

What Is the Church?

What Does the Bible Teach?

By Don Green

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What we've been doing over the past several weeks is we're developing a doctrinal framework for our church, answering a number of critical questions: "Why do we believe the Bible?" "Who is God?" "What is the Trinity?" "Who is Satan?" "Who are you?" "What is sin?" and the last time that we were together we answered the question, "What is salvation?" and a word picture was used this past week by a teacher at a conference that is helpful in thinking about what we are doing. What we are doing is we're building a fence, as it were, around our flock. We're doing that together. We're building a fence, a theological fence, around our flock that gives us protection so that we know that we're in the realm of God's truth and that fence helps keep error and false teachers a little bit at bay, hopefully a lot at bay and so these are very important messages. If you've missed any of them, I encourage you to pick them up because every single message is foundational and one of the things that I would say as you study biblical doctrine like what we're doing, is that you find that it's so tightly interwoven together that if you are askew in one area of doctrine, it has a domino effect elsewhere. If you don't get the corner square on a house, the whole structure is affected by what you do. So we're trying to be careful and we're trying to be accurate in what we teach because we know we're laying the foundation for what we will build on in the years to come as we seek to become the people that God has called us to be.

Last time, we answered the question, "What is salvation?" and I won't review the content of that message here except that I do want to say this one thing: particularly in our individualistic American culture, particularly in the way that some forms of evangelism are done, particularly in the way that we've been taught for a generation of seeker-friendly churches, there is a tendency, there is an ever-present temptation to think of salvation solely in individualistic terms, to think of ourselves as a silo, as it were, that has received the grace of God in our own lives and then to think that we are simply free agents moving about and not to see the bigger picture of what Christ is doing. It is very true and it is a blessed truth that we can speak of the work of Christ as being directed to us in a personal individualistic way. Christ knows us by name. Paul said that he died for me and gave himself up for me, Galatians 2:20. And the song that we sang earlier, "I Am His and He Is Mine," is a reflection of that great unmovable truth.

But there is another dimension to that. Christ didn't save us simply to be individual Christians, he saved us so that we would become a part of a body known as the church. We are born into a family. We are baptized into a body, as it were, a spiritual baptism is what I mean by that. So we should not think of ourselves solely as individual Christians but we need to see ourselves as part of a larger body, as part of a bigger work that Christ is doing. One of the reasons that we hold to a confession of faith that was written in 1689 is because we self-consciously want to connect ourselves not only with Christ, not only with each other now, but we want to be self-conscious of the fact that we belong to a flow of history, a flow of the work of Christ as he builds his body and that we are not individual islands even as a church. We're conscious of the fact that we are in the flow of a work of God through history and we want to be self-conscious in identifying with that because we believe that that honors Scripture and honors Christ as we do.

So, today we come to answer the question, "What is the church?" What is the church? I want to give you a very brief answer to that question as we start and then we'll try to unpack it in the remaining time that we have here this morning. The church is that group of people called by God and born of the Spirit who are true believers in Jesus Christ. The church is that group of people who are called by God and born of the Spirit who are true believers in Jesus Christ. There is a Trinitarian focus to the church: God called us; the

Spirit worked in our lives; Christ is our Lord and Savior. So the church is a group of people. It is not a building. The Bible does not use the word “church” to describe a building. The Bible uses the church to describe people who have been the objects of the redeeming grace of God mediated by the Spirit and grounded in the righteousness and blood of Christ. We have our own individual testimonies of which we are grateful to the Lord for and yet the reason that there is a common thread to true testimonies that, “I recognize that I was a sinner. I heard the gospel. I repented of sin and put my faith in Christ and now my life is changed.” That is the common thread of every true testimony of redeeming grace. Every true Christian has some manner of every one of those elements expressed when he talks about why he is a Christian and how he became a Christian. It's that commonality that we're alluding to here that the reason that there is that commonality is because we are all brought together into one great body of believers. So we're going to unpack what we mean when we use the word “church.” We're going to try to answer that question, “What is the church?” It is that group of people called by God and born of the Spirit who are true believers in Jesus Christ.

Now, I'm going to give you four points this morning to kind of outline this and then after our Communion Service next Sunday and the following week or two, I'll do a message entitled, “Why does the church exist?” Right now we're just trying to describe what the church is and not so much talk about its purpose, we'll save that for a future message. But what is the church? Point 1 that I want to share with you, this if foundational. This is the cornerstone of everything. 1. The church belongs to Christ. The church belongs to Christ. When we gather together as a local body, as we think about the broader group of people that belong to Christ throughout the world and throughout the ages, we need to be mindful that we are participating in a life that belongs to Christ himself. Scripture makes this very clear. In Matthew 16:18, you don't need to turn there but in Matthew 16:18, during his earthly ministry, Jesus told his disciples, “I will build My church.” That possessive pronoun “my” church is very important. The church belongs to Jesus Christ. The church takes its direction from Christ. The church gets its life from Christ. The church can stand before God as a redeemed people because of Christ. The church is his.

This is so fundamental for you and for me to understand where we fit in the whole scheme of reality in the life of the church. Christ, as we're going to see, Christ is the head and we are underneath that. We are the privileged recipients of this divine favor, the privileged recipients of divine blessing. And because we have received blessing, we give honor to the one who bestowed it. Because we have received blessing, we are in a role of submission to our Benefactor and that is so essential to forming a proper corporate approach to life in the church. Life in the church is not about what you or I in particular want because the church belongs to Christ. Evermore, ever and always, our preeminent question in any situation in the life of this local body is, “What does Christ want? What does Christ say?” because the church belongs to him. That is the reality to which Scripture speaks.

Turn in your Bibles to the book of Ephesians. I want you to see this from a couple of different passages. Christ called it “my church” in Matthew 16 and as you read through the epistles of Paul in particular, you see him asserting the glory and majesty of Christ and you see him asserting the authority of Christ over his people. Remember, the church is a group of people and Christ is over them. The church belongs to Christ. Ephesians 1. This text will actually be our text for our Communion Service next Sunday as well so we get a little bit of an advance preview here. Remember in Ephesians 1:4 that Paul said that God “chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him.” Now as you move on in Ephesians 1, Paul is going to speak about the reality of that relationship between Christ and the people that God gave to him before the foundation of the world and in verse 18, Paul says, “I pray,” he's in a spirit of prayer praying for the recipients of this letter. He says, “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe.” As the recipients of divine favor, as that people called by God, born of the Spirit, to receive true salvation in Jesus Christ, we are the recipients of hope. We have an inheritance that is waiting for us. We are on the receiving end of a surpassing display of divine power that pulled us from sin, from the realm of Satan and put us into the realm of the kingdom of his beloved Son.

We're a group of people that have been the objects of a work of God and Paul, here in Ephesians 1, is praying and saying, “I'm praying that God would help you grasp the significance of what it means to be a

Christian, the significance of what it means to be a part of the body of Christ.” So there in verse 19 he goes on and he says, “These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which,” watch this, watch the focus on Christ now. Look at verse 20, put your finger on it and follow along with me, “which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places,” in that position of authority. Verse 21, “far above,” far above, “all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.” We’re talking about magnificent, unspeakably great spiritual realities here.

Notice what Paul goes on to say about Christ and his relationship to the church in verse 22, that’s our focus for this morning, “And He put all things in subjection under His feet,” under the feet of Christ, “and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.” Christ is the head of the church. The church gets its life from its head. The church, like the body does, gets its direction from the head. Christ has authority over the church and that means that as we come together to worship him, as we walk through life as a body of believers together, we are ever, ever mindful of the fact that Christ is the one who has preeminent authority in the life of our body. Everything else is secondary to his one preeminent position as the head of the church. That may seem a little bit abstract but, beloved, it shapes the entire way that we think. It means that we think not in terms of what do I want or what does she want or how do we manipulate human relationships here, we’re every looking up before we look horizontally. We’re always conscious of the fact that what happens in the life of the body of a local church is done under the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ. He sets the tone. He sets the stage. As the head of the church, Christ gives direction to his people. As the head of the church, Christ gives spiritual life to his people.

And let me remind you of a passage, turn to Titus a little further back in your New Testament, to remind you of an important verse that I’m grateful to the Lord has been made prominent in the early life of our time together as Truth Community. Titus 2:13. Paul says that we’re “looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself for us,” watch this, “to redeem us,” notice the first person plural here? Us as a body of believers. “He gave himself for us to redeem us,” plural, “from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself,” that it would belong to him, in other words, to purify for himself, “a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.” When we think about the church, as we think about what we do together corporately, as we think about the broader body of Christ throughout the world, our starting point in true and accurate thinking has to come down to this one central point: the church belongs to Christ. He owns it by right of authority. He owns it by right of purchase. He purchased at the cost of his own life a people that they might belong to him, that they might be his possession.

That means so many different things. One of the things that it means as we think about the trials and tribulations of life, that as a Christian there is a broader, deeper, more profound reality that defines the reason for your existence and that defines the purpose in your struggles and defines the future that belongs to you. It’s not about so much we take all of those individual difficulties that we go through and we gather them up and we realize, “Oh, everything that’s happening is happening under the sovereignty and authority of my blessed Christ and there is a purpose to this because I belong to him. I’m not a free-floating free-agent disconnected from the reality that’s around me. Above all else, I can define myself as one who belongs to Christ and therefore I not only belong to him, I belong to the body that he bought with his own blood.” This shapes the way we think about everything. The church belongs to Christ.

You know, I always think about that when you read secular columnists and self-appointed authorities on cultural events in the world and they’ll say, “Well, the church should be doing this or that. The church should be more concerned about the poor, more concerned about inclusion of disaffected groups.” Well, whatever you think about those issues, realize that no one in the world, no one in the world has any authority to speak about what the church of Christ should do because the church belongs to Christ and those people who are not believers who try to tell the church what to do are interlopers who have no business speaking about the life, the doctrine and the authority of what the church should do. They have no jurisdiction to speak and it is very critical for us to understand that so that we are always being influenced by what Christ says in his word about what the church should be rather than letting the culture try to define our life for us. We must be dogmatic and clear about this. We do not have the prerogative and here in Truth

Community, we don't even have the desire to let people outside the church tell us what we should do. We could never do that. That would be a betrayal of the one who bought us with his own blood anymore than somebody should walk into your house and tell you how to arrange your furniture. "What do you mean telling me? You don't live here. You didn't pay for this building. You don't know anything about this. What are you doing telling me how to arrange my furniture?" That's the attitude that we have toward those outside in the world who have no submission to Scripture, no submission to Christ trying to tell us what we should do. No, the church belongs to Christ and we take our direction from him.

Now, let me say one other thing about it just in terms of the way that we come together as a body and as we contemplate the dozens of families that constitute the people of Truth Community Church. This impacts our corporate life as well. Here is a local church in a very sweet and special way that I want to pull out for you by way of application. Truth Community does not belong to me. I might be the pastor but it's not my church. Truth Community doesn't belong to a circle of influential families. Truth Community belongs to Christ. Truth Community is his church. We are stewards of what he has done. We are stewards, we are delegated responsibility to care for what's happening here but Truth Community belongs to Christ, not to any man or any family or any group of families. So, everyone who belongs to Christ who would choose to affiliate with us and associate with Truth Community is welcome as full equal partners in the life of the body of Truth Community because the church belongs to Christ and that is essential and it affects the way that we think about ourselves corporately. We think about each other as fellow heirs of grace, fellow recipients of the work of Christ and we'll talk more about that as we talk about leadership a little later in the message.

Do you get it? The church belongs to Christ and so as a result of the fact that the church belongs to Christ, that affects the way we think about ourselves and the way that we think about each other and the way that we think about the world around us as we think about this great body of people who belong to Christ. It's like there's a triangle in our minds and there's everything but it all points up to one central point and that point is Christ and everything flows from him as the head, everything flows from him as the authority, everyone flows from him as the giver of spiritual life. It is a precious thing to be a Christian. Part of the reason that it's precious is because we belong to this body known as the church.

Let me move on to a second point here. The church belongs to Christ, who is it then that belongs to the church, you could say? The church belongs to Christ, well, who is it that constitutes the church? Let me give you a second point here: the church consists of true believers, genuine Christians. Not simply someone who calls themselves a Christian but a true Christian. 2. The church the consists of true believers. All true Christians belong to the Church, capital C. We're talking about the church universal here. It's sometimes called that, the universal church. All true believers are part of the universal church of Christ. Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 12. We'll just look at a couple of key verses here. 1 Corinthians 12:12. Remember, we said that the church is that group of people called by God and born of the Spirit who are true believers in Jesus Christ. Here in verse 12, you see that spiritual reality being laid out by the pen of the Apostle Paul. He says, "For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ." Watch this in verse 13, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." Paul is saying that the Spirit of God is the one who brings somebody into the body of Christ and everyone who has been born of the Spirit is a part of the body of Christ. There is no such thing as a true Christian who is not a part of the body of Christ in this universal sense.

So, the church consists of true believers. God calls his people to Christ by a work of the Holy Spirit. We become a part of this church not by human effort but by a work of God and so the church consists of true believers. And if you look at Acts 2, you can see where the church was born. The church was born by an act of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 and I want to just point this out to you as well. We believe that the church began at Pentecost in Acts 2. Let's go back for just a moment to Jesus' final words to his disciples before he ascended into heaven and look at Acts 1:4, "Gathering them together, Jesus commanded them," that group of disciples, he commanded them "not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, 'Which,' He said, 'you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'" Something was coming that had not yet occurred in their lives and so Jesus says, "Wait and stay in Jerusalem until you are baptized with the Holy Spirit." Look at verse 8, he

says, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you,” and so he's looking forward. He's looking to something in the immediate future and telling them to anticipate and to wait until it comes.

In Acts 2, we see the fulfillment of that. Acts 2:1, “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them.” Verse 4, “And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance.” Now, as you read on in Acts 2, you see that that gift of tongues was the gift of known human languages that were previously unlearned. God miraculously gave them the ability to speak in other languages – get this – as a sign that the Holy Spirit had come upon them. There was a supernatural event that took place when the Holy Spirit came and gave birth to the body of Christ on that day of Pentecost and it was marked by, the invisible coming of the Spirit, was marked by a supernatural display, a supernatural power of people doing what is humanly impossible to speak as adults instantly with a language that you had never studied before. And so the coming of the Holy Spirit, those supernatural events surrounding the coming of the Spirit, signified that something radically new, radically different, had occurred that had not been the experience in the prior progress of revelation. These believers were now baptized by the Holy Spirit and taking it together with what we saw in 1 Corinthians 12, they were baptized into the body of Christ and the church was born on that day.

And so who is the church? The church belongs to Christ and the church consists of all true believers in Christ who have been born of the Spirit. You can't get very far in biblical doctrine anywhere before it becomes a question of: have you been born of the Spirit yourself? Are you part of this body of Christ? Have you been born of the Spirit? Have you been supernaturally given new life to belong to Christ? Because that is the mark of someone who belongs to the church. It's not enough to simply walk through the doors and be in this physical geographic location, the question is whether a spiritual renewal has taken place in your heart, whether you have new life that you did not have before. If that sounds foreign to you, it's your opportunity to bow before Christ and say, “I don't know anything of this new life. Please save me because it frightens me to think that I'm outside this special body of believers, that I don't have the spiritual life that marks the true church.”

As we talk about the church in that sense, we're talking about the universal church, those who belong to Christ who have been born of the Spirit throughout time and those who share the life of the Spirit right now regardless of their geographic location. There is that aspect to the way that Scripture uses the word “church.” But there's also, as we think about true believers, there's also a sense in which we can say that there is a church with a small “c,” the word “church” being used to refer to local assemblies of believers. Look at the book of Galatians with me, chapter 1. It's a mark of the inspiration of Scripture that even the introductory words that you so easily pass over have such great doctrinal content and important truth communicated in them. Galatians 1. Remember that we had seen in 1 Corinthians there was one body of Christ. Notice here in Galatians 1 that there's going to be a plural usage of the word “churches.” Verse 1, “Paul, an apostle (not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead), and all the brethren who are with me,” watch this, “To the churches of Galatia.” To the churches, to the multiple groups, the multiple assemblies of believers that are in that geographic region of Galatia. Churches, plural, referring to local bodies who are a subset of the true one body of Christ who gather together and assemble together for the purpose of worship and service to Christ. The churches of Galatia.

You can see a similar use in 1 Thessalonians so turn over there, past the book of Philippians and Colossians. 1 Thessalonians and I realize we're doing this in a very quick survey way. It's by design and in days to come in the future of our church, we'll be able to go back to all of these wonderful truths that we've surveyed and be able to flesh them out in greater detail. But look in 1 Thessalonians 1:1, “Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” The church in Thessalonica. Again, a local church. A local manifestation of the universal body of Christ. And so, the Church universal throughout the world, Church with a capital “C” we might say, gathers together in local churches, small “c,” with local people in a local geographic region consistently meeting

together to live out the manifestation of the body of Christ in their local area. So the church is a group of people who share common life in Christ. Universally and then locally. The church is used in both ways.

So let me give you a sense of anticipation about what lies in the future of Truth Community Fellowship as a result of this point that we're talking about, the fact that the church consists of true believers. Not anybody can join a true church. Not anybody can just walk off of the street and apply for membership when we established Truth Community Church. We're still calling ourselves a Fellowship because we're still laying the groundwork for the future but we're getting much, much closer than we were. But you have to be a true Christian to belong to a church that belongs to Christ. You have to be one who belongs to him. Now, that has an implication. Before anyone can join Truth Community Church as it will be known, everyone will need to give a testimony of their conversion as part of their application for membership. People will have to give in simple or longer forms but have to give some declaration that testifies to the reality of the work of the Spirit in their hearts and that they have truly been converted to Christ. That's going to be true and we're not going to take letters of transfer or anything like that because we don't know anything about anything else.

So the point of all of that is that there is a reason for that. This is a way that we can honor the authority of Christ in his church and say before we recognize someone as a member of this local body, we're going to require them to say and give verbal testimony of how they came to Christ so that there is a basis to believe that they belong to Christ and are able to be a part of the life of the body of Christ. This is not to embarrass people or to make it difficult or anything like this, this is a means, beloved, I trust you see this after everything that we've said, this is a means for us to honor the authority of Christ and to do what we can before we admit people into membership into a local body that they have that one spiritual qualification that it requires, "I'm a true Christian." Well, the only way the leadership in a church can know that is if people open up their lives enough to say, "Here's how I was convicted of sin and here is the story of my faith in Christ," and that change has lasted because it was real. So I say that just to give you a sense of what's to come.

Before someone can join a local church, they have to have the spiritual life that defines the church and we establish membership in the future at Truth Community, those who want to be a part will be lovingly embraced and welcomed but you'll need to give testimony to your conversion and a true Christian doesn't mind that at all. A true Christian approaches it this way, a true Christian says, "What? You mean you will give me an opportunity to tell you about the work of Christ in my life? You'll give me a chance to tell you how he redeemed me from sin? And you'll give me a chance to tell somebody the glories of how Christ saved me and how precious he is to me? Oh, thank goodness I get a chance to say it again." No true Christian resents that opportunity, particularly when you realize that what we're trying to do together as a church is that we're trying to protect the purity of life, we're trying to honor Christ and the last thing that we would want to do as leadership at Truth Community is to just have open enrollment of membership of Truth Community and let people think, let someone who's truly unconverted think that their external association with Truth Community means that they have the reality of spiritual life within them. Because you know what the outcome of that self-deception is? Eternal destruction and so, of course, we're going to screen people before they come into membership. It's for Christ and it's also for the sake of those who come.

Many people have been brought to realize that, "I'm not a true Christian by the fact that someone said, Please tell me how you came to Christ." And when they start to describe it, they start to stumble and they can't articulate thoughts and there is no clarity of the gospel. Well, that gives you a ministry opportunity to say, "Well, let's back up. Let's back up. Let's go over the gospel again. Maybe you're having trouble expressing the reality of your conversion because you haven't been converted." That's not an insult to someone, that's a desire to care for their souls. Do you see it? It's because we love Christ and we love people that we'll do it that way, not to be exclusive, not to be difficult but because the gospel and the Lord of the gospel are precious and souls are precious and souls are eternal and we can't be careless with the way that we handle them.

So as you see the process of membership starting to unfold in days to come, please understand that that's set up to honor Christ and to be a protection for everyone's souls so that the church in this local manifestation

would consist of true believers. And if you've never written your testimony, we'll help you. We're glad to do that. That's part of the privilege of church leadership. But you see, that when you understand the purpose of the church, you understand why things like that are done. When you understand who the church is and you realize that it's an invisible work, a spiritual work in the heart, that there have to be ways to assess that to protect the purity of church, the authority of Christ and the security of the souls that would come and look to our church for leadership. We're going to lead with pastoral care and love for the souls that come through the doors here. This is one way that we do it.

Which leads us into our third point here this morning. What is the church? Well, the church belongs to Christ; the church consists of true believers; thirdly, the church has spiritual leaders. The church has spiritual leaders. The church of Christ when you look at what the Bible says about it, is not a New England town hall meeting, it's not a pure democracy that simply lets everybody have equal voices on whatever they want to say, whenever they want to say it. No, God says that things should be done decently and in order and one of the ways that he establishes that decent order and structure to the life of his church is that he establishes leadership in the local body. Ask yourself this question: how does Christ lead his church when he's not physically present? How can Christ lead a people when he's not physically present to take care of the day-to-day operation of it, if you want to think about it that way? Well, he mediates his direction through men who are called elders who have teaching and leadership authority to build the church.

Look at Acts 20. We'll just look at a couple of passages here. We covered elder leadership when we taught through Titus 1 and if you have questions about what we're going to summarize briefly here, I'd encourage you to go back and download those messages or get the cds, we're happy to provide those to you at no cost. But Acts 20:28. Paul is speaking to the elders at the church of Ephesus as he's about to depart from them and he tells them as he's about to leave, he tells them and gives them a charge, an apostolic charge because he will no longer be there as an apostle and the weight of leadership is now going to fall on them and he says, "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." Elders shepherd the church. They guide. They lead. They feed the church. That's the responsibility that elders have. Notice as Paul is speaking to this group of church leaders back in the first century that even then when he describes the church of God, he calls it and defines it by that which Christ purchased with his own blood. So as Paul is talking to these church leaders about the reality of the church. He ties it in with the sacrifice of Christ which purchased those people with his own blood and he tells them, "You're the leaders here. You've got to shepherd the people of God. You have a responsibility to guard them and guard the flock and to give your life to that responsibility." Christ leads his church through men, spiritual leaders.

Look over at the book of Ephesians again. Ephesians 4. Paul says that Christ "gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers," watch this, "for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ." He's talking about the church. He gave leaders to the church to build up the church, verse 13, "until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ." Christ gives leaders to his church so that, and he tasks them with the responsibility to teach, to lead, to be examples so that the individual Christians that are within the realm of that local body are grown up spiritual, go from being a baby to a young man to a mature man. They grow spiritually by the impartation of truth, pastoral oversight and care and the instruction and admonishment that the Scriptures call us to. That doesn't happen in a town hall meeting where everybody has equal authority. Christ has set apart certain men in local churches to bear the weight of the responsibility to give that kind of direction.

Now, those men, no one walks into that office. Not everybody can be an elder. In his Scriptures, Christ has given stringent biblical qualifications that a man's life must meet over a long period of time before he's qualified to be considered for the office of an elder. You find those qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 and in Titus 1. We've look at them in the past and we won't repeat them here. Simply to say that part of the way that Christ himself has safeguarded the spiritual well-being of all of his people is that he's established leaders but the way that he protects the overall flock is that there are stringent biblical lifestyle character qualifications assessed and put on that man before he can ever approach the office. So that's the protection. Here's what I want you to see, beloved, the way that Christ protects his flock is he gives them men to watch

over them and he does it even more carefully, he says, "This is how you can recognize a man who's fit for that office." So a lifetime of character is necessary before a man ascends into that position of leadership.

That's the leadership, what about the people who follow? We need to look at this. It is the will of Christ for his church that church members respond to their leaders with a teachable and even using the word "obedient" spirit. Turn to the book of Hebrews with me, Hebrews 13. There is a full circle that we're going to go through here and there is a beautiful symmetry to life in the church that assures us the well-being of everybody involved. Hebrews 13:7, the writer of Hebrews says, "Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith." Follow your church leaders, in other words. Look at their conduct. Look at their life and follow after them who have been put in that position. Verse 17 states it in a different way, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you."

Let me say a couple of things about that. That spirit of submission is clear in what Christ has given to all of us to consider for the way life and the church is supposed to look. Now, let's address that for a moment. That might be unsettling especially in our culture that resists authority. Those of us that were raised on the idea of "question authority," we freely acknowledge that this is in direct conflict with the spirit of our age but Christ has established a beautiful symmetry in the life of the body to prevent abuse. Christ gives church leaders and he says, "You shepherd the flock." He goes to the flock and he says, "You submit to the leadership of that spiritual authority that's established in the local body." But then he goes even further and this is where it comes full circle and this is where when the biblical pattern is followed, there is no threat to anyone. There is no threat of abuse when the biblical pattern is followed because Christ commands church leaders not to lord their authority over the church but to care for the flock in humble godliness.

Look at 1 Peter 5. This is crucial. All of this is interwoven together, interlocked like the pieces of a puzzle. This is all woven together and if there is a breakdown on qualifications, if there is a breakdown on a spirit of submission, if there is a breakdown on the way that elders carry their authority, it is not going to be the pattern that Christ has set for his church and so all of these are of equal importance. 1 Peter 5¹, "Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed," so here's what the elders are supposed to do. We just saw from Hebrews 13 what the flock does, here's what the elders are to do and how they are to do it. Verse 2, "shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God," watch this now, those of you who are elders, those of you who aspire after the office of elder in the future, watch this, "not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory." Biblical leadership is given with an accompanying command from Christ, "Here is how you are to do it. Not for your own personal gain, not so that you can lord it over the people that are under your charge, but so that you can be an example to them and shepherd them with care and according to the will of Christ."

The church, we said, our third point here, the church has spiritual leaders and here's what I want you to understand, beloved, this is so vital and important: Christ gives authority to spiritual leaders in the church so that they can be a blessing to the church. Let me state this in a different way: elders are not given their authority to increase power for themselves. Elders are not given their authority so that they can build wealth for themselves or for their families. A pastor, an elder, whatever term you apply to a church leader, if he is truly a servant of Christ, is ever mindful of the fact that with his authority comes a great responsibility and he looks at that authority and he says, "That is not for my sake. It is not for me to accumulate power or influence for myself. I am given this authority," the elder says to himself, "the elder is given authority so that and for the sole purpose that he can be an instrument of Christ's blessing to the people around him." When elders hold their position from that perspective, there is absolutely no threat to anyone in the congregation, rather there is a sphere of security, a sphere of confidence that comes from the structure that Christ has instituted for his church. This is the way life in the body of Christ is supposed to work. Elders and church leaders are given their authority simply so that the Lord Jesus Christ who himself is the head of the church, can carry out his intentions to bless his people that are found in the church. That's it. It's not so that elders can lord it over, it's so that they can be a blessing. The spirit that Christ intends is

analogous to the fact that he calls us to submit to himself as part of his work and his plan and his will for us as a people of God that there be a spirit of submission that marks the life of the body as well.

Those of you that have come from churches where there's been that constant conflict, conflict between leaders and people, people against leaders, leaders against the people, all of this should sound like a fresh spring of water to you to say, "Ah, it's not supposed to be that way. It's not supposed to be about angry meetings and conflicts and self-aggrandizing men taking power and wealth and influence for themselves and for their families." It's not supposed to be that way and God helping us, it will never be that way at Truth Community. Just so you know, that's the intention of the hearts of your elders here. We're mindful of the threat. We've seen it played out. We don't want to go there. We just want to be what Christ wants his church to be and that means that elders have authority to shepherd, people have the responsibility to cooperate. That's the way life in the church is supposed to work.

Final point. Let's ask this question and then I'll give you the point: how do we know what to do? How do elders and the people know what to do as we go through life day by day, month by month, year by year? How do we know what to do? How do we live in the midst of this body that is called the church? Point 4, very quickly: the church is subject to Scripture. The church is subject to Scripture. The Bible is where Christ directs his church in detail. The leaders in the congregation are all subject to the authority of Scripture. Look at 1 Corinthians 14 beginning in verse 37. Paul is writing at the end of a very long letter that is very practical in its instruction to the local body at Corinth and by extension to local bodies throughout the universal church of Christ. Notice what he says here in verse 37, "If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you," the inspired apostolic writings in other words, the things that I write to you, "are the Lord's commandment." When we read the Scriptures, we're not reading the words of someone who lived 2,000 years ago ultimately. They are the words of someone who wrote 2,000 years ago but they wrote with divine authority so that their writings which are contained in the 66 books of Scripture are the commandment of Christ to his people. What we have in the Scriptures are the commands of Christ for his people.

One final passage that I want to show you. 1 Timothy 3, beginning in verse 14, Paul again. I'll give you just a moment to get there. Paul says, "I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; but in case I am delayed, I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth." What do we do as a church? We do just what we've been doing for two years so far, we open up the Bible and we read it and we study it and we teach it individually, collectively. On Sunday we come together and we pour over this word. We look through it. We study it. We think about it. We contemplate it. We meditate on it because, beloved, because we're part of the church and the church belongs to Christ and he has authority and he's expressed his authority in his word and in his word he tells us how we're to conduct ourselves in the household of God. And a church that is anchored in Scripture, consisting of people who have been born-again by the Spirit of God, true believers in Christ who are submissive to Scripture, with qualified leadership and of supportive people around that leadership, that church is on its way to becoming what Christ intended it to be. Beloved, that church is what we want to become at Truth Community. Want to join with us?

Let's pray.

Father, as individuals, it is a privilege to be a Christian and that privilege multiplies even more as we realize that we're part of a greater body which is the object of the redeeming love of Christ. We thank you for our Master, the Lord Jesus Christ. We thank you for where he has made his authority known in his word and we thank you for bringing us together to share in this kind of life together. We pray that you would bless the future of Truth Community, that you would give us such a heart commitment to follow Christ that whatever Christ says in his word would be that which is a glad law upon our hearts and consciences. Yes Father, make us what you want us to be. Thank you for calling us together. We offer ourselves to you and pray that now you would have your way with us as you continue to build your church both around the world and here in our own midst. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.