

How to Choose a Church: Part 1
Getting a Running start into 1 Timothy
1 Timothy 3:14-16

Introduction: *How do we choose a church?* The question itself is very American since if we lived in a different country or context the idea of *choice of churches* would be extremely low: in places like Lyon, France, Lodz, Poland, or Hanoi, Vietnam decision of where to worship with the household of God is limited. But because of the proliferation of churches in our Western, American world, the question is supremely relevant. For some of us, we grew up *going to church*, so church is both tradition and comfort, normal and almost automatic. The potential problem with this group (of which I belong – and so my kids) is obvious: *there can be attendance without understanding, participation without true desire or regeneration.* Some of us have chosen churches because we think it's the right thing to do, good for our kids, or because your family goes. Others will have to make decisions on churches when you leave and move away. Whatever the reason you are here this morning, it is good to think through the **reason we are here, how do we actually evaluate the health of a church, and how do we measure our commitment to what God has created as His Body and Household.** *What are the Biblical essentials of a church? Does the size and location of a church matter? How about the music, children's ministry, preaching, and programs? Is it a place I'm supposed to feel comfortable or convicted? How do I belong in a church? How do I grow, mature, and change?*

Over the next 2 weeks we want to ask and answer the question of evaluating a church Biblically as we move into our study of 1 Timothy, getting a running start with the theme of the book.

There are a few practical principles we are hoping to clarify in this study:

- **To push to develop and uphold Biblical leadership in the home and church**
- **To mobilize the people of this church to service and discipleship**
- **To clarify the beauty of Biblical roles of men and women in the home and church**
- **To inform and raise the commitment level to our mission and participation in God's church**
- **To reaffirm our love for Christ, His Word, and His church to bring glory to God the Father**

Clear Commitment to Truth – 1 Timothy 3:14-16

Clarity about the Authority & Sufficiency of Scripture

*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 the truth.***

Paul this letter to Timothy so that he would know and be reminded of his job in the city of Ephesus at one of the flagship churches of Asia Minor. This important port city was known for its focus on health and athleticism, filled with gymnasiums that held competitions and space for working out (a crossfitters dream), as well as one of the **seven wonders of the world**, which was the Temple of Artemis or Diana. It had double the dimensions of the Parthenon, and Pliny the Elder said it "was the most wonderful monument of Grecian magnificence (*"Natural History"*, 36). It would have been on the bucket list of influencers and philosophers of the day. It was a place of worship but also a place to behold beauty itself.

Timothy was to set things in order at the church, since there false teachers wrecking their own faith and tearing down the faith of others (1 Tim. 1:19-20). The way forward for Timothy was to bring both clarity and precision with the truth, reminding and informing the church of **how they were to live**, but also **what** they were to focus on. Notice three things that Paul is writing to Timothy in terms of purpose (so that you may know):

- **The church is God's household** - Often the "family" and "household" metaphors get overused. When I get blocked on the basketball court driving for a layup, my opponent yells, "Get that out of my house!". Employers and coaches try to impress on their employees and teammates that we are family, and thus should have an amount of **loyalty and loving treatment toward each other**. But here, the power lies in the language, since it is a possessive genitive, where the household o God is translated "**God's household**". The church is HIS HOUSE, which He obtained with his own blood (Acts 20:28). He purchased the church, owns it, and calls those who would be a part of it. This means that **HE MAKES THE RULES FOR HIS CHURCH, not us**. We are stewards, servants, and ambassadors, but not owners. But we are also members of the family, called out of the world, out of darkness into light, **transferred to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins** (Col. 1:13-14). This means that we are in an *eternal relationship, preparing for heaven which will be the redeemed, perfected family of God dwelling with Him forever*. There are two important *implications of this reality in terms of choosing a church*:

1. **Everything we do in the church, from form, function, and obedience needs to come out of the revealed truth He gives us** - In other words, He makes the rules in His house, and its our job to know, understand, teach, and live them out.

2. **Belonging and believing matter** - There is a divide in churches that gives insight into the purpose of the church, and it has to do with belonging and believing. **Can I be a part of the family before yield my life to Christ in salvation?** The answer: no. And yes. Let me elaborate. The household of God is for those that have been redeemed, sons and daughters of God who have believed, repented of their sin, and are following Christ. If you participate in a church and the activities in it you are like a young man who comes over to my house to hang out with my family. You are welcome, but you are not **family, yet**. You are family when you are born into our family, we adopt you in, or you decide to make a covenant relationship with one of my daughters in marriage. Then, and only then, are you family. Everyone is welcome within the walls of the church, but we must be clear to differentiate those who are open and visiting and those who are brothers and sisters. Believing in Jesus as your Savior and Lord is the pathway to belonging, NOT attaching yourself to a program, or serving, or merely participating.

- **The church is the LIVING God's church** - We serve and have been called to a living God, through a living hope (1 Pet. 1:3). He is a **living God** as opposed to dead idols, of whom we once served (1 Thess. 1:9 - *For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.*) We were once given over to follow our own passions and desires, seeking after power, material gain, sex, or any other thing that could not satisfy, but now we serve a God who is real, living, and will continue to build us into eternity. Hebrews 9:14 says "*how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.*" Life in the household of God is not vain religion, as if we are serving ourselves or pacifying an impotent idol. We serve the living and true God, who is worthy of our worship, who satisfies our desires since He is the fountain of living waters, and who secures our eternal state.

- **The church is built on and proclaims truth** - The church is the foundation and pillar of the truth the bedrock and beautification of the truth. A building will only be as stable as the foundation, and the pillars not only hold up the roof, but inform of the beauty within. Its fascinating that today in Ephesus the foundation and one pillar of the Temple of Diana are still there, a lasting testament to the beauty once beheld. The church is both **formed** from the truth and **informs** of the truth. Truth is what is needed in every culture, every geographical location, every age. The search for truth is like trying to navigate the ocean through the waves of a storm (Eph. 4:14), or getting traction on shifting sand. Because truth is so pivotal and foundational, it **will always be attached by the enemy: weaken the foundation, the house falls!** The attacks against the truth are typically subtle, slow and relentless.

In his book *Christless Christianity*, Michael Horton addressed this issue in the church in America, not only pointing out the drift away from the truth of God's Word and the gospel, but *how it actually happens*:

*"My concern is that we are getting dangerously close to the place in everyday American church life where the **Bible is mined for "relevant"** quotes but is rarely relevant on its own terms; **God** is used as a personal resource rather than known, worshiped, and trusted; **Jesus Christ** is a coach with a good game plan for our victory rather than a Savior who has already achieved for us; **salvation** is more a matter of having our best life now than being saved from God's judgment by God himself; and the **Holy Spirit** is an electrical outlet we can plug into for the power we need to be all that we can be."*¹

*"My argument is not that evangelicalism is becoming theologically liberal but that it is becoming **theologically vacuous...vacuity and liberalism have typically gone hand-in-hand when it comes to the church's faith and practice. Liberalism started off by downplaying doctrine in favor of moralism and inner experience, losing Christ by degrees. Nevertheless, it is not heresy as much as silliness that is killing us softly. God is not denied but trivialized ----used for our programs rather than received, worshiped and enjoyed.**"*²

Losing the truth of God by degrees, killing us softly. Over the last few weeks our larger Christian family saw two defectors who were at one time well-known figures of upholding the gospel. This is both heart-wrenching and cautionary. John Cooper, the lead singer of a Christian band called *Skillet* wrote in response to one of his friends reasoning for leaving the church, faith, and Christ Himself:

"I'm amazed that so many Christians want the benefits of the kingdom of God, but with the caveat that they themselves will be the King.

"It is time for the church to rediscover the preeminence of the Word. And to value the teaching of the Word. **We need to value truth over feeling. Truth over emotion.** And what we are seeing now is the result of the church raising up influencers who did not supremely value truth who have led a generation who also do not believe in the supremacy of truth. And now those disavowed leaders are proudly still leading and influencing boldly AWAY from the truth.

"Is it any wonder that some of our disavowed Christian leaders are letting go of the absolute truth of the Bible and subsequently their lives are falling apart? Further and further they are sinking in the sea all the while shouting "now I've found the truth! Follow me!!" Brothers and sisters in the faith all around the world, pastors, teachers, worship leaders, influencers...I implore you, please please in your search for relevancy for the gospel, **let us NOT find creative ways to shape Gods word into the image of our**

¹ Michael Horton, *"Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church"*, p. 19.

² Horton, p. 23-24.

culture by stifling inconvenient truths. But rather let us hold on even tighter to the anchor of the living Word of God. For He changes NOT. “The grass withers and the flowers fade away, but the word of our God stands forever” (Isaiah 40:8)³

Principle #1 – Why preaching matters

If the church is the living God's household, and the church itself is to be formed by and inform others of the beauty of truth, then our commitment to teaching and preaching must be equal to the task. Here at Grace we have committed ourselves to *expository preaching*, which means we are committed to preach through the Bible and the point of the message of the Bible is the point of our message! We believe that all Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). Years before Paul wrote those words, he said that he did not shrink from declaring to the church at Ephesus the **whole counsel of God** (Acts 20:27). He taught in public, house to house, and formally in the Hall of Tryannus (Acts 19:9; 20:20). Preaching the whole counsel of God helps ensure:

- We teach the gospel in terms of the whole of redemptive history, the overarching story of God from before the foundations of the world to the world to come - Not everything is the gospel, but all things given to us in Scripture tell us of where we come from, where the Promise of Christ moved from Prophecy to actuality.
- Ensures that we will continue to proclaim the gospel
- Ensures that we will tackle the hard issues of Scripture, not simply the things that make us feel better
- Ensures that we will not preach our own ideas as primary but keep God's desires and mind out front.
- Since we are transformed by the renewing of our mind (Rom. 12:2), regular, consistent, and informed interaction with God's Word changes us over time.

If I were to leave this church and look for another one, one of the first test questions I would pose would be: what is your view of preaching God's Word? If they take God's Word seriously, as both sufficient and authoritative, it will color how they teach. A church that teaches God's word continuously will have a high likelihood that they are in line with God's desire for His church.

Clarity about Christ & the Gospel

*Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: **He** was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory*

Most churches have creeds, hymns, or statements that they memorize and recite to make sure they are on the same page in certain doctrinal issues. This seems like the case in the church of Ephesus, as this would have been something to remind them of Jesus Christ, who He was and what He did. Notice that the idea of **mystery** is not that we can never figure it out, but it had to be revealed to us by grace through faith. The mystery of godliness, how we can be made right with God and please Him, is NOT found in anything we can do or something we can say, but in a **person, in the individual Jesus Christ**. It is divided up into three different couplets describing the person of Jesus Christ. 1) He was **revealed** in

³ <https://cogentchristianity.com/2019/08/13/skillets-john-cooper-on-apostasy-among-young-christian-leaders/>- In response to Marty Sampson's, a writer for Hillsong, renouncing of his faith; the other reference was Joshua Harris, a writer of Christian books, former pastor and speaker

both the **incarnation and the resurrection** (see John 1:14 and Romans 1:4). He was **witnessed** in both the supernatural and natural world, both by the angels and nations (1 Pet. 1:12; Matt. 28:19-20, Rev. 5:9-10); He was **received** by the world and His Father in the ascension (Col. 1:6 23; Acts 1:2, 11, 22). We remember, proclaim, rest in, depend on, and trust the work of Jesus Christ for our salvation and reconciliation to the Father. We believe what Paul said, **"that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost."** (1 Tim. 1:15). This reality helps us clarify the gospel and see through the artificial substitutes around us:

- **We reject therapeutic moralistic deism** - This phrase came out of the work of Christian Smith as he evaluated the Spiritual lives of American teenagers. The conclusion was that most of those interviewed believed there was a god who was there but distant, who wanted them to do good and be better, and he was there to make them feel better. God was a cosmic genie and existed for them, to make them happy. This way of thinking is coupled with the *prosperity gospel*, which has perpetuated the belief that God's primary purpose is to heal us of our disease and make us wealthy, and all that is needed is we have to believe enough. If we are not healed or if we stay in our financial straits, we are not getting God's best because we do NOT BELIEVE ENOUGH. There is no talk of **sin, suffering, or sanctification**. It is focused on us, making us the king and lord of our lives, with God there to assist, nudge, and inspire, and it is damnable! God does not share His glory with anyone, and He reconciles and restores us through the blood of Jesus Christ so that we can worship, adore, and proclaim Him. This ensures that we will **suffer, be persecuted, mortify our sin, discipline ourselves for godliness, and fight the good fight of faith**. Life is not about us, and God is about Himself. He loves and upholds His glory by satisfying His wrath on the perfect sacrifice of His Son. Nothing else will do. Nothing else will save.
- **We preach a complete gospel of faith and repentance** - This means that the gospel we preach is about both **faith and repentance**. *"Testifying both to Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."* Both faith and repentance are gifts of God's grace and cannot be generated by or in ourselves, but are freely acted on when God opens our eyes and softens our hearts by grace. Repentance means a change, a transformation of our mind, heart, and hands. The way we perceive truth changes, how we feel about sin and holiness changes, and the direction of our life changes. A message of belief in Jesus without a subsequent change of life is the type of belief that leaves us in our sin since it only rises to the level of belief that is held by demons (James 2:19).
- **We believe that repentance and faith WILL PRODUCE MATURITY** - The gospel changes us. We are called to be disciples of Jesus, which means a follower and learner. When someone says, "That person is 34 going on 13", it is not a compliment. Just like my goal is to have my girls grow up in our home (and eventually leave), the goal of God's household is that we would not only make disciples, but help mature disciples who would **observe all that Christ commanded**. In other words, the truth of God's Word and the commands of discipleship are inseparable.

Principle #2 – Is Christ proclaimed completely

What does a church teach about the gospel? Is everything focused on the individual, or is it focused on worshipping God? Do they talk about sin and suffering? How does a person grow and mature? If the answers to these questions do NOT contain the person and work of Christ as the answer, it is not a church I'd recommend.

Conclusion: *How have you thought about choosing a church? How are we doing here?* This is a time for all of us to evaluate ourselves and our commitment in this church (or whatever church you are a part of if you're visiting). Are there things we need to change, tighten up, or grow in? The answer is most likely: absolutely! Let's commit to knowing, understanding and living out the truth each day, focused on the Person and work of Jesus Christ, as we seek to know and proclaim Him, seeing each person come to maturity.

Next week we'll look at leadership and mission, and how that shapes a church.

Characteristically Caring Leadership (Acts 20:19-38; 1 Tim. 4:12-16)

Leading by Example

Principle #3 – Do leaders model a life worthy of following

Leading by Loving Care

Principle #4 – Do leaders care for member's body and soul

Leading in Mobilization and Sending

Principle #5 – Is there an expectation to serve and make disciples

Conviction to Mission and Purpose

Understanding God's Heart

Understanding God's Household