

The Church is a Pillar

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[0 : 00] Tonight we're going to begin a short series about the church, and the title for our series is The Church in Pictures.

And the reason I've called it that is because if you look at the New Testament you'll see that there are lots of pictures that are used to describe what the church is like. In fact, I was looking into this and I discovered that there's one author who's written a book which identifies 96 different images for the church in the New Testament.

Now I'm not quite sure if there's as many as 96, and you'll probably be very relieved to hear that this is not a 96-part series. But it's definitely the case that the New Testament does use various images to help us understand the nature and purpose of the church.

We're going to look at five of these. We're going to say that the church is a pillar, the church is a farm, the church is a body, the church is a mother, the church is a bride.

Some of these might be quite familiar to us, some of them maybe not so, but they're all important in shaping our view of the church. And that's a crucial thing for us to think about because throughout our history the Christian church has been greatly harmed by two things.

[1 : 20] The church on the one hand has been misunderstood by people outside her, but on the other hand the church has also been misrepresented by the people within her.

And for both of those reasons, whether you're a Christian or you're not or you're not sure, it's immensely important to have a clear biblical understanding of what the church is and what God wants the church to do.

So we're going to begin tonight and we're going to turn together back to 1 Timothy chapter 3, and we're going to focus especially on the words of verse 15, but I'll read verses 14 to 16. I hope to come to you soon, but I'm writing these things to you so that if I delay you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.

It indeed we confess is the mystery of godliness. He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory. Now if you read the letters of Paul, one thing that you will discover is that very often in writing about a particular topic, he'll just throw in a tiny comment here and there.

[2 : 47] And yet these tiny comments, which are often just tagged on to the end of what he's saying, contain a huge amount of important teaching. And there's a clear example of that in this chapter.

In the passage which we read, Paul is outlining the qualifications for leadership in the church. This is the chapter that gives the outstanding counter-cultural description of what good leadership really looks like.

Part of the reason why Paul is conveying that information to Timothy is because he's conscious that he might be delayed in getting to him, as you can see there in verses 14 and the beginning of verse 15.

And then at the end of all that discussion, in the second half of verse 15, he just throws in this tiny comment about the church.

He says that the church of the living God is a pillar and buttress of the truth.

[3 : 49] And these seven words are our focus tonight. Imagine you're at work tomorrow morning with a neighbor or a friend or meeting people in your community and they asked you, how was your weekend?

And then you replied, well, it was great and I went to church. And then they said to you, what's your church like? Could you describe it for me? What would you say?

How would you describe St. Columbus? Well, there's lots you could say. You could talk about worship. You could talk about being a community. You could talk about singing, about family, about friendship, fellowship.

All of these things are true. But would you say to that person, well, my church is a pillar and a buttress. The buttress of the truth.

And yet Paul is saying that's exactly what our church is meant to be. There's an awful lot that we could look at here. I just want to focus on three simple things.

[4 : 49] In this phrase, we are being taught a lesson about Christianity. We're being taught a lesson about our church and we are being taught a lesson about ourselves.

So first of all, then a lesson about the Christian faith. The lesson that we're being taught here is that at the very heart of Christianity, there is one absolutely crucial principle.

The truth. At its core, Christianity is a quest for the truth.

So Christianity is a worldview. It's made up of words and statements, doctrines, prophecies, historical records and promises. In other words, the whole Christian faith is grounded on a vast amount of data and it seeks to present various pieces of information to humanity.

But in presenting all of that information, Christianity is not saying, here's a pathway for life which might be true. Here's an outlook that might be helpful.

[6 : 02] Here's a philosophy that could do you good. Christianity is not saying that. Christianity is saying, here is the truth.

That is a body of information which if it's not true is worthless, but if it is true, then it is the most important message you will ever hear.

Biblical Christianity has no interest whatsoever in being a maybe. It has no time for the idea of being one truth among many. Its goal is not to inspire or fascinate or even astound people.

Its goal is to tell the truth. And that means that everything Christianity says is absolutely worthless if it's not true.

And that's not me saying that. Paul himself says that. That famous statement in 1 Corinthians 15, if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.

[7 : 16] In other words, your religion is pointless if it's not true.

And that concern for truth is seen throughout the whole Bible. You go back to the Old Testament, you'll see that there's a firm prohibition against false witnesses. There's a constant concern against false prophecy and there is an absolute abhorrence for anything that falsely claims to be God.

And the same concern for truth lies behind this letter that Paul wrote to Timothy. If you go back to chapter 1, you'll see that that's one of the key themes of this letter.

Paul is telling Timothy, he says, I've left you in... When I left, when I was going to Macedonia, I said to you, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith.

The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law without understanding either what they're saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.

[8 : 36] Paul is utterly opposed to speculation or to made up stories or to teaching that is contrary to what the gospel says. And the reason for that is that as far as Paul is concerned, this all comes down to a question of the truth.

If the gospel is true, then anything which contradicts it is false. That's why if you read on into chapter 4, you'll see that when he talks about those who've wandered away to the false teaching, he describes them with a very pointed word.

He says that they're liars. And of course, that should make perfect sense to us because all of this is bringing us back to one of the most basic presuppositions of Christian theology, which is, only certain stuff is true.

So Christianity is one of many different worldviews that you can hold. Derek spoke a little bit about this in the morning, and I don't want to repeat what he said, but a worldview is just simply a way of understanding the universe.

He has one, whether we realize it or not. We all look at the world around us and we have a certain way and a certain framework of understanding it.

[10:02] So in order to think about worldviews, the minute I get into anything complicated, I need pictures to help me. So here are some pictures of four very popular worldviews.

So number one is the naturalistic worldview, which basically says that all of reality starts with nothing, is then a machine, which is a closed box, and then it ends with nothing.

So nothing, machine, nothing. And we're just a bit in that machine. The next one is the pantheistic worldview, which is much more common in Eastern religions, which basically views the whole of reality as kind of bound up with the divine.

And instead of being a kind of linear existence where there was a beginning point going to the end, life is more like a cycle, and you have the whole idea of reincarnation and all of that and kind of oneness with nature and God and gods and all that kind of stuff.

There's kind of this cyclical worldview on reality. The other one, the next one is the mystical worldview, which basically has the physical world in front of us here, which we're part of, but then above us there's this kind of mystical realm of reality.

[11:21] That stems back from the, really from the Greek philosopher Plato and others who saw the physical world as a reflection of a mystical reality.

And that mystical reality was where real truth was found. And so there's this kind of physical, spiritual, earth mystical kind of worldview.

And then you have the biblical worldview, which is grounded on the fact that God is creator and we are His creation. And from that, we find our purpose.

We find the one to whom we are accountable. We find the reason for which we have been made.

Now, I don't want to go into these in any more detail.

What I simply want to highlight is that Paul's basic presupposition is that only one of them is true.

And that's because they're incompatible with each other.

[12:28] They can't all be true. And so your force to a choice, truth, forces you into a decision as to what your worldview is.

Now, I would hope that all of us would be in the bottom corner with the biblical worldview. But even within that biblical worldview, there can be differences of opinion.

There can be differences in terms of how we understand the creator-creation relationship. Here's more pictures, I'm afraid.

So here are three different approaches to the biblical worldview, to the creator-creation distinction.

First one's a staircase. It's the idea that a relationship with our creator is based on working our way up to him.

But we have to impress him with our works or by what we do or by adhering to certain standards.

And variations of that approach are found in Islam, Judaism, and many Christian heresies.

[13:38] That idea, we have to work our way up to God. The middle one is a smiley emoji, which is basically trying to depict the fact that people can view our relationship with our creator in terms of the fact that God basically allows us to do whatever we want, because ultimately we're all saved, we're all fine.

That's an approach to Christian theology based around the concept of universalism, the idea that everything's fine. God will put it all right. There's nothing that we need to worry about.

We can do what we like. God owes us salvation. He'll forgive us. That's his job. And there are other Christian theologies that use that approach to God.

The final option is a relationship based on love, a relationship of privilege and responsibility, a relationship grounded on commitment, cost, and grace.

And Paul's great concern, again, is that only one of them is true. The first is a relationship based on people who are scared of God, and they feel they need to impress Him.

[15:01] That's not the gospel. The second is based on a God who is scared of people in the sense that God has to keep us happy and let us do whatever we want.

That's not the gospel either. The third is based on a God who loves his people so much he will die for them, but who also expects us to love him so much that we will live for him in a committed, meaningful, beautiful, real relationship.

That is the only one that is the gospel. Now, I'm going to say something that's possibly going to get me sacked.

You'll find the first two of these in Judeo-Christian religions, you'll find them in various sects and unusual Christian heresies, the idea of working your way up to God or the idea that you can do

whatever you like.

You'll also find number one and number two in the free church. Loads of people think that we have to work our way up to God.

[16:32] And then at the other extreme, loads of people think, I'm forgiven, I can do what I like. Neither of them are the gospel.

Only one is true. Paul is telling us, reminding us that the gospel is not the message of a brutal slave master who we must impress.

That was part of the reason why he opposed these false teachers. They were saying to Timothy's congregation, you can't get married, you have to abstain from certain foods, you've got to do all this stuff to impress God. Paul is saying, no, God is not a brutal task master.

But equally, the gospel is not the message of a pathetic God who needs to indulge us for fear of our reaction. God is not brutal, neither is he spineless. He is holy and compassionate, righteous and kind.

And the gospel is the message of the creator rescuing his creation from death through the blood of Jesus Christ on the cross.

[17:43] Or as the words of verse 16 describe it for us brilliantly, Jesus was manifested in the flesh vindicated by the spirit seen by angels proclaimed among the nations believed on in the world, taken up in glory.

This is the truth that Christianity claims. It is a message of propositional, factual, objective, empirical, unchanging truth.

But we need to just pause there for two minutes because we live in a culture that has big problems with all of this.

The idea of exclusive truth claims is not popular. So for many people in our culture today, the truth has become trivialized. It's no big deal.

Don't think about these things. For others, truth has become relativized. So what's true for you might not be true for me. It's all relative.

[18:42] But I think that most of all today in our culture, truth has become mysticized. So if we go back to our worldview diagram there, which one would you say is most popular in Scotland?

If you were to look at that. Now, our instinctive reaction might be to say, well, it's the naturalistic one because everybody believes in that kind of atheistic, naturalistic worldview.

I don't think that's the most popular worldview. I actually don't think I've ever met a pure naturalist who thinks that we're just cogs in a meaningless machine or I've maybe met one or two.

Nobody can actually live with the outworking of that. So I would say, and I'm not an authority on all of this, but this is just my own opinion. I think that the most popular worldview in Western culture just now is the mystical one.

We are living in a generation of mystics. Although I'm not sure that people are really aware of it.

Now the reason that I'm saying that is because the culture around us makes truth claims by means of mystical statements.

[20:03] Now, what do I mean when I say that? Well, if you look at the big questions that society is facing just now, if you look at the difficult issues that are on our table, issues of equality, issues of rights, whole question of Brexit, question of gender, in all of these situations, what we tend to see is that the final claim is made in mystical terms.

So people will talk about equality on the basis of their dignity. People will talk about rights on the basis of being themselves.

Politicians are, I think, possibly the greatest mystics of all. They love to use terms like better, stronger, worth, humanity, will.

A great illustration of this came from good old Boris Johnson who was talking about Brexit and he was being interviewed and I saw it just on the BBC News website.

He was being asked about how he was going to sort out the backstop and all that kind of stuff and everything else. The reporter was asking very specific questions and he said, the most important thing is that there is now a lot of positive energy to get the job done.

[21:28] That is mysticism at its best. Now, I'm not saying that to have a go at Boris Johnson. He's not been in long enough to judge, I suppose.

I honestly have no idea who I would vote for if there was a general election tomorrow. I think I would vote for Derrick, actually. That would be my first choice for ex-prime minister.

Or even better, Katrina. The point is all of these things, positive energy, better, stronger, dignity, they're all mystical terms.

No one ever explains what they mean. No one knows what they mean. What is dignity? What is better? What is my humanity? What is positive energy?

What is being myself? We have no idea. There's nothing concrete, empirical, factual or verifiable about what these statements mean.

[22 : 27] And yet, these are the final realm of appeal. These are the conversation stoppers. These are the unquestionable truths.

And we are already at the point where the mystical is more real than the physical.

Because biology is being trumped by identity. Investigation is being dominated by ideology.

Debate is being crushed by dignity. That's where we are as a culture.

But do you know that it's nothing new? Paul recognized the very same thing in the false teachers at Ephesus.

[23 : 24] Back in chapter one, he said, these people make confident assertions about things that they do not understand. The mysticism of today is full of confident assertions about things that I really don't think are properly understood.

All of this has led us to the point where the truth is now something that we declare. So we declare the truth.

And the person who shouts the loudest is the one whose truth gets listened to. But in reality, truth is never something we declare.

Truth is something we discover. Whether that's in a scientific laboratory or in a court of law, in a research degree, in a medical diagnosis, the great aim is to discover the truth.

I know somebody who last week had to go to hospital with a kidney stone. And they were in severe pain. And imagine the doctor had come in and said, well, I don't really know what to do, but the most important thing is I've got a lot of positive energy.

[24 : 45] I think the poor person writing in agony would have said, forget your positive energy and fix my kidney stone. And it's the same in any other situation in life.

We need the truth. Christianity is no different. And its claim is that the Bible is where the truth about life and death, about God, and about humanity, the Bible is the place where that's discovered.

That is not a trivial or relative or mystical matter. It is a life or death question about the truth.

We have been reminded in these verses that Christianity is all about the truth. We also learn a lesson about the church.

And the lesson that we're learning is based around the imagery of construction, in particular the images of a pillar and a buttress. Those are things to do with supporting a building.

[25 : 56] So you can see pillars here. And this building is a great example of pillars that are holding up the roof, holding up our church building. A buttress is usually an external reinforcement to a wall.

There's some very clear examples of it just down the road in St. Giles Cathedral. You can see pictures there. The bits that are kind of sticking out, like pillars sort of stuck to the wall. They're there to hold the building up.

Pillars and buttresses support and keep the building stable. Paul is saying that the church is a pillar and buttress for the truth.

Now, that should immediately strike us because it seems as though it's the wrong way round. We tend to think that the church is, that the church stands on the truth.

So we imagine of God's truth as our foundation. The church stands upon it. And that's true. That's a biblical image. Paul says in Ephesians that the church is built on the foundation of apostolic teaching.

[27 : 01] So we tend to think that the church stands on the truth. But Paul is saying it's the other way round. He's saying that the truth is held up by the church.

And I think using that imagery, Paul is emphasizing to us that if the Bible is presenting the world with the truth, then the church is the place where that truth is being held up for the world to see.

The church is the place where the truth is proclaimed. The church is the place where the truth is lived out.

So just like a pillar and buttress holds a building up for the world to see, so too the church is holding up the truth for all to behold.

I want to just say three or four things about that very quickly. Number one, stability. A pillar and a buttress brings stability to a building.

It keeps the building up, secure, consistent, and stable. And the church's role is exactly the same. It's to be an environment where the truth of the gospel is held up.

[28 : 12] If we believe that the Bible is presenting us with unchanging truths, then we want to hold these truths up with unshakable stability. It's a great reminder that there's a wonderful unchangingness about the Christian church and its message.

Now, by that, I don't mean kind of unhelpful traditions where the church refuses to change and refuses to do anything different. That's a different thing altogether. What I mean is an unchanging, uncompromising commitment to the truth of God's Word.

If you look at that pillar right there, okay, when do you want that pillar to stop doing its job? The answer is never.

It needs to always, always hold up that roof. The church is exactly the same. We are to consistently hold up God's Word as a stable pillar and buttress of the truth.

That's why we don't for one moment agree with the idea that the Bible is no longer relevant or accurate. That's why we treasure our historical heritage, stretching back 2,000 years.

[29 : 23] When we read from the New City Catechism, question 31, we recited the Apostles Creed. That is about 1,800, maybe even 1,900 years old.

It's a statement of what the Christian church believes. We are reciting that Creed because we're saying we believe exactly the same stuff because only one message is the truth.

If you think about it, what's the worst thing that a pillar can do? Worst thing it can do is move because if that pillar moves, that roof comes down.

When it comes to the theological, propositional truth of God's message, we are not moving.

We want stability. Secondly, pillars and buttresses give us confidence. If you have strong pillars, if you have stable buttresses, it gives you confidence to use them.

[30 : 31] You could all pile up into that balcony confident that these pillars are going to hold you up. Paul is implying to us here that the church should give people confidence in God's truth.

If you look at that pillar, it's strong, it's stable, it gives you confidence to go and stand on that platform. The church should do the same thing with God's truth. It should give people confidence in God's message.

Yet tragically, the church has repeatedly done the very opposite. In every generation, the church undermines rather than reinforces people's confidence in the truth.

The reason that happens is because the church detaches itself from God's truth. That's what was happening in Ephesus with these false teachers. That's what can happen with us.

We need to stay firm. We need to stay connected to the truth of God's word. Third thing we have is usability.

[31 : 35] That's obvious. The pillars in this building make the building usable. That's one of the great truths, great purposes of the church to make God's truth usable.

In other words, the truth of the gospel is not some secret knowledge that's to be kept tucked away. It's knowledge that's to be used. It's the information that is the most useful piece of knowledge that you will ever encounter.

And the church's role is to hold that up so that you can use it. And what are you going to use that knowledge for? What can you use that knowledge for?

You can use it to find peace. You can use it to take away the burden of every single mistake that you've made.

You can use it to obtain hope. You can use it to remove the fear of death.

[32 : 44] You can use it to gain eternal life. You can use it to know God himself. Now that is useful knowledge.

So as a pillar in the truth, we are to give stability, confidence, usability and forth to bring a presence to God's truth. When we think about a pillar, it's easier to think about something static, motionless, passive, and that as a church we're just to stay very still.

But that's true in one sense. But in terms of reaching out into the world, that's not true because a pillar and a buttress actually performs a vital role in bringing a presence to the world around us.

In other words, as a pillar and buttress of the truth, the church is doing a mission work because the pillars in this building mean that this building is present so that the thousands of people who walk past on the royal mile every year can see it.

And the church performs the same role with God's truth. We are to stand in a world that desperately needs to hear the truth and say, here it is as pillar and buttress, God wants the church to hold the truth stable, to give people reason to be confident, to make God's truth usable, and to keep the truth ever present in front of people who need to hear it.

[34 : 14] So we need to learn a lesson about Christianity from this passage. It's all about the truth. We also learn a lesson about the church, that its role is to hold that truth high and secure.

Lastly, and very, very briefly, we learn a lesson about ourselves. Every time we study what the Bible says about the church, it's vital that we remember that when the New Testament speaks about the church, it's not speaking about a building.

It's not speaking about an organization. It's not speaking about a denomination. It's not even speaking about ministers and leaders. It is speaking about people.

It's speaking about God's people. That means that the pillar and buttress of truth in 1 Timothy chapter 3 verse 15 is you.

You are the ones who hold up the truth of the Christian faith. This is the duty that we are all part of.

[35 : 22] And there's just one thing I want us to focus on here. If you look at that pillar, sorry that I keep pointing you to that pillar, but it's there.

At what point is it not holding up the balcony and the roof? The answer is never.

So as you go into this week as a Christian, at what point are you not holding up the truth of God's message?

The answer is never. In every part of our lives, we are to function as those who are holding up the truth of the gospel.

That's why the fact that the church is a pillar and buttress of the truth needs to shape the way we behave. And that's reinforced so clearly in the instructions that Paul gives in this letter.

[36 : 21] He says, overseers need to be above reproach. Deacons must not be double-tongued or dishonest. Their wives must be faithful. Widows must not be gossips.

Servants must be honorable. All of that is because the truth of God contained in the Christian message should be seen in the integrity, honesty, and consistency of the lives that we live.

And that makes perfect sense because the truth of God's message, if it's true, should have a profound effect on us.

It should humble us because it shows how tiny we are before the God who is king of ages, immortal, invisible. It should make us gentle because Jesus himself displays his perfect patience to us as an example.

It should make us compassionate because the world around us is full of precious, broken people, and God desires that all people would be saved. It should make us self-controlled because we're capable of hurting others.

[37 : 32] It should make us generous because we do not need to love money. It should make us truthful because Christianity is all about the truth.

As you go into this week, you are a pillar and buttress of the truth, and you might be the only one that the people around you will ever see.

Imagine people were talking about you and saying, what's that person like? Imagine, imagine they said, do you know that guy or that woman?

She's a pillar and buttress of the truth. By God's grace, that's how I want to live my life.

The church is a pillar. It's a pillar and buttress of the truth. As we close, there's one final thing to say.

[38 : 38] If you're not yet a Christian, you need to ask yourself the question, where is the pillar and buttress of truth in your life?

Let's pray. Father, we thank you so much that in you, we find the truth.

Please make every one of us a pillar and buttress of that truth as a church and in every part of our lives.

Alright.