

## A Study of “The Church”: Session 1

### The Church in 1 Timothy: Pillar and Ground of the Truth

By Bob Young

#### Introduction

The text from which our title comes is familiar. It is of course from 1 Tim 3:15. The book can be roughly divided into two parts with the first three chapters establishing theological foundations for ministry among the people of God, and the last three chapters describing and informing specific ministry assignments and assignments. This teaching and application outline is frequently used in Pauline letters.

Paul, in his writings to churches, and also in the Pastorals, uses many illustrations or metaphors to describe the church. The book of 1 Timothy says a great deal about the church, but the primary topic is ministry. As Paul concludes the theological section, the focus at the end of chapter 3 (also the end of the extended doctrinal section) turns to the church. This text provides a basic ecclesiology or understanding of the church. The person addressed is Timothy, and numerous tasks are included in Paul’s instructions to Timothy.

Paul had several goals in mind in the first letter to Timothy, goals which are reflected in four themes. He provides a description of **ministry** for Timothy, teaches about **worship**, gives instructions about **leadership**, and offers a magnificent view of the **church**.

We begin at the end of the passage. The church must understand itself. As ministers must understand ministry, so the church must understand itself. It does this through its vision and dream for its own ministry—the identity and tasks of Christian ministry, informed by Scripture, history and the traditions of ministry. The identity of the church is always dependent on the church’s understanding of its tasks and its mission.

The church must study the applicable biblical texts concerning the nature of Christian ministry and the responsibilities of those who serve as ministers, giving special attention to the work or ministry of every Christian. Understanding that all Christians have a ministry is vital. The church must understand itself so that it can learn and maintain its identity as described in the Bible. The church exists in the context of community. The context of all ministries is the church. The church is the community of God. We now turn to this description and other models of the church.

#### THE CHURCH AS THE COMMUNITY OF GOD

1. The church is a community redeemed, not a community perfected.
2. Every spiritual family has problems and sin, Acts 5, et.al. Our challenge is that we be a community of character.
3. Hauerwas--Every human is shaped by community; every community is shaped by its story. My identity is shaped by my story. How can I say who I am without telling my story? The explanation of my life—experiences, challenges, problems, understandings, etc -- is “my story.”

Hauerwas—The ultimate test of the truth of a community's story is the character of the people it produces. The ultimate test of the veracity of the Christian story is the character of Christians.

4. This statement demands that we study ethics from the point of view of "being" rather than simply "doing." Ethics is more than a system of belief, not only intellectual or rational.

5. Ethical decisions express the character and identification of those making decisions. In the study of ethics, the community has a character—that is, loyalties, values, etc.

6. Each community has its own symbols, own language, own story. It has its own codes of behavior, its own feelings. The community shapes the people in the community in ways consistent with the community. If we can develop character within the Christian community, the church, then individuals with character will make ethical decisions consistent with that character, and ethical decisions will express that character.

7. The greatest source in forming a Christian ethic in the context of the Christian community is the Bible. Why? What in the Bible shapes character? The Bible stories and narratives shape identification and form character, as much as and perhaps more than the instructions of the Bible. The Bible narratives are a statement of the reality about us, not only a statement of the reality about God.

We are called to be holy and chosen. We are holy, but we are not holy. Can you recognize this enigma? Can you grasp the dichotomy? The community we grow up in gives us our views and our character. This means that the community changes us little by little.

8. George Lindbeck says that the Bible represents the real world. This reverses the general concept of reality. The church is the real world; the world of Scripture is truth, reality, and actuality.

Will we be a "contrast" community or a community that accommodates the culture? If the Bible speaks of the real world, a parallel truth is that the church comes to worship to find reality, to find its real identity, to confront reality. One danger is that we let false stories become our story. If we let false stories become our story, does it change our reality? Do we change the Bible or does the Bible change us? Is the Bible authoritative?

9. All of this means that doctrines are not just cognitive and propositional for intellectual belief or disbelief, but that doctrines are for living. Doctrines are healthy skills for surviving life. Deut. 4-9 says, "Do not forget the story, be sure to remember." Notice the concept of "remember" throughout Deuteronomy. When we forget who we are—our identification—we lose our power to live as we are called to live.

10. If we are serious regarding the church, we will become a society in contrast to the world around us. This means we are not anti culture, we do not buy into culture, we are not isolationist, but we let our light shine into the community around us. We are people of character and we conduct ourselves in a certain way.

What would it mean for the churches you know to accept this way of thinking? How would it influence our worship, our activities, etc.?

## **OTHER MODELS OF THE CHURCH**

A primary understanding of the church is that the church is community. We will return to this truth toward the end of this series.

There are several other models of the church in the Bible, and especially in our text in 1 Timothy 3.

1. What is the calling of the church? What are we called to be? The Bible describes the church as a dynamic, prophetic, reconciliation, redemptive community.
2. The NT church was not born full-grown—it is changing, growing, ethnicity, community...
3. What is the shape of the church you know?

The models of the church available in the first century—

temple, but temples were places clergy lived, not places gods lived

synagogue, worship, lay people, court, community center, center of instruction

Qumran, Essenes, community in isolation/commitment

Guilds existed, first century labor unions

Household

4. Other NT metaphors for church

The model of the church does not give us a precise model of structures, but rather an image to define, shape, without placing restrictions on our ideas.

The most common NT description is that of body of Christ. This is not illustration, not analogy, not simile. We are the body of Christ.

- This affirms us as a group, present tense.
- This affirms our diversity.
- This affirms our uniqueness as a congregation.
- This provides an understanding for accepting individual persons and members.
- This suggests the size of God's redemptive purpose.
- This brings into view the cosmic body of Christ
- This affirms the personal nature of the touch of God in our lives.
- This affirms our connection to Christ, which ultimately gives us life.

[I will further explore the idea of the church as the body of Christ in the third lesson in this series.]

## **THE CHURCH CALLS LEADERS/MINISTERS WHEN IT UNDERSTANDS ITSELF AS THE CONTEXT OF MINISTRY**

- We tend to look at leadership positions as authority. That is, who is over/above whom? Rather, Jesus has authority. And also, the story has authority over all, which authority does not reside exclusively in one location.
- We hear the story; we hear God's call to be holy, covenant people.
- We therefore recognize the models, the living reminders among us. We ask these to lead the way in bringing us all to God, to help us make progress on the journey. We entrust the responsibility, and trust. This is the recognition of who we are as ministers. The church says, Let us follow you.
- The church longs to find meaning and significance. Our understandings have not been profound, but minimal.
- There are two important things: ministry is in the community and the world, ministry is connection with God.

We must return to and spend the rest of our time in 1 Timothy.  
Remember that from the text of 1 Timothy I have suggested four themes—ministry, worship, leadership, the church. These are interrelated.

### **THE MINISTER (Chap. 1)**

What is the nature of the church and its ministry?

Ministry provides orientation, disorientation, reorientation. This is maturity.

Orientation refers to time/place/purpose/direction/etc. What gets us through our problems is a sense of orientation.

The life of the church must provide orientation?

Ministry should provide orientation, meaning, ID, purpose. When life disorients us, preaching and church activities should orient us.

### **WORSHIP (Chap. 2)**

Leitourgia—the service/the work of the people (liturgy)

Worship is not for the people, but of the people.

Worship is not an experiential expression (horizontal).

Worship is vertical, touching transcendence.

We will never exceed our worship is understanding the power of God.

The what and why of worship inform the how, culture never informs our worship. If the issue right now or at any time in the history of the church is fought on cultural grounds, we will never get to the biblical basis.

What drives worship for most is not theological but pragmatic. What is a theological basis for our worship?

Worship must arise from the church's identification as reflection of God.

Worship must connect to the story of the Bible and the story of the local church.

Telling the story must take precedence over mere activity for the sake of activity.

People need to receive God's word systematically.

Worship is the people of God assembling to acknowledge truth: about God, self, others, the world

### **LEADERSHIP (Chap. 3)**

The preacher is a church leader with authority and power, but the power is not in the role or position, but is personal.

Ad-ministry is that which leads to ministry, equipping, helping others accomplish their ministry.

This is focus on the ministry of the body of Christ.

### **THE CHURCH: HOUSEHOLD, PILLAR, AND GROUND (3:15)**

As we close, we return to our text. The doctrines of 1 Timothy will provide a solid foundation for continuation of the study.

First, the church is the house or household of God. Oikos means both the house (building) and the family that lives in the building. The church is both, 1 Cor. 3:16; 1 Pet. 2:5; 4:17. In Eph. 2:19, we again have this word used. Since the oikos has already been used in the sense of family in this chapter (v. 4,5,12), it is likely used in the same way in this verse.

Note that the church belongs to the living God. When we understand this fact and come together in the church, every aspect of our shared lives is enriched by our knowledge of the presence of God among us. In worship, we bow before the living God. In the word being read, we hear his voice. In the Supper of the Lord, his presence and person is revealed to us anew. In our fellowship, we love one another in the same way that he has loved us.

Of even more interest is the continuation of the passage.

The “hedraioma” of a building is its support system. This refers to the foundation or stabilizing system—thus the English word, ground. Clearly, the foundation provides support and stability. The Church has the responsibility of maintaining the truth against the storms of unbelief and heresy.

Stylos is the Greek word used for column or pillar. The purpose of the columns is not to support the roof, but to reach upward and raise the roof high so that it can be seen from a distance. In Ephesus, there was a great illustration of this in the temple of Diana, or Artemis. It had 100 Ionic columns, each about 50 feet high, supporting a massive, shining marble roof. In the same way, the church raises up the truth to a position where it can be seen and can be admired by the world. The function of the church is not to call attention to itself, but to demonstrate and call attention to the truth.

Thus, the church has two responsibilities regarding the truth; first, as the foundation to maintain the truth firmly, without any danger of falling due to the weight of false teaching; second, as the column to raise us to the truth to the heights so that it will not be hidden. One could call these the defense and confirmation of the gospel, so that the gospel might be proclaimed. The church has received the call of God in both of these ministries.

Truth exists apart from the church so that the truth informs the life of the church, providing instruction and teaching. The church depends on the truth and cannot exist without the truth. But the mission of the church in this passage from Paul is this: the church is called to serve the truth—to confirm it and proclaim it.

The truth with which the church must guard is detailed in the last verse of the chapter (verse 16). What a great summary of the importance of Jesus Christ. What a great summary of the gospel!