

How to Choose a Church: Part 2
Getting a Running start into 1 Timothy
 1 Timothy 3:16

Introduction: *How do we choose a church?* This summer in our travels we were able to spend time with folks outside of Simi Valley and discuss issues of life, including the makeup and structure of different churches. One conversation stood out as a family was in the midst of looking for a new church in their area since the church they had been attending was moving away from a firm, convictional stance concerning key doctrinal issues. In their search, one church was appreciated, sound, and well liked by the family in terms of size, location, and teaching. But there was one sticking point. My friend said, "*I'm not sure this is the type of church that'd be ok knowing that I watch "The Bachelor" (it might have been "The Bachelorette").*" This was fascinating to me as both a friend and pastor. Now when I mention a current "reality" show on TV, there is a broad range of reaction: some of you have never heard of this show, nor care. Some watch the show. Some of you have heard of it and choose not to watch it. But here is the point: *we all will make a value call on something like this, and whatever value we place on it, we can easily evaluate someone else through that lens.* My friend felt she would be evaluated poorly if this was a known fact, feeling judged or looked down on, or even less mature by this simple activity.

The church is a place to be fully known and fully loved, since that is exactly who we are in Christ. He knows us fully, all of the sins of our past, present and future, the shame that's resulted from it, and has chosen to love us. In fact, the Ephesian church was reminded that God chose them and loved them before the foundation of the world itself (Eph. 1:3-5). We express that knowledge and love with each other as we walk this life together, fleeing our sinful desires in this world (1 Tim. 6:10-11) in order to pursue the better things: righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, and gentleness (1 Tim. 6:11). We do all of this by fighting the good **fight of faith**, which we can all admit is difficult and thus requires a fight, a battle to believe. The issue is not about judging the externals which can so easily be wrongly evaluated or compared (types of school, drinking, entertainment choices, spending, etc), but about each of us pursuing our satisfaction in God through Christ, depending on God's grace to believe, and doing this in a progressive way. Each family here is geared differently, has different personalities and stages, so the issue is not each of us pursuing God's glory **exactly the same way**, but pursuing the same ONE together. The only way to do this is to have the right understanding of the complete gospel of Jesus Christ.

How does a church make sure it is cultivating the right kind of gospel culture? The answer: **Are they committed to the full, complete, totality of who Christ is, what He has done, and what He has called us to?**

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.***

- **The church is God's household -**
- 1. **Everything we do in the church comes out of the revealed truth He gives us**
- 2. **Belonging and believing matter -**
 - **The church is the LIVING God's church -**

- **The church is built on and proclaims truth**

Principle #1 – Preaching matters

- 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 become - Not everything is the gospel, but all things given to us in Scripture tells 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.

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. In **Acts 19** we read that the city of Ephesus had a thriving industry of magic arts and cultic practices, culminating in worship in the Temple of Artemis (Diana). When Paul came to preach the gospel, it not only turned hearts and minds but affected the industry since in one day the people burned 50,000 pieces of silver worth of books. The leaders of the city were convened for the economic welfare of the city, and said "*there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship.*" **Acts 19:27** This led to a confusion laden riot and a 2 hour shouting session "**Great is Artemis of the Ephesians**" (**Acts 19:34**). This hymn countered that belief and focused on the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is believed to be an early hymn or at least a creedal statement, and notice that it is both **poetic and clear, both rhythmic and precise, and is focused not on the people of the church but Jesus Himself**. In other words, when this early church sang their songs, hymns, and spiritual songs, it actually taught, informed, and proclaimed rather than simply trying to ignite inspirational passions.

Notice that the idea of **mystery** is not something that cannot be figured out or solved but rather something that was hidden at one point and now has been revealed. 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 both the **incarnation and the resurrection** (see John 1:14 and Romans 1:4). Jesus did not BECOME God but was revealed as God in human form, putting on flesh to dwell among us, represent us, and ultimately substitute Himself for us. He was born to die on the cross to take our place, and He was *vindicated or justified* by the Spirit or in His spirit when He rose from the

dead according to Romans 1:4. Many came to claim they were Messiah, and many died, but only ONE rose again, and in His rising from the dead calls us to rise again with Him one day, knowing that without the resurrection, our preaching, faith, and lives are futile since we'd still be in our sins (1 Cor. 15:12-17)

2) 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); Angels announced Jesus' conception with Mary, His birth in Bethlehem, and were there at the resurrection. Angels longed to perceive redemption through this Messiah since they themselves never will experience it. This also could mean that Jesus made proclamation to the evil spirits in prison since the days of Noah, proclaiming His victory in His death (1 Pet. 3:18-20). His witness in this world was to spread, to go out to all nations, including every tribe, tongue and people. There would be no doubt as to who was Savior and Lord, and who He called to Himself.

3) He was **received** by the world and His Father in the ascension (Col. 1:6 23; Acts 1:2, 11, 22); He would be received not with a sword but by belief given by grace through faith, as both Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, culturally good and evil would believe in Him. Then He ascended to heaven and was seated at the right hand of the Father with all things placed under His feet as the Head of the church, preparing and securing a place for His Bride, His chosen, His people.

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 (and any other false forms of the gospel)** - 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, happy in this life, 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. Not only is this unbiblical, it is frustrating and joyless. When we have **wrong expectations about life and God** they can lead to unmet expectations, which lead to frustration, bitterness, anger, and eventually separation. If we think God SHOULD heal us, or answer our prayer in the WAY we've asked, or give us what we wanted, and FAILS to come through, we will view Him negatively, without joy, through a lens that sees Him as one who withholds good things from His kids. In false gospels there is no talk of **sin, suffering, or sanctification**. **Luke 9:23-25 says** *"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?"* It is instead **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**. Paul's message to the Ephesian church while ministering there: "*Testifying both to Jews and Greeks of **repentance toward God** and of **faith in our Lord Jesus Christ**.*" This was consistent with what Jesus commissioned in **Luke 24:47**, "*that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations beginning from Jerusalem*. 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 of mind, 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. This is different than what Judas experienced in Matthew 27:3-5. After he had sold Jesus out for 30 pieces of silver, he felt **regret, sorrow, and remorse**. Unfortunately, the editors of the ESV translated the word "*metamelomai*" as "**changed his mind**". Judas felt regret, and the recourse was for him to deal with his guilt and shame by hanging himself. Repentance (*metanoia*) is a gift from God (Rom. 2:24; 2 Tim. 2:25). 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). Both faith and repentance working together by grace allows us to see that **Jesus is Lord AND Savior**, the One who takes our place and is also in a place of our master and king. We are now slaves of His, not out of forced duty but willing delight as we seek to please Him and be satisfied IN Him. Being saved by faith and repentance in Jesus Christ means that we will **live a life of repentance** as God continues to change our mind, heart, desires, and obedience. This will inevitably lead to and produce an ascending growth in maturity.
- **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.
Maturity in the gospel will mean that we will have a growing understanding of the magnificence and glory of God, the depth and breadth of our own sinful depravity, the immensity and loving gift of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and the change of our desire for our own glory, trust, and righteousness. **Maturity** means we are MORE gracious to others, we look to Christ alone for our righteousness and goodness, and let God's love for us flow down in our love for others.
Maturity is a growing focus on the Person, Work, and Position of Jesus Christ. Whenever you hear about a person's life, especially as they deal with conflict, loss, pain, suffering, or even ease, it will quickly be revealed what role Jesus Christ plays. Is He Lord, preeminent, and primary or a non-existent throw in? In a church, is Christ magnified, focused on and delighted in, or is He presented as the One who is focused on and helps us? This will give us a good picture of a person and places commitment to Christ.

*"Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone **mature in Christ.**"*

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 answer to these questions do NOT contain the person and work of Christ as the answer, it is not a church I'd recommend.

Why is this so important? Why did we spend so much time on these first 2 things? *What is at stake is not only our souls but our joy in this life now.* I talked to a friend a few days ago dealing with the slow and painful death of his wife and was reminded how hard this life is. We each have reasonable expectations that we will live a long life with our loved ones, enjoying our families and the good things God has provided for us. But very rarely does life turn out the way we thought or expected. Where do we turn when it all falls apart? How do we deal with the inevitable pain associated with the brokenness of this world? We need a fully developed view of God and His love for us in Christ, who was willing to restore us out of our sin by sacrificing Jesus on the Cross, pouring out wrath on Him so that we might have life with Him forever. His suffering meant we will not have to suffer eternally. His sacrifice gives us **hope**, not so much in THIS life but in the one to come. Far too often we don't hope in the life with Christ eternally because we are too content with life here in this world.

Second, we need a church that will remind us of the realities and joys of the gospel often, through its preaching, music, sacraments (like baptism and communion) and fellowship together. We are reminded each week as we worship corporately, focused on the magnificence of Jesus Christ, and that life is NOT about us but about Christ and others.

We do not need a place that will be focused on us that sells us platitudes that everything will just magically be ok, but a message that tells of God who put on flesh, lived a perfect life, died as a convicted criminal and sinner though He had never sinned, who rose from the grave securing victory over sin and death, who was proclaimed throughout the nations so that all those called would believe and who secures a place WITH HIM on day! We need to lift our gaze from our selves and circumstances to focus not so much on **what Jesus would do** but rather remind ourselves **what Jesus has done!** In that truth and reality, we find joy now and hope for tomorrow!

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 a expectation to serve and make disciples

Conviction to Mission and Purpose

Understanding God’s Heart

Understanding God’s Household