ?.

some sacred space, which demands a certain solemn decorum.

(But, boy, am I going to miss this sanctuary!)

When I first came to Cornerstone, we ran a preschool,

and the children ate lunch in the Fellowship Hall—

the same room where we worshipped.

And I remember the teachers trying to keep order

by telling the children to be quiet because they were in “God's house.”

And I wondered what must have gone on in the heads of those kids—

Did they think that God might be asleep and they might wake him?

But Paul is not talking about a place at all.

He is referring to the community of people who constitute the church--

they are God's house; his household.

They are God's family.

And family language,

used of the church throughout the New Testament,

is particularly prominent in this letter of 1 Timothy.

In his opening words, Paul had spoken of Timothy as

"my true son in the faith" (1:2; also 1:18).

In 3:4 Paul has said of elders that they must manage

their own house, their own family, well,

for how else could they manage the church of God?

And in 5:1,2 Paul urges Timothy to treat other Christians in Ephesus

as members of a family--

"Do not rebuke an older man

[here, Paul is using the same word

that in other contexts he uses for a church elder]

"Do not rebuke an older man harshly,

but exhort him as if he were your father.

Treat younger men as brothers,

older women as mothers,

and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity."

And Paul talks about the church bearing the family responsibility of caring for widows

in those cases where those widows

have no biological family to support them (5:3,4).

In union with Jesus the Son,

the church is a new community

composed of God's sons and daughters,

who are beloved and precious in his sight.

The church is God's household, God's family.

Surely, this has all sorts of implications.

I think it's important to realize that

unlike a business enterprise or even a para-church organization,

the success of a family can't be measured by numbers on a spread sheet.

A family is a place of refuge and encouragement and discipline;
it is a place of education and instruction and nurture;
it is a web of relationships of love and commitment.

As a church family, by the power of the Spirit,
together we grow up and mature
becoming more like God our Father
and Jesus Christ our elder brother.

And it is out of this family that we live out our various vocations in the world.

Like a business, a family may have a mission,
but, unlike a business, it can't exclude those
who can't do much to contribute to that mission.

As Robert Frost once described it,
"A family, a home, is a place where, if you have to go there,
they have to take you in."

That's what a church does—we take people in—all sorts of people.

In the church you're not valued
by how much you can contribute to the mission,
but by how much you are loved by our heavenly Father.
In fact, sometimes a troubled or unhealthy child--
the child who "produces" very little--
that child is the very one who receives the most love and attention.

That's why I've always thought that a healthy church
attracts a lot of unhealthy people--

odd people, socially awkward people, needy people.

That ought to be true

because the church is one of the few places

where those people will be taken in

and find acceptance and love--

that true hospitality,

that reflects the love and acceptance and hospitality of God in the gospel.

In the church, we discover a new family.

As a family, Christians have a kinship affinity, a blood relationship,

through their common participation in the saving blood of Christ.

So we need to continue to emphasize the fact that you can choose your friends,

but you are stuck with your family.

Our relationships with one another are not a consumer choice;

they are a divine mandate.

Your problem is my problem;

your pain is my pain;

your joy is my joy.

We celebrate each other's victories,

and we grieve each other's defeats.

And we have to learn to get along despite our differences

and to forgive each other when we offend one another.

That's what it means to be a family.

We are in this together.

The more the makeup of the church and its unity as a body
is grounded not in some demographic or cultural similarity,
but in a common union with Jesus Christ,
the more it becomes a compelling demonstration of the power of the gospel.
It becomes more than a social club;
it becomes a picture of heaven—a spiritual family.

And when I see glimpses of that in our church,
when I see people rallying around a family whose child has special needs;
when I see people giving generously to help an immigrant family get settled;
when I see people weeping with those who weep
and rejoicing with those who rejoice,
it is a beautiful thing--
to see the church behaving as the family we are called to be.

My own biological family is precious to me—

Being a father of my four sons has been one of the great joys of my life.

What a privilege it has been to be their father.

And what a privilege it has been to act as a spiritual father in God's family--

under our heavenly Father.

We need to appreciate that God's spiritual family is precious to him—

He gave his own Son to create this family.

There is no greater joy than to see our spiritual sons and daughters

grow up to maturity in Christ, walking in the truth.

The church is the family of God.

So people who say, "I can be a Christian without being a part of a church"

they are missing the whole point.

You might as well say I can be born and live as an orphan—

Yea, in a sense, I suppose so,

but who would want to?

Being a part of a local church is part of what it means to be a Christian.

Like marriage, living as a Christian is something that can't be done alone.

That's what the church is--

the family, the household, of God.

And in our late modern culture, with its tremendous sense of homelessness--

both socially and existentially,

I can think of no more powerful attraction than to find one's home

in the family of God. /

There is a second description Paul uses here of the Christians in Ephesus--

the Apostle speaks of them as "God's household,

which is the church of the living God,"

The term "church," the Greek *ekklēsia*,

was the common word for a public assembly.²

² Cf., e.g., Acts 7:38. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, that word translated the Hebrew **אִתְּחַוָּה**, the word used when the Israelites gathered as a congregation before the Lord. cf. . Lev. 26:12; Jer. 32:38; Ezek. 37:27; 2Cor. 16:16.

In the New Testament, that term was chosen to describe a community of people
who gather together in the name of Jesus Christ.

Which is why this pandemic has been so hard on churches
living in a virtual world—
they haven't actually been able to "gather together,"
for that's what a church, a real church, does. /

We are "**The church of the living God**," Paul says—not the Dead Poets Society.

Our God is very much alive--
he is at work among his people.

And it is that living divine presence that distinguishes a church
from every other assembly of people that meets together.

Without that presence,
a church is nothing but a self-help group like weight-watchers.

The presence of God among his people is perhaps
the central covenant promise of the Bible--

"I will live with them and walk among them," the Lord says,
"and I will be their God, and they will be my people." ³

And in the New Testament that promise takes a special form:

Jesus said, **"Where even two are three are gathered in my name,
there am I in their midst"** (Mt. 18:20).

The church is the gathered people of the living God.

It is as we are gathered together--especially for worship--

that God is especially among us.

The church becomes a holy temple in the world.

In Christ, Paul says, in Eph. 2:22,

we "are being built together to become a dwelling

in which God lives by his Spirit."

What an incredible thought that is!

If you want to find God in the world today

the Bible says you need to look not in the chambers of Congress

or in the lecture halls of Harvard,

or in the mansions of Hollywood,

If you want to find God in the world today

the Bible says you are to look

in an ordinary gathering of Christian believers

in a local church like this one--

the local church which is the gathered people, the church, of the living God.//

The significance of what we are doing here

is not determined by the number of people in the seats.

That significance is determined by our true audience.

And the audience of our worship is the living God,

who promises his presence as we gather in the name of his Son Jesus./

Every once in a while

the President of the United States will invite some famous musician

to perform in the White House.

They've had legends like Aretha Franklin, Bob Dylan, Willy Nelson,

B.B. King, Carol King, and Lin-Manuel Miranda.

These are people who can pack out great auditoriums,
but they come to a room in the White House
where there may only be a hundred people in attendance.

They come because the President has invited them,
and they come because the President will be there.

That makes all the difference.

And when we gather for worship—
we are performing before one
far more magnificent than any American President.

Our every act is viewed by the King of all kings.

This means that when we gather for worship,
there is no more important gathering
in the whole of the cosmos.

And as a pastor, I have had the privilege of acting as a worship leader in that great event.
Week after week, I get to lead you into the very presence of God.

There is a priestly dimension to the pastoral calling.

Pastors are charged with bringing God's people into God's presence.

I like the words of Eugene Peterson—

"The biblical fact is that there are no successful churches.

There are, instead, communities of sinners,

gathered before God week after week in towns and villages all over the world.

The Holy Spirit gathers them and does his work in them.

In these communities of sinners, one of the sinners is called pastor
and given a designated responsibility in the community.
The Pastor's responsibility is to keep the community attentive to God."⁴

What a privilege, what a glorious privilege,
to exercise that priestly role of
"keeping the community attentive to God"—
to the living God,
who promises his presence with us in the gospel of Jesus Christ.
For we are the gathered assembly, the church, of the living God.//

Finally, Paul wants Timothy to think of the believers in Ephesus, this church,
as "the pillar and the foundation of the truth."

Again, to quote Robert Mounce—

"This is perhaps the most significant phrase in all the Pastoral Epistles."⁵

The church is "the pillar and the foundation of the truth."

But what does it mean?

How does the church support and even protect the truth?

I mean, isn't it the job of the seminary to support and protect the truth?

Don't we look to the biblical scholars and theologians

⁴ Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles*, p. 2. In the next sentence, he laments "It is this responsibility that is being abandoned in spades."

⁵ *Pastoral Epistles* (Word series), p. ??.

at places like our beloved Trinity Evangelical Divinity School?
Don't we look to them to guide us theologically so that we not fall into error?

Well, yes, but there are lots of seminaries that teach theological rubbish--
how can a place like Trinity be protected from that?

It still comes back to the church.

And with no connection with and dependence on local churches,
with no accountability to the faith of the people of God in the churches,
how many academic institutions have gone off on their own
into all sorts of theological detours and dead ends.

As the seminary of the EFCA,

Trinity is accountable not just to a set of theological propositions,
but to a people.

It is the role of the church—the people of God in local churches—
to be the pillar and foundation of the truth.

And the truth that is grounded and must be protected through the church
is not just what is thought and taught,
but also what is *lived*.

This is why Paul is so concerned about how believers in the church behave.

Our lives are a part of the message of the truth
that we are called to proclaim to the world.

And if our lives are no different from those around us,

if the gospel has no impact on the way we relate to one another,
on the way we handle our money,
on the way we go about our work,
on the way we interact on social media,
on the way we deal with pain and suffering,
or even on the way we deal with death,
then why should anyone believe what we have to say?

That new humanity in Christ which God is creating through the gospel
is itself to be embodied and displayed to the world through the church.

That's why church fights are more than just annoying,
they are scandalous and even blasphemous--
for they defame the very truth that we are called to proclaim—
the deny “Christ in us, the hope of glory”.

In a wonderful way, the church is the first fruits of that heavenly reality to come.

As one writer put it,

"The church does communicate to the world what God plans to do,
because it shows that God is beginning to do it."⁶

The church is missional in its very being.

Its very existence is a demonstration of the gospel it proclaims.

The medium is indeed an essential part of the message.

The life of the church is to testify that Jesus Christ

⁶John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood*, p. 74.

who died for our sins and rose again from the grave,
really does bring us into relationship with God.
Our life as God's people is to testify that God has sent his Spirit into our hearts
to renew and restore us into the image of his Son.

The church is to be a living witness to that good news of God's work in the world.
It is to be the pillar and foundation of the truth.

And pastors have a central role in upholding
the glorious truth of the gospel in all its fullness
among the people God has called them to serve.

There is nothing that has so absorbed me as a pastor,
nothing that has so occupied my mind and heart,
and nothing that has more fully challenged me personally,
than this--
preaching and teaching the word of God
regularly within a community of believers
such that we are together shaped by gospel truth.

It's what drew me to pastoral ministry in the first place—

I was a young Christian attending a large state university,
and my first Sunday there I was invited to a church that attracted lots of students.
It just happened to be a Free Church.

This was a church where the Bible was expounded from the pulpit

with care and seriousness week after week after week.

The Scriptures were opened in ways that engaged my mind, my heart and my will.

There I saw the way in which the preaching of the Bible shaped an entire community
with the grace and truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Funny thing—

I don't think I can remember a single sermon I heard.

But I was fed a steady diet of healthy, well-balanced meals
which over time issued in spiritual growth.

There was a beauty to that church—

a beauty I attribute to the Spirit of God working through the Word of God.

And it was that experience that God used to call me to commit my life
to expounding the Bible in the context of a local church.

And I am forever grateful for the privilege of that high calling.

I have occasionally had one of those meta-preaching experiences

While I am preaching,

I am thinking about myself preaching.

I am looking out at all of you,

and I ask myself, "Why are all these people listening to me?"

I think of all the man-hours expended in this moment.

I know that I would be wasting your time

if was just offering my own words of wisdom about life.

This whole exercise only makes sense if I am offering you

the transforming grace and truth of the word of God.

This is the privilege of being a pastor—
to speak theological truth—truth about God and his gospel,
to God's people,
for the church is the pillar and foundation of the truth.

The church as the household of God,
as the gathered people of the living God,
as the pillar and foundation of the truth.

That's great stuff.

But is that what the world sees when it looks at our church or any church?

Is that what you see?

Isn't this a bit romantic and idealistic?

It may seem so,

and Paul addresses just that perception in what follows.

"Beyond all question," Paul writes in v.16,

"the mystery of godliness

[or, "the mystery that flows from godliness"] is great:

He appeared in a body,

was vindicated by the Spirit,

was seen by angels,

was preached among the nations,

was believed on in the world,

was taken up in glory."

"the mystery is great:"

This mystery is the story of Jesus Christ.

"He appeared in a body," Paul says--

He came into this world as a baby laid in a manger.

He lived a fully human life, just like us,

and then he died the shameful death of a criminal.

Yet he was vindicated by the Spirit

when he was raised from the grave on that first Easter day.

He was seen by those in the angelic realm,

but not by all here on earth.

His story still had to be preached among the nations;

it still had to be believed on in the world.

And all the while, he has ascended to the Father

and been declared to be God's glorious Son—

a declaration that will one day be known to all.

This is a mystery.

It is a mystery, not in the sense that no one understands it,

but that no one could understand it

if God had not now made it known.

This story of God's work in Jesus Christ is a wonderful mystery now revealed.

Have you seen it for what it is?

This gospel story of Jesus Christ?

Jesus came to bring the kingdom of God,

and he did--

but not in power and glory.

He brought the kingdom into the world silently, mysteriously--

like a tiny mustard seed you plant in the ground;

like a little yeast that you put in a lump of dough--

it does its work without a lot of fanfare

and is seen only with the eyes of faith.

The presence of that kingdom is now embodied in a peculiar people

which Jesus calls his church.

This is a profound and wonderful mystery--

and it is the same mystery which was revealed in Jesus himself.

It's the mysterious pattern of lowliness and humility in this world—

a true identity hidden and disguised,

seen only by those who have eyes to see.

Only later will it be vindicated before the world.

Do you see it—this mystery of godliness?

God works through humiliation and weakness to accomplish his powerful purposes.

I like the statement by Dorothy Sayers—

"God underwent three great humiliations

in his efforts to rescue the human race.

The first was the incarnation,

when he took on the confines of a human body.

The second was the Cross,

when he suffered the ignominy of public execution.

The third humiliation . . . is the church.

In an awesome act of self-denial,

God entrusted his reputation to ordinary people.⁷

He entrusted his reputation to people, Paul says,

who were not wise by human standards,

or influential or of noble birth.

He might have said, "to people who are largely poor, uneducated and easily led."

This is not what anyone would expect the kingdom of God to look like.

It is the mystery of the church--

"God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise;

God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things --

and the things that are not --to nullify the things that are,

so that no one may boast before him" (1 Cor. 1:27-29).

Who would have thought, looking at her scrubbing the floors,

that Cinderella would have been the star of the ball.

But that's who we are--

We as the church of Christ are like Cinderella--

chosen by God in his grace to share in the very glory and splendor

of Jesus Christ our Lord.

That's why I say, the church is the centerpiece of God's purposes for humanity.

⁷cited in *Reformed Journal*, 39.4, April, 1989.

Again, listen to these words of Paul--

It is God's "intent was that now, through the church,
the manifold wisdom of God should be made known
to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms,
according to his eternal purpose
which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph. 3:8-11).

Is that hard to believe—that the church is such a glorious thing in God's sight?

I mean, just look at us—

full of very ordinary people—
who are full of all the failures and foibles ordinary people are prone to.

Hardly a group of people that are going to change the world.
Could that possibly be what Paul the Apostle is talking about?

But just think how hard it was to believe that a carpenter's son

from the small backwoods town of Nazareth

who was crucified as a criminal by the Roman governor

was the Son of God and Savior of the world.

It is a mystery—a mystery that is missed by the world

with its preoccupation with power and fame.

It is a mystery grasped only in faith--

faith in the loving purposes of our heavenly Father—

revealed in the gospel of a crucified Messiah.

That's why in the Apostles' Creed the church is an article of faith—

as we confess, "I believe in the holy, catholic church."

I've sometimes wondered if maybe there might have been
a lot more important things I could have done with my life—
things that will make people notice you,
things that will really "make a difference,"
things that will "change the world."

But this understanding of what the church is in the sight of God—
as his household,
as the gathered assembly of the living God,
as the pillar and foundation of the truth—

this is what encourages me,
this is what has sustained me,
this is what makes me think that there is
nothing more significant I could do with my life in all the world than this—
to serve in a local church,
and to be one of God's instruments to prepare Christ's bride
for her glorious wedding day.

For, you see, there are no ordinary churches.

For in a thousand years, should the Lord delay,
there will be no more *New York Times* or *Washington Post*.
America itself will be no more,
and the magnificent buildings on the Washington mall
will be architectural ruins
just as the Roman Forum is today.

But you can be sure, in a thousand years, **there will be churches,**

for Jesus himself has promised that it will be

so. /

Could I just mention one more thing to set the record straight.

When my father was dying of cancer,

and his eyes of faith were opened in a new way,

he came to realize that being a pastor

was far more important than he ever imagined.

So I thank you for the privilege of being your pastor these many years,

and my encouragement to you all

is to value the church.

In whatever way the Lord allows you,

find your place as a functioning member of the body of Christ, this new family,

the church of Jesus Christ—

Nothing is more precious in his sight. //

May 1, 2022

The Preciousness of the Church in God's Sight

(and "The Privilege of Serving as a Pastor")

(1 Timothy 3:14-16)

The church once held a prominent position in the makeup of American society, but it no longer receives much respect. It is only as we see the church as God sees it that we can appreciate its true value. In our passage, the Apostle Paul sets forth a vision of the church that ought to inspire us with its preciousness in God's sight.

I. The Church as "the Household of God."

The Pastor as "father"

caring for people in the family of God.

II. The Church as

"the Gathered People of the Living God."

The Pastor as "priest"

bringing people into the presence of God.

III. The Church as

"the Pillar and the Foundation of the Truth."

The Pastor as "theologian"

guiding people into the truth of God's gospel.

But is this what our church looks like?

Don't Be Misled—

The Church and "the Mystery of the Gospel"