

Title: The Marks of a True Church, pt.1
Text: 2 Timothy 3:16- 4.5
Theme: Right preaching and belief
Series: Reset, refocus and renew, fall 2020
Prop Stmtnt: Preaching God's Word is an indispensable mark of a true church

Read Text:

I had (and still have) nicknames for my kids and I think that I had them picked out by the time each of them were 2 or 3 years old. Not long ago, I mentioned to one of them, that in view of the fact that they are considerably older, that I would resist calling them by that nickname since it may make them feel slightly embarrassed. Wow! I could not have been more wrong. The response was immediate. "Dad, you had better always call me that." I had no idea of how meaningful that was and the fact that it meant so much was very touching and humbling.

I want you to consider some of the names that God has given to the church. Each name is a beautiful part of a glorious painting. We are, "the bride of Christ" (Eph 5). We are a building held together by the Spirit (Eph 2.20 and 1 Peter 2.5). We are a temple (1 Cor. 3.16; 2 Cor. 6.16; Eph 2.21). We are living stones, a spiritual house and a holy priesthood (1 Pet. 2.5). We are the salt of the earth, a letter from Christ, the family of believers and the family of God. But, the primary names that we are called are: the people of God, the new creation, the fellowship in faith and of course, the body of Christ.

The people of God is a term used by both Peter and Paul that has strong OT roots. Peter uses this term to encourage the young believers who were facing persecution in order to help them see themselves as being separate from the world. The world is persecuting you. You feel out of place. You are not at home, nor at rest but this is not the end of the story. You are the people of God. God is forging you into one. You are a single temple, made up of living stones, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief Cornerstone. This is a reality that cannot be destroyed.

We are also called, the new creation. The resurrection of Christ ushered in a new dimension in God's plan. Paul said that Christ "*was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.*" (Romans 4.25) This is the imagery behind the statement that Paul makes in 2 Cor. 5.17. "*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!*" This is not just a game-changer, this is an eternity changer. When you realize that you are a sinner whose sin has offended God and grieving over that, you trust in Christ alone for the forgiveness of your sins, you are, in that moment, placed into union with Christ. You are in Christ and Christ is in you. You are bound to Christ eternally in a union that is sealed by the Spirit. It's unbreakable. This reality is yours because in this union you not only receive credit for his life (righteousness) and his death (atonement), you get credit for his resurrection. Already you have eternal life. Already you are a new creation. Coming to faith in Christ is the ultimate new start or start over. This is a new beginning that is from the inside out and it points forward to the kingdom of God. Every genuine Christian is part of this new creation that will literally involve a brand new creation (Revelation 21-22). In the new creation, we will live perfectly with God and under the rule and reign of God. The church is to point to that by practicing now how we are going to live then.

The church is also the fellowship. This is inherent within the word, church, which means gathering. We are a plurality of people in a unified fellowship. This was a major emphasis in my message last week and is underscored over and over by Christ in his prayer in John 17.

And finally, the church is the body of Christ. 1 Cor. 10.17 speaks of this in relation to the Lord's table which I will address next week and Eph 3.6 speaks of Jews and Gentiles being one body. But, think of the weight of what Christ said to Paul when he was on the road to Damascus and Christ hijacked his life. Christ said, (Acts 9.4) "*Why are you persecuting ME?*" Wow! Jesus takes it personal when his people are being persecuted because his people are his body. This is part of the reason why he feels our infirmities. He carries our sorrows.

Therefore, since the church is that important to God and that personal to Christ and the means that God has established to reveal himself, to make the gospel visible, to spread the gospel and prepare for the coming kingdom of Christ, then it is absolutely essential that our churches be true, biblical and healthy. How we think about our church really matters. What we practice, what we teach, how we function, how we prioritize, how we protect, even promote are all very important because the church is so very important to God. Do not believe the lie that your life doesn't matter. You are part of a body that is entrusted with the greatest mission in the universe.

But not every "church" is a church. What makes a church a church? What are the irreducible minimum evidences or marks of a NT church? There are two: the right preaching of God's Word and the right practice of the ordinances. This morning let's remind ourselves of the importance of right preaching. The right preaching of God's Word is an essential mark of a church because of the nature of God's Word.

I. The nature of God's Word

A. God's Word creates life.

In the beginning, God formed man from the dust of the earth, but man was not alive until God breathed into him and man became a living being. In John 11, Jesus stands at the tomb of Lazarus without medical equipment. He speaks, "Lazarus, come out!" Lazarus has no other choice but to come. The word of the Lord that creates life controls that life and all life, as the disciples observed that even the winds and waves obey his voice.

The prophet Ezekiel was part of the Babylonian captivity. Separated from his land and temple, with his home and people overrun and nearly destroyed, he is right to wonder, what hope is there? My nation, my people so full of rebellion and unbelief and now nearly ruined, what is going to happen? In chapter 36 God says, I am going to make a new covenant. This time I will not write the covenant on stone, but on hearts. And then in chapter 37, God gives Ezekiel a preview of the power of this new covenant when he sets Ezekiel into the middle of a valley that was full of bones. It appeared that a major battle had taken place years ago, and now the bleached, dry bones of soldiers were all that remained. It was a vast and eerie setting of death and then God says to Ezekiel, "preach." Preach to the bones. Preach the Word of the Lord to the bones. Tell them to hear the word of the Lord. And Ezekiel in defiance of all logic does exactly

that, and as he preaches the bones start to come together and form people. God's new covenant is going to create a new community of people and he is going to do that through the preaching of the gospel. God's Word is so powerful that it creates life.

Romans 10.17 says that faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. "And how are they to hear without someone preaching? (Roman 10.14) Preaching seems like an antiquated method of communication. God could have waited for YouTube and Instagram to send Christ. But God sent him before pictures, movies, TV or internet. God does not need technology to improve on his message. His Word is so powerful it can create a universe out of nothing. God's Word can cause the dead to come alive. God's Word can restore marriages and break generational patterns of sin. God's Word can break addictions and give joy. God's Word gives life. Paul said to Timothy that "*from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*" He uses the faithful proclamation of his word. It's really that simple. It is not powerful preaching, it is faithful preaching of the powerful word. Because God's Word creates life, the preached word creates the people of God. No word? No church!

B. God's Word (Spirit) creates the church.

Do you see how this fits together? The preaching of the Word of God creates and forms the people of God. That is how the church started in Acts 2. God's word creates physical and spiritual life. God causes you to be physically and spiritually. You hear his Word with your ears, and the Spirit causes your heart to hear it, that is the Spirit gives you spiritual life that convicts you of your sin, causes you to love and believe in Christ and trust in him alone for your forgiveness. The gospel that Jesus died for you is now your only and your greatest treasure and delight! This is the doing of the Spirit of God through the Word of God. God's Word makes you a believer and makes us the church. All of the names that God causes us (intro) are real because God has said it and what God says, he causes to be. His Word makes us, defines us and empowers us to live this way.

C. God's Word grows the church.

The gospel that saves is the same gospel that grows us. When I say grow, I am speaking of maturity. God's word forms Christ in us. God's Word, heard, understood and applied makes us look like Jesus. Jesus prayed, "Sanctify them through your word, your word is truth." (John 10.17) In Eph 5.25 Paul says that "*Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.*" The word causes the church to become more and more beautiful. The other day I was in a business where the TV had a daytime talk show on. It was pretty obvious that the hostess had been seeing the plastic surgeon with an emphasis on plastic. This text is the ultimate beauty treatment. The Word of God will make you look like the most radiant and beautiful being in the universe. But, how so? God's Word, rightfully understood, helps you know what forgiveness is and how you can be completely forgiven. God's Word, rightfully understood helps you know how you can forgive others. God's Word not only informs you of that, but God's Word empowers you to do it. Every one of you have been sinned against.

Of course, you have also sinned against others, but let's talk about the fact that you have been wronged. God's Word has so much to say about forgiveness and being willing and ready to forgive. It is not cheap forgiveness. It is a weighty matter. But, if you are a follower of Christ, God gives you the perspective on forgiveness and he empowers you to do make that promise and keep it and as you do, you look like Jesus. And together we look more like Jesus. Therefore, one of the marks (indicators) of a true church and what is essential for a healthy church is the faithful preaching of God's Word because God's Word will give us all that we need to live a godly and holy life. 2 Tim. 3.17 says that it will make you competent and equipped for every good work.

Recently there was a lady whom we have had the privilege of counseling her from the Bible. By her own admission she said that this was different. Her counselor just kept going back to God's Word and asking her, what does God say about that? At first it was a little maddening, but over time the Spirit took the Word and did surgery in her heart and helped her address her issues at the core. The change was remarkable. That's the nature of God's Word.

II. **The content of God's Word.**

The right preaching of God's Word is going to point to Christ and the gospel. That is how Jesus interpreted the OT. He said that it was about him, so that is how we are to understand it as well. He is the hero of the Bible because only Christ can save us. So, the point of preaching is not 7 steps to a better you, better marriage, etc. It is to faithfully point you to Christ as your Savior, your strength, your love, your delight and your future glory.

God's Word teaches us about God, about ourselves, how to grow, about the church, about our world, and about eternity. All of that is what the Bible calls sound doctrine. You need to know that, so that you will believe it, embrace it, delight in it and order your life by it. It is all there for your good. Now, here is why the right preaching of God's Word is an essential mark of the church. God's Word tells us a lot about a lot of things, but there are some things that are emphasized more than others. The reason being, we need that emphasis. We need to hear those things a little more than other things. All Scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable.

I need to preach the entire Bible (not just my favorite parts) because you and I need the entire Bible. We need teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness. We need it all, therefore the church needs to preach it all. Since we need the entire content of God's Word, we should practice a form of preaching that is designed to expose us to all of God's Word?

III. **The preaching of God's Word.**

A. **God's Word is from God (3.16)**

We do not add to it, subtract from it or change it. Therefore,

B. **God's Word is authoritative. (4.1)**

It is to be declared. The gospel is not something we do, it is what Christ has done, therefore the gospel is what we proclaim. The gates of hell cannot prevail against the church because hell

cannot withstand the Word of God. Beloved, we preach God's word authoritatively because it is authoritative. The substance of God's Word determines the tone of preaching.

C. God's Word is defining. (v.2)

- i. Reprove/reproof – do not believe that!
- ii. Rebuke/correction – do not do that!
- iii. Exhort/training in righteousness – do that!
- iv. Teaching – believe that!

God's Word gives us necessary categories. This is what marriage is and this is what it isn't. This is how a person comes to God and this is how they don't. This is what a follower of Christ looks like, this is what they don't look like. This is how a husband is to treat and care for his wife. This is what a Christian mom looks like. This is how a Christian responds to an unfair situation. This is what a church is, this is what it isn't. This is what worship is, this is what it isn't.

In order to develop those categories with clarity, balance, and charity, we believe that the best way for that to take place is through expositional preaching, which is not what I am doing in this series. In this series on the church, I am preaching topically. I am addressing the topic of the church by defining and defending that from a variety of passages in the Bible. That can be helpful and is necessary at times. However, we believe that the regular preaching diet for the people of God should be expositional, meaning preaching sermons where the main point of the text is the main point of the sermon. And preaching through entire books of the Bible. Faithfully preaching through the Bible will address all four of those categories in a balanced way. But, when you do that, you run into topics that are controversial and would be easy to skip over, but faithful preaching does not allow you to do that.

D. God's Word is convicting (and therefore, controversial) (vs. 3-4)

E. God's Word is forever.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And God said, "Let there be light, and there was light." And God said, "Let there be an expanse between the waters." And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place." And God said, and God said, and God said. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Your word, O LORD is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens. The LORD said to Moses. Then the LORD said to Joshua. The LORD said to Gideon. The LORD revealed himself to Samuel through his word. The word of the LORD came to Elijah. Elisha said, "Hear the word of the LORD." This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD. And we have the word of the prophets...and you will do well to pay attention to it. Above all you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. The unfolding of your words gives light. Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard

through the word of Christ. Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And we have the word

You have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does, prospers. Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus I give you this charge: Preach the Word! For all men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the LORD stands forever. And this is the word that was preached to you.

503 years ago yesterday, Martin Luther began a call for the reformation of the church. This call led to a recovery of the Word, which led to a recovery of the gospel, which led to a recovery of preaching, which led to a recovery of the church. It is our tradition to sing “A Mighty Fortress is our God” to remember and renew.