

What Is the Church?

Together in Truth

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Well, as we turn to God's word again this evening, we're going to continue the series that we're titling "Together in Truth," kind of surveying the primary doctrines of the Bible in a systematic way. We started with the authority of Scripture, we looked at the person and nature of God, we considered who Satan is, we looked at the creation of man and who man is and what sin is, and then we looked at the doctrine of salvation this past Sunday, and so we're making our way along, we're progressing rather rapidly and to be able to do all of this in a condensed version in about three weeks is a real blessing for us to be able to do. So the way that we left things off is that we saw the doctrine of salvation, we saw what it meant to be born again, to be saved, to be a Christian, we looked at that in detail, now that leads us into what happens to somebody that is saved in that they are made a part of the church. We are not saved individually but Christ saves us in order to bring us into a body of believers known as the church and that's going to be our topic for this evening. What is the church? What is the church?

Now there's a lot of confusion about this, you know, I grew up thinking about the church as the building on the corner where people met, maybe you did also. There are a lot of different organizations that claim the title of church but are all of them true churches, are they really what the Bible describes? It's important for us to have a ground for discernment in these matters as we study. Jesus Christ is the head of the church. He died for the church. That climactic event 2,000 years ago was done for the church, for the people of Christ. And so from God's perspective, certainly from the perspective of Jesus Christ, who the church is and what the church is, is a matter of utmost supreme significance and so it behooves us as believers in Christ to consider it carefully and to see what he has to say.

So tonight we're going to look at what is the church. On Thursday at 7 o'clock we're going to answer the question why does the church exist. Two parts to the question about the church in this series that we're going to do. I'll be honest with you, not that I'm ever intentionally dishonest in anything that I say from this pulpit, but I'll be transparent with you: I nearly left these messages off and didn't preach them because we have just covered so much on the church in recent months at Truth Community Church. About six months ago we were dealing with these very issues with much of this same material, and then even more recently we were dealing with matters of church unity from Philippians 2, and I thought, "Well, maybe I should just let this go since we've covered it all so recently."

But after interacting with Nancy about it, I thought, "No, let's just stay the course. Let's just do what we had. Repetition is the key to learning and it's a great opportunity for us to come back and to consider these things together."

You know, one of the things that I know is happening in the midst of this separation, this enforced separation that we are enduring right now, is that all of you that are a part of Truth Community Church are developing a greater appreciation for the fellowship of the body. You miss each other and I miss you. Absence here in this case, I'm sure, is making the heart grow fonder. Well, what we need to do is we need to take advantage of those sentiments in our heart and take a fresh look at the church and remind ourselves of what it is that we belong to in Christ and next time to see what it is that we are to be doing so that when in the Lord's timing we are brought back together, we are able to do so with a fresh sense of purpose, of understanding, and I trust with a fresh sense of commitment, and what I would encourage you to do in these times where you're away and you're missing people is to let that sense of longing for the people of God, longing to be in the assembly of believers together, my friends, I would just ask you to let it deepen your commitment to the church and to Christ. Maybe look at ways where you had kind of taken it for granted or neglected some duties and some opportunities in the past for earthly priorities, well, let this time where it's been taken away and creating a hunger in you make you step back and say, "Yes, you know what? I need to change direction. I need to modify the trajectory to commit myself better to that for which Christ himself died." And we consider those things here this evening as we answer the question what is the church.

Every individual who is truly saved, we saw last time, is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. We won't review that anymore than just simply to allude to that. When we are indwelt by the Spirit, he brings us into the body of Christ, into a broader corporate relationship, and we could define the church in this way to define it simply: the church is that group of people called by God and born of the Holy Spirit who are true believers in Jesus Christ. The church is that group of people called by God and born of the Holy Spirit who are true believers in Jesus Christ. The church is for true believers in Jesus Christ. Not everyone who names the name of Christ is actually a part of the church because they haven't really been born again. Again we remember Matthew 7, "Not everyone who says to Me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven." So as we talk about the church, we're talking about true believers here in what we're discussing this evening, those who are genuinely born again, not those who simply make a superficial profession of faith in Christ but don't really belong to him. To state it from a human perspective, they don't really love Christ, they're just interested in an outward association maybe, you know, trying to do things in a superficial way and they don't know anything of the new birth, of having been born again, of having utterly new affections for Christ and for his people and for his word.

You know, as we frame it in that way, it gives me an opportunity just to remind you and to encourage you to take a look at yourself and to take a look at your heart. You know, if you're consistently cold toward the things of Christ, that this isn't the dominating passion, Jesus Christ and his word are not the dominating passion of your life, there is serious reason for you to question whether you're really a Christian, whether you've really been

saved from hell and damnation yet or not because what the Spirit of God does when he saves someone is that he puts a love for Christ into the heart, it's part of the new heart that God gives, the new creation, puts a love and a desire for the word of God into a heart, puts a love for God's people, puts a desire for holiness into the one who has genuinely been born again. In the true Christian these are affections that matter, these are things that you shape your life around, these are the things that you desire most in life and whether I'm speaking to young people now or those of you older in the faith, older in the faith by which I mean you're just older in life and have been associated with the church for a while, I just encourage you as we look at these things to examine your heart. You know, it's so easy to make an initial profession of Christ only to find out that it dies out in the end and that it doesn't have a lasting impact on your life. Well, there's a word for, there's a verse for people like that in 1 John 2:19, "they went out from us but they were not really of us, because if they had been of us they would have remained with us, but they went out in order that it might be shown that they are not all of us."

You see, here's the point: a genuine Christian, someone who has truly been born again perseveres in the faith and Jesus warned us that sometimes people would hear the word of God, hear the Gospel and respond with immediate joy and immediate enthusiasm and they sprout up like a flower springing up in shallow soil, but they don't last, they don't last because it wasn't real, it was just an emotional temporary reaction under other influences that wasn't the mark of genuinely being born again. So for some of you, I have many faces in my mind as I'm saying this and I'm concerned for your soul, you know, I'm concerned that that initial display of interest in Christ, I'm concerned about whether it's lasting in your life or not. You've just given yourself over to things of the world and the things that you care about and devote your time to, and the things that you talk about, you know, let's be honest with each other, sometimes we find that the love of Christ and the love of his word are just things that are just not a part of your vocabulary, indicating that it's not a part of your heart, and if it's not a part of your heart, then how could you possibly share in the Holy Spirit who always produces these things in the hearts of those that he has saved. If you don't have those affections of the new life, what makes you think that you have the new life to begin with? And if you don't have that new life, then you are still in your sins and you are still lost and you are still under the judgment of God, and if you died tonight Christ would turn you away from heaven and you would be sent into the abode of the unsaved and awaiting only a resurrection of judgment and destruction in hell forever with the devil and all his angels.

Yeah, I paused to let that sink into you, that you would take these things seriously. Scriptures say that to be under the sound of the Gospel is a place of great accountability and I just encourage you and I say these things because I love you and because I care about you, for you to not take for granted your spiritual condition simply based on a past experience or a past profession you made. If there is an abiding sense of coldness and indifference and even sin in your life and some of you leading a double life, you know, I fear for your soul and you should too and I'm praying for you even as we go through these things. For those of you that by contrast do have an abiding desire for Christ and my heart lightens as I think of some of you by face and by name, think about you and your love for Christ and your earnest desire for the word, your desire to share Christ with

others, all of those things, well, this is a message that helps us, helps you and me understand what Christ has brought us into, into this body that is the church.

So as we think about the church, we need to be able to know what its aspects are. Those of you maybe that are thinking about church membership or you've applied for church membership in the recent past, well, I just want to encourage you with these things. Before we join a church, we should be able to know what the church is and what the church is about. It is not a human social club, in fact, it is not a human institution at all in the ultimate sense, and that's what we're going to see as we look at four aspects of the church as we answer the question what is the church in tonight's message.

As always, as always we should start with the Lord Jesus Christ and our first point for tonight is that the church belongs to Christ. The church belongs to Christ. This is a central foundational matter of great importance and whenever you're talking about theology as we're doing here in these three weeks, you should always find Christ rising up in the center of any doctrine that you're talking about. When we studied the authority of Scripture, we based it on the authority of Jesus Christ. When we talked about the nature of God, we talked about the nature of Jesus Christ, he who revealed God in human flesh. And as you think about Satan, well, Christ is the one who bruises Satan on the head and strikes down Satan in the end, and he is the Savior of sinners. And so there is just this Christocentric reality to every aspect of true theology and that's especially true when we consider the nature of the church. So whenever you're thinking about theological issues, the question that you want to make a beeline to, where does Christ fit into this, and not think about biblical truth apart from Christ because Christ said, "I am the way and the truth and the life." And as we think about it in those terms as we answer the question what is the church, we see first of all that the church belongs to Christ.

Now Jesus himself said in Matthew 16:18, he said this, he said, "I will build My church." He makes a promise that he is going to build this body of believers and he will build it over time certainly, he says that that is what he is going to do, but what I want you to be mindful of in tonight's perspective is that he calls it "My church," that the church belongs to him, the personal possessive pronoun indicating that the church belongs to him and not to anyone else. It's exclusively his. And if you think about it, it could be no other way and let's just give a little brief example here, a little brief illustration. If you go to the store and you pay money for a bag of groceries or you go to a car dealer and buy a car, you pay the price for it and then in exchange for that price you own what you purchased. Those groceries are yours. The title to that car is in your name and you pay the price and you take ownership of it. Well, friends, do you see that that's what Jesus Christ did with the church when he died for his people at the cross? Titus 2:14 speaks about this. Titus 2:14 says that Jesus Christ "gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds." Christ gave himself for us to redeem us, to purify for himself for his own possession. You see, Christ did this in order to purchase a body of people for himself. Christ paid the price for us and therefore we belong to him, and speaking in terms of the church, the church belongs to Christ because he paid for it. He owns the church by right of redemption. He paid for it, therefore it belongs to him.

Now in a more extended passage, I'd invite you to turn to the book of Ephesians 1:20-23 as we see the glory of Christ and we see him as the head of the church here. Here in Ephesians 1:20 it says that God "raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, 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. And He put all things in subjection under His feet," here we go, "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. He is the chief officer in the church, if you will, if we can put it that way, and he purchased the church and therefore it belongs to him.

Now what we find as we think through what that means is, is the church is his possession, he purifies for himself a people that are zealous for good works. As we think about the church, there are three marks of a true church that we can consider under this heading here. First of all, a true church that really belongs to Christ is going to preach the true Gospel, the pure Gospel, the Gospel that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, based on the authority of Scripture alone, to the glory of God alone. That summary of the true Gospel, grace alone, faith alone, is central to a true church because this is how every single person must be saved, they are saved by the grace of God alone and they receive Christ by faith alone. They understand that they did not merit salvation, they forsake any claim to good works and they are simply resting on Christ alone to be the fullness of their salvation and to deliver them from sin. Well, that's how a person enters into the church, well, a true church is going to be marked by those kinds of doctrines, by that kind of teaching, and one of the things that you see is that not everyone, therefore, that claims to be a church is a church. There are a lot of institutions of deception that put the label "church" on what they do but they do not teach the true Gospel of Jesus Christ. They do not teach in accordance with a Gospel of Ephesians 2:8-10, for example.

So while they claim the name of the church, they are not a true church because they do not teach the true Gospel. This would apply to all of the mega churches that preach their happy message of moralistic therapeutic deism, I know I allude to that a lot but it's only because it's such a dominant influence in what passes for the church broadly speaking in America here, and we need to understand that that's not the true Gospel and therefore the churches that are basing their message on that are not true churches. And so you can't simply be a church by claiming to be a church, we have to ask the question what is the doctrine that you teach, what is the message that you preach, what is the Gospel that you preach. Those churches that preach without any message of repentance from sin and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, they're not real churches because Christ is not the head of them. Those churches that are built on ritual and external things like that, this is not the spiritual reality of the true church. A true church is marked by, 1. the pure Gospel; secondly, a true church is marked by the practice of church ordinances found in communion and baptism; and thirdly, a true church is marked by purity in that there is an exercise of church discipline, that open sin is not tolerated in the body, that there is a confrontation of sin that takes place, a loving rebuke that takes place when members fall into sin.

All of these things are a mark of a true church, the pure Gospel, the practice of the ordinances and purity expressed in church discipline, and when you consider what we read in Titus 2:14, you see how it has to be that way. Christ redeemed us, what's the message of the Gospel, it's the message of redemption, how Christ actually does that, and the fact that the emphasis there is that Christ purifies a people for his own possession indicates that there should be a sanctifying influence that is at work in the body of a true church; that there is a church that loves holiness, that proclaims the importance of holiness and sanctification, the importance of repentance. And beloved, when you enter into a place where those things are just absent over the course of time, it doesn't matter if it's a Baptist church, a Presbyterian church, an Assembly of God church, none of that matters that they call themselves a church if those things are absent because they are leaving out the very essence of why Christ purchased his church and the means by which he does it through the preaching of the true Gospel.

So what we see here is that the implications that Christ is the head of the church, it goes everywhere. Christ commissioned his apostles, the apostles who recorded and brought to us the 27 books of the New Testament as we have them in English, all of these things are indicative of the fountainhead source of the authority of Christ and therefore the true doctrine that the apostles taught must be the mark of a true church. If that is consistently neglected, if that is contradicted, you're not in a true church and if you're not in a true church, my friend, you're in a position of great great danger. And so that's why we focus on Scripture so much, is that Christ is the head of the church and he mediates his authority through his word.

So what is the church? Well number 1, the church is a body of true believers that belongs to Jesus Christ. Secondly, we can say this, is that the church consists of true believers. The church consists of true believers, that was part of our definition, and we're going to use the word "church" in this point in two different senses. We're going to talk about the church with a capital "C" and church with a lowercase "c." Church big "C" church and little "c" church, and you'll see what I mean by that in just a moment. All true believers belong to the church with a capital "C," the Church of Christ. This is sometimes called the universal Church. And I read from 1 Corinthians 12:12 and 13 earlier, let me read those verses again here. In 1 Corinthians 12:12 and 13, it says this, "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." Here we go, "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." Every true believer is brought by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ. This is sometimes called the universal Church indicating that there is this invisible aspect to the true Church that every true believer belongs to this universal Church because every true believer has been born again by the Spirit and therefore is brought into union with Jesus Christ and therefore belongs to the body of Christ. So the Church consists of true believers.

Now this word "church" has another usage in Scripture, church with a small "c," we could say, church with a small "c" simply indicating a reference to local assemblies, a local visible body of believers. Truth Community Church is a local church, small "c" in

that way. We're not the only true church, there are many true local churches that belong to Christ and so we are one among many in that sense, but Scripture uses this term "church" to refer to local assemblies in a geographic location.

So for example in Galatians 1:2 Paul refers to "the churches of Galatia," plural, the churches of Galatia. There were numerous churches in that region and Paul was writing a letter to go to the individual assemblies of those local believers in that region back 2,000 years ago. Similarly in 1 Thessalonians 1:1, you see Paul referring to "the church of the Thessalonians." There was a local assembly in the city of Thessalonica there. It could be called the church of the Thessalonians, using the word "church" in a different sense than it is used to talk about the Church in a universal sense incorporating all believers, here we're talking about churches in a particular geographic region, the local manifestation of that universal Church. And that shows us something, that shows us something of great consequence, it shows us that Christians in a given locality are to gather together, they are to assemble together and to be part of a broader body of believers. God never intended, God never intended for people to be Christians in complete and utter isolation. You know, you'll hear people that talk about they worship God in their own way, they go out and they want to be in nature, they want to be in their deer stand or their beer stand for some of other consequences, again, that's another matter altogether, but they claim and they profess that they worship God on their own and they worship God in their own way and they don't need anyone else to worship God with. Well, that is a complete contradiction of the New Testament. The New Testament assumes that individual believers will become part of a local assembly where they gather together with other believers.

Let's just follow this train of thought just a moment here. If we're thinking about this individual in his deer stand off someplace claiming to be a Christian but having no involvement with a local church at all, well, how is he going to obey the "one anothers" that are found in Scripture: love one another, bear one another's burdens, pray for one another, confess your sins to one another. How can you do that in isolation? How can you do that by yourself if there's not another there with whom to do that with? You see, it's a false claim, it's a false understanding of what it means to be a Christian, and someone who has no use for the local church at all is somebody who has every reason to believe that they are deceived about the reality of their salvation.

Charles Spurgeon, that great Baptist preacher from the 19th century put it this way and I quote, he said, "I believe that every Christian ought to be joined to some visible church. That is his plain duty according to the Scriptures. God's people are not dogs that they might go about one by one, they are sheep and therefore they should be in flocks." So individual Christians are truly a member of the invisible body of Christ, this universal Church, and they are to be part of a local church, an assembly of believers in a geographic location.

Now I realize for some of you that are watching in extended areas outside the region of Truth Community Church, we welcome you, I'm so grateful for your involvement and that you desire the word of God like this, I realize that it's challenging for some of you,

you're in regions where it's very difficult to find a church that preaches the true Gospel, that takes the word of God seriously and embraces the things that we're talking about here today. I realize it's hard for you. Some of you are at a physical position, a chronological age in life where it's just very difficult if not impossible for you to get out and be involved in a local church like that. Well, I know that Christ has mercy on those of you that are in that condition and you can trust him for that and we're glad that you can share in this aspect of it, the fact that you're consistently joining in for teaching like this shows where your heart is even if you don't have that opportunity. And so our prayers are with you as you contemplate and as you hear these things, we realize that as we're articulating these principles of Scripture, that the application of them for some, your circumstances make it difficult to live it out as fully as you would like, you know, and the reality of it is that here in these weeks that we're separated, even here at Truth Community Church and so many others like us around the country, we're not able to gather together in this temporary time like we would like but we're still an assembly of believers looking forward to that time when we're able to gather together again. So I just say that word of encouragement. I realize that for some of you, you know, your options are just nonexistent and I just encourage you to somehow find other believers, somehow, somewhere that you can fellowship together with and to share in these things together in a face-to-face way that would be a reflection of what Scripture calls us to do as Christians are called to serve one another and minister to one another even as you're waiting for God to bring you to that local body that would be a better expression than you found so far to date.

Well, what is the church? The church is a body of believers, it belongs to Christ, and it consists of true leaders which means that not everyone that shows up at a church is a part of the Church. There has to be that inward reality of having really been born again to be a true member of the Church. Without that, you are not part of the Church. If you've not genuinely been saved, you're not eligible for membership in a true church because the true Church consists of true believers and so a person who has no love for God, no love for Christ, can't walk into this building off of Mount Carmel Tobasco Road and say, "I want to be and I insist on becoming a member of Truth Community Church." It doesn't work that way. There is a prior spiritual qualification: you have to be born again, you have to be a part of the universal Church before you can be a member of a local church, a true local church, and that's why in our membership process we require people to give a written testimony explaining how they came to know Christ; that there is some manner of credible evidence in their lives that they have truly believed in Christ and there is an ongoing impact of the Spirit in the work of sanctification in their life that would show that they've really been born again, and so that's why in our membership application we require people to give a testimony. We are trying our best in our fallible human judgment to have some basis to believe that someone has actually been born again before they're admitted into membership into the local body of believers.

Now I've seen people take offense at that, I've seen people take really rabid offense to that and that's okay, the Lord handles those things in his own way, I guess, but we need to understand as a body, as Truth Community Church, to refresh our minds and to understand why we do this, why it is that we do this. First, it's preeminently because the

church belongs to Christ and therefore membership in the local church is reserved for those individuals who truly belong to Christ. This is part of the purity of the church and if you don't belong to Christ, then you don't belong to the local church, and conversely then, those who truly belong to Christ have a place in the local church if they are manifesting something of an obedient life in response. So we screen membership applications looking for a testimony of true conversion and when that is seen, it's our delight to work with people and hopefully to be able to welcome them into membership as we have with so many of you. So the church belongs to Christ, the church consists of true believers. Let me repeat that again: the church consists of true believers.

Now that brings us to our third point here today and it is this, is that the church has spiritual leaders. The church has spiritual leaders. It is the intention and the purpose of Christ to mediate his leadership in the church, to mediate his headship over the church to spiritual leaders. You could ask the question this way: if Christ is the head of the church, how does he lead his church when he is not physically present? How can Christ exercise authority over his church when he's not physically here to do it? And that's a very important question to answer.

We'll look at a couple of scriptures here. First of all, I'd encourage you to look at the book of Acts 20 beginning in verse 28, and I'll get there myself here momentarily. Acts 20:28 where the Apostle Paul speaking to the church at Ephesus and more specifically speaking to the leaders of that church, the elders, he says this in verse 28, 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."

Now let's take a moment and reinforce the things that we've already seen here. The church of God, the church belongs to him and the reference there is to Christ as shown by the fact that he immediately says that he purchased it with his own blood. Christ is the one who died for us. The church belongs to Christ. We see it right here. Secondly, we see that his possession, he purchased it with his own blood, that's what we were just talking about, and now here as we consider the fact that the church has spiritual leaders, you see that Paul is speaking to the elders and he says that he made you overseers. You are to oversee the work. You are to provide spiritual care for these people for whom Christ died, to shepherd them and to look out for them and to teach them. This is what the spiritual leadership of a church is supposed to do and we see here that there are individual men, there is a group, a plurality of men that are responsible, uniquely responsible for that leadership in the church.

You see a similar theme expressed in Paul's words in Ephesians 4, beginning in verse 11, and I would encourage you to turn there. Ephesians 4 verses 11 through 13 where it says this, again speaking about Christ it says that Christ "gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers," and what's the responsibility of these men, these pastors and teachers? What is their responsibility that Christ has given them to the church to do? Well, verse 12, it's "for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; 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." Jesus Christ mediates his care for the church, he mediates his leadership and authority over his church through men who are called elders or pastors, teachers, sometimes people use slightly different terms for this but there is this recognized body of men who are responsible to take care of the church, and Christ exercises his care, his love and his authority over his people in that way in the context of the local church.

So these men who are called elders have teaching authority in the church, they have leadership authority in the church, and it is the expressed will of Jesus Christ that his people respond to their leaders with, their elders, it is the will of Christ that his flock, his sheep, that Christians would respond to their leadership in the church with a teachable and obedient spirit. A teachable and an obedient spirit.

The book of Hebrews in chapter 13 makes this very abundantly clear and we need to turn there for just a moment. Hebrews 13 toward the back of your Bible after all those letters of Paul. Hebrews 13, we see a couple of different verses here that are important for our consideration tonight. Hebrews 13:7 says, "Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith." Then in verse 17 he says in the context of the church and the ministry of the church he says in verse 17, "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." So Scripture says it very plainly, I didn't make this up but it's still my responsibility to emphasize what Scripture emphasizes, that there is this sense in which members of a local church are to respond in a submissive way to the leadership of their church. That's why God put them there.

Now I understand that in our day and age and in our culture, that that is perhaps unsettling for a culture that resists authority and that is very individualistic in its mindset, and let's be honest with each other here, some have suffered at the hands of people who abused their positions of spiritual leadership and understandably they are slow to embrace this, they are reluctant about this because they have been burned in the past by it, and what we need to do is to not shape our approach going forward based on our past experience but rather to shape our attitudes going forward by what Scripture calls us to do. So this is the line of Scripture, there are elders with authority in the church and that authority is to be respected and honored by the members of the church.

Now one of the wonderful aspects, one of the things that I love about the church, about the doctrine of the church and about this doctrine of church leadership is that I love the beautiful symmetry that is in place by Christ in regard to these matters. These elders that God appoints, they do not have independent authority and they are not to use it in an abusive manner. All kinds of qualifications and directions are put on the elders for the way that they are to exercise their position. First of all, there are numerous qualifications, personal and teaching qualifications and character qualifications, home qualifications before a man is ever recognized as an elder. You can find those in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. We've studied them in the past. But not just any man can become an elder. A man can't just say, "I want to be an elder," without regard to what his life is like and what his

character is like and what his teaching is like. Christ, as it were, screens men before they become elders so that they would somehow approximate his own care for the people that are placed under their authority.

Now beyond that, beyond the fact that there are preliminary qualifications for elders, there are a couple of other really crucial points. Christ warns men who would be elders, men who aspire after the office, he warns them in James 3:1 to understand, "Let not many of you become teachers because as such you will face a stricter judgment." So someone with the fear of God in him looks at the office of elder and trembles at the thought, trembles at the thought that there will be a stricter account required of him as he exercises this role; as he serves in this role, God will hold him to a stricter account than someone who never held that office before. There are times where that makes a guy like me tremble in fear, to be honest with you. It's sobering to realize that you'll give a stricter account as a result of having held the position.

So there are qualifications, there's this warning of a stricter judgment to take place, and then Scripture also has specific commands for elders in the way that they exercise their care and we need to look at this in 1 Peter 5 and then try to pull all of this together. 1 Peter 5, beginning in verse 1. 1 Peter 5, beginning in verse 1 where the Apostle Peter calls himself a fellow elder and he says this to the position, to those men who hold the office of church leadership known as elders. 1 Peter 5:1, "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," here's what you're to do if you're an elder, "shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and 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 so there are a lot of negatives and positives in this passage indicating how an elder is to think about what he is to do. You should not do it under compulsion simply because you've been asked to do. It's an office that an elder should embrace voluntarily, something that he wants to do and that he undertakes gladly for the sake of Christ and for the sake of his people. It's something that should be done not for personal benefit but with eagerness, with a ready and willing spirit to be able to carry it out. And tonight for the purposes of how elders are to exercise their authority, I really want to emphasize verse 3 that elders are not to lord it over those allotted to their charge. They're not to exercise things in a heavy-handed, bossy way that emphasizes their position in a way that subjugates the people that are in the church that are members of the church.

I visited a church one time on the East Coast in the state of Maine, I won't get any more specific than that. One of my daughters was with me and we were on a little trip and so on Sunday morning we went in to visit a church so that we could worship on Sunday morning hopefully with some fellow believers. Well, the pastor got up and he was making some announcements and it was chilling, it was utterly chilling what he had to say. He was announcing a prayer service that was going to take place later in the week and he made the announcement and he said this to his flock, he said and I'm not endorsing this but this is what he said, this is almost verbatim, he said, "As the God-appointed leader in this congregation, I am not asking you to come to that prayer service,

I am commanding you to come." Then he went on and said some other things. I wasn't a pastor at that time as I recall, maybe my early days at Grace Life, but this was many years ago, 10-15 years ago or more, and I just heard that and man, that just clanged off my ears in a very painful way because it is a manifestation of lording it over the flock, and to speak that way to a flock entrusted to your care that you're supposed to love and shepherd and feed, well, the spirit of what he said there certainly seemed to be very much at odds with this passage here in 1 Peter 5. Maybe I caught him on a bad day, maybe he's much different in other aspects, but that one manifestation of that, the spirit of that was sure a violation of 1 Peter 5 and lording it over and trying to command and give directions like that. That is not the spirit of church leadership.

So I like to put it this way and if I had the opportunity to speak to a group of potential elders or church leaders, I would want to make this point early on and to emphasize it with them. Men are given authority in the church for a specific reason. Church leaders have authority so that – watch this – so that Christ can carry out his intentions to bless his people through them; to bless his people found in the church, God gives authority to men, gives authority to elders so that they can exercise a protective function for the flock, so that they can feed the flock in the matters of God's word, so that they can love the flock and care for them in their times of distress, that they can rejoice with the flock in their times of rejoicing, that they can pray with the flock in their times of discouragement and despair and spiritual need. You see, this is why God gives authority to elders is so that they can carry out those aspects of love and care and instruction for the flock, going back to Ephesians 4, that they might be built up in Christ, that they might come to maturity, that they might know something of the love of Christ that is mediated through the hands of very imperfect men.

So when we put all of this together, we see that the church has spiritual leaders and that members are supposed to submit to that leadership, but that is not just a blind submission, it is based on men who satisfy, approximate the biblical qualifications of elders and that exercise that authority in the spirit in which the New Testament says that it is to be done. A true elder is not on a power trip. A true elder looks up at Christ and in a love for Christ wants to minister to the people of Christ and at the same time recognizes that his authority is not for his own benefit, for his own posture before men, but it's simply to be able to have the position necessary to make sure this care is dispensed over and through to the people of God.

So my counsel when people are new to our church, sometimes people are new to our church and they're very excited and they want to become members right away. I never encourage that. I always tell people to wait because what you should do as you come to a new church, is that you should take your time to observe and to see what the church is like over the course of time; to hear the teaching, to compare it with Scripture and see if the teaching is consistent with what you believe, and also have opportunity to, you know, as you're able to do, to interact with the elders to get a sense for them and whether you believe that they are men who are trying to lead in accordance with biblical principles in the spirit and in the love of Christ, and then and only then once you have a sense of comfort about that, then and only then should you seek to pursue membership in a local

church whether it's here or anyplace else, we're making a broader point far beyond Truth Community Church here this evening.

But what we find is this as we kind of step back and all of us come into this together: the church belongs to Christ, it consists of true believers, the church has spiritual leadership in place, and so we step back from this and what I want you to see is this, let's go back for a moment, let's remember how it is that the church came into being. Christ purchased the church with his own blood. The Spirit of God came in Acts 2 and launched the church and manifested his presence in those with his mighty acts in Acts 2. Then we had the apostles setting forth doctrine and teaching and preaching, establishing the church and then everything is built on what they did after that. Well, these are magnificent, holy, noble purposes of God that are at work here and if the church belongs to Christ, then this means that you and I, you and I should have a sense of respect for the church because it's not ours. The church is not mine. The church does not belong to a group of influential families in the church. The elders don't own the church. It's not like that. The church belongs to Christ and he purchased it with his own blood. We are here as stewards. We belong here as true believers and yet we recognize that we are participating in something that belongs to our Lord and Master and therefore we treat it with respect. We are careful to preserve unity in the church as is so often commanded in Scripture. We are committed to serve and to be a part of it and to exercise some kind of commitment to the body that Christ has called together. So to become a member is a serious thing and what you do with that membership afterwards is a serious thing because it is a reflection of what Christ has done for the church and our response to Christ and our obedience to Christ is reflected in our attitudes and our participation and our service and our love and our faithfulness to a local church. So these are matters that have a lot of significance and I know, I realize that when I say that I'm kind of cutting against the grain again, a predominating spirit of American Christianity, but we don't want our cues from the culture, do we? We don't want our cues just because a church is big, we want to go to Scripture, see what it says and then line ourselves up with what the Bible has to say about things.

Well, let's just go to our fourth and final point here very quickly. How is it that the elders and the people in a church, how do they know what to do? How do they know what the church is supposed to be like? That brings us to our fourth and final point: the church is subject to Scripture. The church is subject to Scripture and this is a place where in a different time, with a different level of animation, there would be places where I would want to overturn a few tables in different locations on this very point. There are a lot of self-appointed church gurus who would be happy to tell you how to build your church, and you just buy their books and use their materials and buy study materials for your people to spread about. It's quite a racket really, and you know, you go and there are prominent pastors who post their sermons online, preach these sermons, and this is really bad. This is really bad to have that element of human authority and prominence of a single man outside a local church setting the agenda for a local church. That's not good. The church is subject to Scripture. Jesus Christ directs his church through the Bible, the Bible he has given to his people so that we would know what he wants his church to be like. In 1 Corinthians 14:37 and 38, it says this, "If anyone thinks he is a prophet or

spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you," the Apostle Paul, "the things that I write to you are the Lord's commandment. But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized." The written word of God recorded for us from the hands of the apostles, this is Christ's commandment for the church. This is where we find what we are to believe, what we are to do, what we are to teach. It is found here in Scripture. Christ has made his will known for his people in his word. And in 1 Timothy 3:15, verses 14 and 15, the Apostle Paul said this, "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." Paul says, "I have written to you so that you would know how to conduct yourselves in the church of God."

So beloved, if something is in the Scripture and intended for this New Testament area in which we are living, we are to obey that. We are to follow that. But we are not to add things to this. The fullness of Scripture is sufficient for what Christ wants from his church and we are not to add things to that and treat them as essential to worship or on an equal plane with Scripture, or anything like that. We don't get to make this up and make it what we want it to be. We are under the authority of Christ because it's his church, and we are under the authority of his word so that our spirit, our approach, our philosophy is this, okay, we've come together as a body of believers in Jesus Christ, and I'm just speaking at a satellite view of the church and outlining the very fundamentals of philosophy about how a local church is to think and operate. The church belongs to Christ. Individually we are believers and so we are a part of this. We become members of a local church and then we ask the question, "Well, what are we to do and what is this supposed to look like?" Well, then we go to God's word and God's word tells us how we are to conduct ourselves in the household of God. That has implications for men and women in leadership, men are to be elders, women are not. We are to teach Scripture, not our own opinions and on and on we could go. So the church is subject to Scripture and, beloved, that includes not only the members but it includes the leaders of the church as well. We are all under the authority of Scripture. Christ has expressed his will for the church in the Bible and that is to rain down and to set the tone for everything that is underneath it, and so we are always looking to Scripture to justify what we do, and we are submitting to Scripture as we go about it.

So what is the church to do? That's for next time but for now we simply recognize the authority of Christ's word in Christ's church and recognize that we are to follow it.

So how important is the church? I like what the theologian Bruce Milne said and I quote, he says, "It was God's love for the church that brought Christ to Calvary, hence the measure of our conformity with the mind of Christ will be the extent of our concern for the church." Christ laid himself down for his people, gave himself up for them. Somehow as true Christians that's reflected in our attitude toward the church as well as the mind of Christ our Savior controls our hearts and rules our minds in everything, as we sing in that wonderful hymn.

So this is the church. Next time we'll , together and answer the question why does the church exist, what are we to do. I hope you'll be back with us on Thursday at 7 o'clock for that important companion message.

Let's pray together.

Father, we just commit these things to You and as a body of believers at Truth Community Church we thank You for bringing us together, we thank You that Jesus Christ died and rose for us and that atonement for our sins is found in Him and Him alone. I pray, Father, that You would work these things out in our minds and in our midst to accomplish Your will. Thank You that You've brought around scores and scores of people who share in these priorities, who share in a desire to see Christ honored in the ministry of a local church. I pray that You would bless us as we go forward, Father. And Lord, as we make that prayer, tonight I would just ask You as we look forward, going forward in the months and in the years to come, Father, I just ask You in my own voice but on behalf of the many people that are associated with our church, Father, we ask You for a work of Your Holy Spirit amongst us. We pray that You would give power to Your word as it goes out sanctify Your people in the truth. We pray for the power of Your word to be manifest by the Spirit in the hearts of unbelievers that come to our church, and to bring converting saving power upon their hearts. Father, for some they look at their own flesh and blood and see them in rebellion and in godlessness and indifference and, oh, how it aches their heart and wounds them to see these things, Father, that their own flesh and blood is cold and indifferent to these things. Father, I pray for those in that position and I pray for those that are in rebellion against You and, Father, we ask You for a work of Your Holy Spirit upon hearts and upon parents and upon siblings, that You would work through everything that is godly and everything that is related to Scripture to bring converting power to bear upon these ones that You know and, Father, that we love. Father, have mercy on us and we pray, Father, that You would renew us as the people of God and renew us in our own desires for sanctification and godliness. And Father, for those that are lingering outside the body of Christ, Father, we beg You, we ask You, we emphatically pray to You asking You to do a saving work in hearts, Father, to bring them and to extend Your mercy further and to reach Your hand of mercy out further to bring them into the flock of Christ. So Father, we ask You to do that which we don't have the power to do on our own but we pray, Father, for the salvation of many to be manifested in the months to come as people come forward testifying of the saving grace of Christ in their lives. So Father, do that for us because we cannot do it on our own and we ask these things in the name of Christ and for the love of Christ. Amen.

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