

# Picture of a Church

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[ 0 : 00 ] So, if you're able to, you'll turn back with me to Romans chapter 16, the last chapter of Romans. This is the last in our series. We've been preaching in the morning through Romans.

We've had a couple of breaks. And this is the last one. Someone mentioned last night to me that the first one that was preached was Cori's last Sunday. So, that gives you a timeline for when we began it.

That wasn't yesterday. So, it's amazing to think we've taken, gone through and I guess you could take a lot longer. This chapter itself could be the theme of many sermons.

But can I begin just with a point of trivia for you this morning? I've preached from this chapter every six years that I've been here.

Okay? I preached it in May 2001, in December 2007, in June 2013 and now for the fourth time in March 2019.

[ 1 : 08 ] Now, that either means I'm a wester because I'm preaching old sermons or it's important and each time it's been a new sermon, which it is in that sense.

I haven't just gone back to my old notes. And I always think that's significant, isn't it? Maybe it's a great thing if God grants me another six years, I'll preach it in six years' time, whatever that might be.

But it's a timely reminder to us, isn't it, of being a Christian. It's a great way to end a series. It's a timely reminder of why you being a Christian, why you being part of Sint Seas or whatever church you belong to, matters to God.

And if you're not a Christian, there's a great challenge there as well, obviously, in the message and in the need to consider that. It's a great reminder of why we matter to each other and why we matter to God.

Now last weekend I was in Burghead and I was preaching there for morning and evening and supporting a young guy who's there, a church planner. He's a church worker.

[ 2 : 20 ] He's not yet an ordained minister. He's studying down here as well. He's got five kids. His wife works. So we've arranged to go and help support him by preaching every so often.

But he's going through a series on Timothy, 1 Timothy, and he wanted the preachers that are coming when he's not preaching to fit in with that schedule. So last week I was preaching from 1 Timothy chapter 3.

And in verse 15 of that chapter, there's a great description of what the church is. And I'm going to use that as a framework for looking at this chapter. If 1 Timothy 3.15 says, Paul is speaking to Timothy, he says, if I'm delayed and Timothy's a young church leader, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God and the pillar and foundation of the truth.

So there's three descriptions there of the church. It's God's household. It's the church of the living God and it's the pillar and foundation of the truth. And I'm going to use these three descriptions to tie in with this chapter here, which is also speaking about a real church, the church in Rome, and see what the living God, through the Holy Spirit, has to say to us.

So we have a picture here of a great picture of a church, and we're a church. And God's given us this picture.

[ 3 : 47 ] And the first thing he says is, or the first thing that Paul says in Timothy that we see here is that it's God's household. That's a great description of this chapter that we've read together.

It's a lovely description. So there's this description of the church as a family with God as the Father, or to use another image, Jesus Christ, as the head of the body.

God is the Father. And that helps us to understand what the church actually is, is God's household. And it's to be a picture of a household that's led by a God of love.

And there's a relationship of love as we fulfill his commands to us. So internally, we see it here in the church. This was a church that was a family together, and they were battling together for the gospel there was different races, different classes, different genders, or two genders.

There was couples, and there was single people, there was families, and you've got a list of them there in that chapter that we read together. They were going through testing, they were persecuted, there was hard work.

[ 5 : 01 ] There was equality and humility and friendship. Paul was an apostle, but he regarded some of the older, or at least one of the older women who were very treated like a mother.

So there was this family atmosphere between them, a covenant family. There was unity, therefore, and diversity. There was people who were united in Christ, but we were all different.

And the whole idea of being a household together was very important so that it was structure and authority and purpose, but also great love.

Great love for one another, great looking out for one another. You know how it should be in a family, and how the ideal family is. Now I know that sometimes that's not the case with families, but we're looking and considering what a family in human terms should be under God, but also how that relates to what we should be as a church.

And I don't apologize for stressing the metaphor of the family. It's a really important metaphor, and it's an increasingly important metaphor as we grow, because it's harder to be like a family.

[ 6 : 09 ] We're not an institution first, we're not a business, we're not a club, we're not an organization. God describes us here as a family and their implications, so that we can greet one another with the cultural equivalent of a holy kiss.

Now you can decide what that is. But they had this greeting and they had this family connection with one another, and that is, they were God's household, and that reflects how we should think of one another, look out for one another, care for one another, and recognize the structure of God as Father, both internally.

But that also had an external element to it as well, not just within themselves, but if you see in verse 2, they talked about the church in St. Crea, and then in verse 4, it talks about the greetings from all the other churches, and then verse 16, it talks about the greetings that come from other people in other churches, and then in verse 22 and 23, it speaks about different people who bring their greetings from where Paul is writing this letter, even the guy who wrote the letter himself.

Tertius. So they're a God's household, but they have church cousins, and that's important too.

This is a model of a proto-presbyterian church, okay, let's not get into ecclesiastical structures, but in other words, they weren't isolated, they weren't simply inward looking and saying, it's all about us, and it's just about our own individual church.

[ 7 : 51 ] We already see that there's a communism going on, okay, a small sea. There's a communality, there's a desire to help and support and love and pray for one another, similar to what we try to do within our denomination, but maybe more specifically we see it in the relationships in the links we have with the church plants, and also with other churches beyond our denomination in the city.

That's why it was so good for me to be able to go up and help Peter in Burghead, because there's that sense of communality. There's that link that we have with other churches, both locally and internationally, with Suraj, with Russell, we'll hear tonight from Rob Krause, who's staying with us, who's a church planner in Italy, who you heard, he spoke here probably, I couldn't believe it when he said four or five years ago, and we have links with him and with his work, and from Memphis and from the states and from the partnership that we have with churches there.

There's this great external sense of being a universal household, if you can call that. We are a house, but we live in a street, okay?

So we are focused on what we're doing, but we don't forget our biblical and Christian neighbors. So it's a God's household. It's also the church, to use Paul's second illustration from Timothy, which we can apply here, it's the church of the living God.

So what you're already beginning to see, it's the church is God's household, and it's the church of the living God. So we sometimes talk about our church, my church, and there's truth in that, but the reality is that when we come together, we have a higher authority and a higher fatherhood and a higher belonging, and the church is the church of the living God.

[ 9 : 59 ] And that's very important because it reminds us that we are a people together, a family together, who worship and serve a living God, and who read His living Word, and who seek to be those who are vibrant and alive spiritually in our lives.

And we help one another when we're struggling with that, and we all struggle. Isn't that a terrible thing if you come to church and the gathering of God's people and you come out bruised or broken further, or feeling even more isolated, or uncared for, or disinterested in?

It is to be that place of vibrant living and caring concern where we embrace one another in our needs, and where the strong support, the vulnerable, and the tired are helped by the refreshed, and where we come together and recognize the diversity of our experiences as we do so.

It's the church of the living God. We are a living organism. And here in this chapter, Paul speaks about the worship that went on, living worship in the house, greet also the church in their house. So the church was in different houses. And in verse 25 to 27, it speaks about the importance of mission and reaching out with the gospel and the preaching of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[ 11 : 30 ] In verse 5, we hear about someone who was the first convert in that church. And so it was a worshipful, vibrant church that was growing with people who were coming to faith in Jesus Christ.

They worshiped together in groups. They worshiped in different homes. The church wasn't the building. The church was the people. They proclaimed Jesus in word and indeed.

There was a vibrancy about that. And so in our own church, we seek to have that vibrancy of living worship. And that comes from each of us as we are gathered recognizing that we come in a public sense into the presence of the living God, not by coming through the doors, but with our motives and with our heart and with our intention to worship together.

And we recognize the model of church together and church divided into our small groups, into the city groups, just like the church here had many homes that they went to and worshiped in.

And in the city groups, we see them. We need to see them as important because it's impossible for just big church together. And we're not a big church, really, but we're bigger than some other churches, I guess.

[ 13 : 01 ] And when it gets beyond any certain size, it's difficult, isn't it, to be intimate and to know people and to be involved with people. And it's easy to be anonymous and it's easy not to be involved and not to be part of it.

But the city groups, the small church, there's more of a danger there, isn't there? There's more of an intimacy. There's more of a vulnerability. But that should also be a good thing.

Condensed church, church close together in family. And I think it's important for us to see these city groups as more than just midweek Bible studies, place of community, a place of small church, of family, accountability, service, mission, flexibility.

Church of the living God in worship and in mission. And we seek to be a church. I'll come back to that at the end just about mission and evangelism.

And we see as a church of the living God, it was a place of sacrificial workers. You see this great list of people here in verses 1 to 16, really.

[ 14 : 12 ] How many times work is mentioned? Five different times Paul is greeting different workers, fellow workers, hard workers, those who worked hard in the Lord.

Those who worked very hard, the partners that were involved in this church of the living God together, this household of God. And now the 26, nine of these are women that are mentioned, important, significant women within the church who were partners with Paul and who were partners with others.

Paul saluted them, saluted the women who were so significant in the church. And I salute the women in the church. I've never known a church or a city group that could survive without the significant involvement and the often undervalued work of women in the church and their leadership, their informal teaching, their example, their wisdom, their knowledge, their hard work, their care, their hard work in love, in being loving men and women together as we recognize that and children.

So when we speak about hard work, we're not speaking about legalistic service. We're not speaking about ticking boxes and showing yourself to be putting in the effort.

It's the work of love. And that is hard work. It's hard work loving. It's hard work coming alongside those who are in need.

[ 15 : 44 ] It's hard work giving sacrificially of your time and of your energy and of your prayer life and of your home.

These are the areas of outworking the commands in love that is hard work. The church is that living organism. It's the church of the living God and therefore there's that hard work of rooting out the self-centeredness and the individuality that sometimes gets in the way and the importance of living individually for Christ which is reflected in the way that we live together for Christ.

Sacrificial sanctification is not just that individual thing, you know, becoming more holy. I think it's a corporate thing. I think we become more holy as a people together.

We lift each other up. We encourage each other when we're struggling. We listen to each other's needs and we are there to be a people together in this work, all of us in that same way.

So there's that sense, you know, that famous World War I. Sorry. That won't get up by anyone sleeping in there. That's it. That's it.

[ 17 : 04 ] If you sleep in St. Columbus, that's good. Yeah, I must remember that one. Just a quick, a wee nudge. A wee nudge towards my Madonna Mike and that wakes up everyone. That famous World War I poster, you'll know it, Lord Kitchener's, Your Country Needs You, which has been adapted in a million different ways, hasn't it, by all kinds of people.

Well, God's saying that, isn't He? God's saying, you know, Your Church Needs You. Your Church Needs You. That's how I've modeled it.

We're not simply individuals walking in our way to glory, and we're not simply looking for the perfect body of people to walk alongside with.

Your Church Needs You, needs your love, needs your hard work, your worship and your sense of mission together as we support and encourage one another in that.

It's Church of the Living God. It's God's household. We see that in this chapter. We see the different elements of worship and mission and sacrifice and this sense of household together.

[ 18 : 18 ] But then we also see the third illustration that we get from Timothy, for Paul, letter to Timothy, which we also see here.

Because it's the pillar and foundation of the truth. So they've got three really good descriptions of the church, and they're different, aren't they? The church is God's household. That gives us a real personal, intimate kind of illustration, a picture.

And we've got the recognition that it's the church of the living God. It's a vibrant organism. It's not a dead orthodoxy. It's never be a dull and miserable and rotten place to be.

It's the church of the living God. He is the living God. We should reflect that in our lives and in our church. But it's also the pillar and foundation of the truth.

And each of these remind us that God is the center. It's God's household. It's the church of the living God. And Christ is the truth. He said, you know, didn't He? I am the way, the truth in the life.

[ 19 : 17 ] So all of it is relational with God. And all of it is relationship implications with each other as well. So it's the pillar and foundation of the truth.

So we all have different ideas, don't we, of what the church is. I'm sure if we did a survey or whatever here, you would all have, what is the church? You would all have different ideas of what the church is.

It's that really oppressive place that made me miserable on a Sunday when I was a kid. It's the kind of place that's full of legalists. It's full of self-righteousness. It's a great place to be. I love it.

There'll be all kinds of different, we have different images and thoughts of the church. But we must let our understanding of the church be molded by God Himself, shouldn't we? Since it's His.

God's household, the church of the living God. Holy Spirit must be with us. Spirit must be with us in our worship and in our lives as we seek to be transformed.

[ 20 : 12 ] But it's also the pillar and foundation of the truth. That means we should be learners. In verse 17 he says, I appeal to you brothers, watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles, contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught, that you have been learning.

Avoid them. So Paul recognizes that a significant element of church life is learning. There could be a big L plate somewhere in the building to remind us of that.

That we are disciples. We are learners together. And he is highlighting here, Paul's highlighting, the dangers of those, and this fits in with what we're talking about in the evening, worship.

Those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught. So he's, as in nearly all the New Testament letters, he's highlighting the dangers of false teaching

and false doctrine.

And he says that the truth is doctrinal and relational. The two are in juxtaposition. It's doctrinal and relational.

[ 21 : 17 ] The truth about Jesus, the doctrine of God is the truth about Jesus that brings us in touch with the living God that enables us to recognize that we are part of the household of God.

So that they all come together, knowing Christ, the knowledge of Christ, is foundational to our understanding of what the church is, making it unique, because it's the pillar and foundation of the truth.

So where does the church go wrong? Where does the church go wrong? The church goes wrong when it becomes a follower of any particular truth of the day and generation.

We are guardians of what has been revealed. So it's a unique body. We are to protect what's been revealed.

God has revealed Himself in His person and in His Word, and we are guardians of that. You are guardians of that. As individuals, and as a body together, we are to help each other to be guardians of the... we're the pillar and foundation of the truth.

[ 22 : 30 ] The truth of Jesus Christ is the foundation of what we are and of what we are to be in the world.

That's what keeps us from falling. That's what keeps us from collapsing. We find and see that churches that depart from that, from Jesus Christ as the pillar and foundation of the truth, ultimately collapse because there is... there's no foundation there.

I think that's a very significant role for us as individuals and as a church in a society whose question very often is, well, what is truth?

Is there such a thing as truth? Can you speak about truth? The church is not to reflect the latest zeitgeist, that is the defining spirit or mood of a particular generation and mould everything towards that.

It's rather to declare what has already been revealed, sensitively, gently, recognizing that culture and life change, but declaring God's unchanging revelation because it's ultimate truth on which we are founded.

[ 23 : 48 ] And that must always be the significance of our community. It's the glue, it's what binds us together. It's the very core of what we... That's why the lectern or the pulpit is central in our architecture because it reflects the importance of the truth, the word that is declared and that is shared and that is taught and that we learn from together.

We are guardians of that, but we are also to be examples of that. Verse 19, Paul says, for you're obedience is known to all so that I rejoice over you, but I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil.

So that truth that we are, we are to be the pillar and foundation of, is not just a declarative kind of church reality, it's to be part of the example that is our lives, how we respond in suffering and in trouble and in darkness and in difficulty, how we love God and love one another as the greatest act of obedience, which becomes obviously known to all people.

If we react in an ungodly way, then we're no different from it and our faith isn't making any difference, is it? But he says if the pillar and... If we have Christ as the pillar and foundation and when do you need the pillar and foundation?

It's on a sunny day, not really. Jesus gave us that illustration, didn't he, at the end of the Sermon and the Mount? The foundation didn't matter on the beach too much when it was a sunny day in the warmth and beauty of the day, it was when the storms came and the rain came and the trouble came and the difficulty came.

[ 25 : 37 ] And we will only stand on these days when we know and recognize that Christ is the pillar and foundation on which we stand as individuals and as a church.

So we're to reflect that truth in our lives, solid, steady, consistent, incarnational, like Jesus, grace, being at work.

It's simple, but it's not easy. I love that picture there of... Which would really be a summary of what it is to be a Christian. I want you to be wise with things that are good and innocent about what is evil.

That's a great summary, isn't it, of following Jesus? And you can take that with you anywhere you go, any day you want. Let's be wise about what's good and know what's good in His Word.

And let's be innocent about what's evil. In other words, not be drawn towards it, not become experts in the things that divide and separate.

[ 26 : 38 ] So the church of the living God, pillar and foundation of the truth. And that's hugely significant. There were learners, there were guardians, there were examples, and lastly, they were living sacrifices.

Now, I'm moving. Okay, so this is very un... Any ministry students here don't follow my example, in terms of preaching here. But so I'm moving from 1 Timothy where we had that structure for what the church is, and we've used that as a scaffold looking at Romans chapter 16 as a picture of the church.

I want just to finish with the idea again of... That takes us back to Romans 12. That was the verse we read at the beginning for worship, call to worship.

And remember, it's that pivotal verse in Romans when we've looked... It's really bringing everything to a conclusion in Romans. We looked at the first 11 chapters where meaty, heavy doctrine and theology.

And there was that, remember, that conjunctive, what was it? Adverb, therefore. And it was linking all the deep theology with becoming living sacrifices, and the rest of the book that we've looked at has been the practical outworking of that in our lives.

[ 28 : 01 ] And that's hugely significant and hugely important. And we seek to remember that and recognize that. Romans chapter 12 summarizes everything.

And we do so by being, remembering God's mercies. You know, therefore I urge you in the light of God's mercies, and that's looking back to the previous 11 chapters, to recognize the importance of living out God's mercies.

And we see it in this chapter and the way they lived. There were people responding to God's mercies by coming to faith, and by putting their faith in Him. You see, there's a phrase that comes round 10 times in this chapter.

It says, in the Lord, in the Lord, in the Lord, in the Lord. And faith is the core of this church who responded to God's mercies. Faith, unity, baptism, partnership.

Your belonging to St. Columba's must be on the basis of being in the Lord. That you know Him, that you know Him as your Lord and Savior, His rescue package, His person, His love.

[ 29 : 19 ] That is the core of what we are. Recognizing God's mercies that we've spoken about as we've gone through this book.

And also recognizing the privilege of that in St. Columba's. You know, verse 25, he speaks about, strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret from long ago, but has now been disclosed and revealed.

We've got a great privilege of seeking to proclaim God. In this city center, as a people together, we've got great opportunities through church planting to do it, through the relationships we have, through the training future leaders that we hope to do more of, through developing a church planting movement.

We want you all to be part of that because it's part of responding to God's mercies. As is responding to God's mercies in the way this church did here in Rome by recognizing the importance of people. Okay, it meant for Patrick a miserable reading because of all the difficult names, but they were real people. They were people that Paul thought worth mentioning, lots of people.

[ 30 : 39 ] I love that, that this picture of a church is a picture of names, unpronounceable names to us, but it's great, isn't it?

As we recognize God's mercies, we recognize each other. It's a great example, encouragement.

When did you last say thank you to someone or encourage them or build them up?

Make them, celebrate with them, weep with them, forgive them, example grace to them and to one another. That's what we're called to do. That's what we're called to do as we recognize God's mercies and as we recognize the importance of being living sacrifices and sharing in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is hard work. And I encourage you therefore in the light of God's mercies to be living sacrifices.

And I close by asking, making these pleas, to consider the importance of our calling here both as individuals and as a people in prayer.

[ 31 : 48 ] Okay? Now that I've got your attention again. In prayer, to be living sacrifices, I'm going to ask you, we only have one hour of corporate prayer every fortnight and a Wednesday night.

And I'm asking you, if you'd be willing to set it aside. With all the inconvenience and the sacrifice that's involved in coming into the city center on a Wednesday evening at 7.30 once a fortnight, can I just ask you to consider that in the light of eternity?

And our calling to encourage one another, but to pray to the living God and to pray to the God whose household we belong to with all the impossibilities we face.

Sacrifice of prayer, of hard work in relationships and in loving God and loving one another.

That is never declared in the Bible as being easy. And He simply wants us to work hard with the energy and devotion of the Holy Spirit to support and help one another, to know who are in need, to know who to rejoice with, to know who to weep with.

[ 33 : 11 ] And to do that, maybe it seems impossible in a wider church context, at least do that within the city group context, where you know people. And then mission, remember, be living sacrifices when it comes to mission.

We're guardians of truth. You've been praying for your friends and colleagues for many years. We have the words of eternal life. And we believe it's genuine and we believe it's real.

We're looking at shalom and the breaking of shalom in the evening and on the destructiveness of sin, particularly we're looking at this evening. We're only here for a very short time.

Short time we're here, short time we have the opportunity. Now, can we pray for boldness to share that gospel with our friends?

Not next Sunday, but from the Sunday after we have six services. Now I know this isn't the be all and end all of evangelism. I know what you do in your own lives is so significant in sharing your faith.

[ 34 : 08 ] But we're going to do six services. We have this slide up here. Morning and evening, leading up to Easter. Two Sundays leading up to Easter and then Easter Sunday itself.

Next Sunday invitations will be available for you to take and to give to the people you're praying for and you're witnessing to and you're sharing your faith with. There are going to be services that we are focused particularly on the skeptic.

I'm not going to preach to you guys today. Thomas and I are not going to preach to you guys the next few weeks. We're going to preach to skeptics. It's going to be simple. It's going to be short. It's going to be snappy. I don't know about snappy, but it will be simple and short. And the idea is that it will be for those who don't know Jesus Christ.

And we're asking these questions, is Jesus real? Is Jesus a bigot? Is Jesus good? That will be the Sunday morning themes. Sunday evening themes will be are you hurting? Are you empty? Are you hopeless?

[ 35 : 09 ] Now people will not, unless it's a miracle, they're not coming all six, but they might come to one, maybe particularly Easter Sunday, but maybe not, maybe leading up to that.

So we'll have postcards next week to give out. So please pray about that. People can only say no, eh?

And it's so significant that we introduce them to the living God, not just in our own individual lives, but in an easier way sometimes when we do it together, when they see us together as we worship and pray.

And may in all as it was for Paul, to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ. It's not a great way to end that the glory is all God's.

And may that be the case as we close our study on Romans and think about the importance of what church is in the light of what he has, God has revealed through that church, through Timothy and through the people of Rome.

[ 36 : 08 ] Let's bow our heads and pray. Father, God remind us of what we have. We know it's so difficult and we know everyone comes to church on a Sunday with their own burdens, with their own concerns, with their own focus.

We know that church is really a very small, the actual church being together as a very small part of people's lives, an hour here and there. And yet we pray that we would all recognize the great significance of it beyond the hour we are together, the small church in the homes, the love and the companionship and the prayer and the support and the help and the concern and the joy and the sorrow that we all share together, that we seek to live out with others and invite others to come and

know the Jesus who has transformed us.

Thank you for this study in Romans and we pray that it would be a huge change to us in our lives. And we pray that continually we would recognize that we are your household and that we are part of this living organism pillar and foundation of the truth.

Lord help us in this city to be consistent and to be holy and to be gracious and respectful and have a great concern for this lovely city that we live in.

And we pray that you would give us a burden for the great impossible needs that we see and that trouble us and confuses and sometimes make us despair not only in our own country and its leadership and in the mess that we are in politically at the moment, socially also the increase in violence and knife crime and all the different things that grieve us so deeply.

[ 37 : 45 ] And also when we think of the atrocities, particularly in Southern Africa and the loss of life and the sadness and the brokenness of people in Mozambican and surrounding countries with the Cyclone Lord God, we pray that we would not despair.

We pray that we would not just think it's random that we would not be uncaring or insular but we would remember our brothers and sisters and remember with sacrificial giving and prayer and concern to see your kingdom coming, to see Christ returning, the end of all injustice and impurity and loss and darkness and sin and tears and the coming of the new heavens and the new earth within dwells righteousness.

Lord we pray that we would know that and experience that and live that for Jesus' sake. Amen.