

This Must Be the Place of Faith

Blueprints of a Healthy Church – Part VI

Selected Scripture

Introduction

In our next few discussions, I want to address the issue of what it means to be a church. More specifically, I want to answer the questions, “What are the characteristics of a true, biblical church? How are the effectiveness and obedience of a church measured?”

In Arlington National Cemetery, in Washington DC, there is a tomb called the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. A guard is posted by this tomb, which, for nearly seventy years, has been guarded twenty-four hours a day. Every hour on the hour, 365 days a year, a new soldier reports for duty. When the new guard arrives at the tomb, he receives orders from the soldier who is leaving. The words are always the same: “Orders remain unchanged.”

At this time, our church is experiencing a tremendous amount of flux and change. Everyone I have talked to in the past week, feels this. Some are overwhelmed; some are overjoyed; some are anxious; some are excited. This is to be expected. Our move to a new campus is demanding flexibility and adaptation to new faces, to a new environment, and to new challenges.

A thousand things have changed for us in a matter of days, but our orders have not changed. Who we follow has not changed. What our Lord has commanded us to do has not changed. What He wants this local church to be has not changed. Our orders remain unchanged.

As one author wrote,

Our challenge remains to reach our generation for Christ, without altering the truth of Christ’s word. We must be willing to leave the familiar without disturbing the essentials. To serve effectively, the church must wake up to what has to change, and what does not. The church that sits around frowning at the future, doing little more than

polishing yesterday’s apples, will become a church that ceases to impact its world. We do not fight change; we do not manipulate growth nor are we responsible for it. We respond to what God does in our midst – we adjust and we adapt.

I love the line, “We must be willing to leave the familiar without disturbing the essentials.”

So just what are the essentials? What are the non-negotiables about this church and any church that follows the living Lord? What is it that the church must be known for?

Chuck Swindoll, in his collection of illustrations, told of an experience that one of his acquaintances had several years ago. The man lived in Atlanta, Georgia, and noticed in the telephone Yellow Pages, something unusual. In the section for restaurants, there was an entry for a place called The Church of God Grill. The peculiar name aroused his curiosity, so he dialed the number. A man answered with a cheery, “Hello! Church of God Grill.”

Swindoll’s friend asked the man how his restaurant had been given such an unusual name. The man told him, “Well, we had a little mission down here, and we started selling chicken dinners after church on Sunday to help pay the bills. People liked the chicken and we did such a good business, that eventually, we cut back on our worship services to prepare the chicken dinners. After a while, we just closed down the church altogether and kept on serving the chicken dinners, but we kept the name that we started with – and that’s The Church of God Grill.”

Now there is nothing wrong with a church making chicken dinners. However, it is tragic when the chicken becomes more important than the church.

What will we, in this church, be known for? What are the things that should never change, even though everything around us seems to change? Just what are the essentials that should characterize the testimony of this church?

I submit to you, first of all, that the church must be known as the place of faith.

Would that the apostle Paul could write of us as he did of the believers living in Rome, when he wrote,

. . . I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world. (Romans 1:8)

These believers had a reputation for their faith.

To the Colossian believers, Paul said,

We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus . . . (Colossians 1:3-4a)

To the Thessalonian believers, Paul wrote again,

We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith . . . (I Thessalonians 1:2-3a)

In the letter to the church in Pergamum, published for us in Revelation chapter 2, Jesus Christ commends this church, saying,

. . . you hold fast . . . [the] faith . . . (Revelation 2:13)

Ladies and gentlemen, the church must be the place of faith.

How a Church Becomes a Place of Faith

How do we, as a church, become a place of faith? How do we develop a testimony and a reputation for faith throughout the world? How do we live and act and serve so that the Lord Himself would commend us for our faith?

1. First, we, as a church, must be the place where faith is defined.

A definition of faith is needed in our generation today, more than ever before.

Everyone is talking today about their faith. Frankly, everyone realizes that we cannot really live without exercising some sort of faith.

It took faith on your part to get married because marriage vows are basically promises. You placed your faith in your bride's or groom's vow to love you in sickness and in health; for better or for worse. You placed your faith in their promise!

It takes faith for you to take the prescription you picked up at the pharmacy.

It takes faith to deposit your paycheck in the local bank.

It takes faith to get behind the wheel of a car, with so many fifteen year olds having just received their learner's permits. This includes my twin sons, who are excellent drivers, by the way. They definitely take after their . . . mother.

It takes faith to put your child on a school bus.

This past Thursday, I sat at a long red light behind an elementary school bus on its afternoon circuit. There were four kids in the back of the bus – two little boys and two little girls – who were having the time of their lives. They were hitting each other over the head with their school books; jumping from seat to seat; wrestling in their seats; kicking each other in the shins. I could see the face of the bus driver reflected in her large mirror, and she was oblivious to the pandemonium in the back of the bus. I thought, “If only their mothers knew.” You had no idea how much faith you have!

It takes faith to eat what you bring home from the store. Yesterday, I had one of my favorite things to eat – a bowl of oatmeal covered with brown sugar and milk, along with a couple pieces of toast. This is one of my favorite things to eat on a Saturday afternoon. It says right on the oatmeal carton that eating oatmeal actually takes away cholesterol. It actually says, “Imagine each tiny oat acting like a sponge and absorbing the cholesterol in your body.” So I like to eat it, especially after I eat a couple doughnuts! The two sort of balance each other out, I think!

Marsha had brought home, earlier in the day, a jar of apple butter. She had been to an Amish quilt show at the fairgrounds. She knows I like apple butter and bought a jar for me. I got my food ready – the oatmeal was hot and the toast was right out of the toaster – and sat down with the little jar of freshly made apple butter. I opened the jar, but when I opened the lid, it did not make the little “pop” sound that indicates it is sealed. The jar just opened – easily! I sat there, disappointed; wondering what to do. I looked at the apple butter. It was made by the Amish with no preservatives, no fake coloring – just lots of sugar and fresh apples. I thought, “What if it's spoiled? What if it's poisoned? What if I get sick?” Then I remembered that God is sovereign in all things, and all my days were numbered before there was even one of them (Psalm 139:16b paraphrased). So apple butter or

not, if it is time to go, it is time to go! I spread it on my toast – and I lived to tell about it.

I know – this is lousy theology, but it works with toast!

The truth is that every time you open a jar of food, whether the lid goes pop or not, every time you get on an airplane or an elevator, every time you take a drink from a water fountain, you are exercising a measure of faith – and you do it all day long.

Now the Bible talks about a lot of different kinds of faith.

James 2:17 refers to dead faith.

In Matthew 7:21-23, the Lord speaks of deceived faith. He refers to people who thought they were getting into heaven by means of their religion and good works, but were, in fact, going to hell. Jesus Christ says to them,

... “I never knew you . . .” (Matthew 7:23b)

These people were people of faith, but it was counterfeit faith and they were deceived by it.

The Bible talks about “examined” faith. Paul exhorts the Corinthians to,

Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you – unless indeed you fail the test? (II Corinthians 13:5)

Then there is genuine, saving faith. Paul wrote,

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8)

My friend, do you know that you have genuine, saving faith? Examine your heart today. Are you certain that if you were to die this afternoon, you would go to heaven?

You might ask, “Can you really know for sure?”

Yes. The Bible says, in I John 5:13,

These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

Do you know that you have eternal life?

Hundreds of people have said to me over the years, “Yes, I’m pretty sure I’m going to heaven.”

So I ask, “How do you know?”

I hear answers like, “Well, I believe in God and I’ve tried to live the best way I can.”

Wrong! James 2:19 tells us that,

... the demons also believe [that God is One God], and shudder.

They might also say, “Well, I was raised in a good Christian home and I’ve always believed in God.”

Wrong! We were born, not believing, but unbelieving, John chapter 3 tells us. We were born in sin, already condemned.

When in your life did you understand the gospel and believe?

Sophia Loren, the famous actress, was interviewed recently. She was asked whether or not she would go to heaven when she died. She responded by saying, “I pray; I read the Bible; it’s the most beautiful book ever written. And I should go to heaven; I haven’t done anything wrong. My conscience is very clean. My soul is as white as those orchids over there, and I should go straight, straight to heaven.”ⁱⁱ

Her assurance has nothing to do with the gospel of saving faith in Christ. It has everything to do with self-assurance, based upon the fact that she does not think she has done anything wrong.

If this is what you believe, my friend, then you have been betrayed by religion and deceived by your own sinful nature.

The Bible says,

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (Romans 3:23)

The church must be a place where true, genuine, saving faith is clearly taught as faith that is placed in Christ alone for salvation.

2. Secondly, we, as a church, must be the place where faith is defended.

Understand that when the New Testament precedes the word “faith” by the word “the” – “the faith” – it is referring to doctrinal truth. This is the body of truth that we are to communicate, teach, learn, and live. It is a phrase that summarizes the content of Christianity, the word of God, the gospel – the entire body of doctrinal truth that makes up God’s revelation.

Today, in the church that claims to know and follow Christ, doctrine has become almost a

distasteful word and something to be avoided at all costs. In our generation, churches are known for their secular business techniques, self-help sermons, and clever growth management methods. The church has lost its focus and its grip on the body of truth known as “the faith”.

We are as Christians in a battle against Satan and his kingdom for the purity of the faith. In the short letter of Jude, which is the last book before the book of Revelation, he writes in verse 3,

Beloved, . . . I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.

The word translated “contend” is the Greek word from which we get our word, “agonize”. It has to do with a struggle; a trial; a battle. We are to agonize over and struggle with the forces, attitudes, and philosophies of this world system that besieges the truth.

Paul warned Pastor Timothy that,

. . . the time come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths. (II Timothy 4:3-4)

An article in the *Wall Street Journal* described one well-known church’s attempt to “perk up attendance at Sunday evening services.” The church “staged a wrestling match, featuring church employees. To train for the event, ten employees got lessons from Tugboat Taylor, a former professional wrestler, in pulling hair, kicking shins and tossing bodies around without doing any real harm.”

No harm was done to the staff members perhaps, but great harm was done to the testimony and reputation of the church.

A mock ring was built on the church stage and the wrestling match was advertised. That evening, the place was packed, with standing room only.

If a series of messages on doctrine were announced, we could watch the place dry up and blow away.

This must not be allowed to describe our church. We must see that “the faith” – the whole council of God; the doctrinal body of truth – is taught and studied; discussed and expounded.

It is not our objective to be entertaining, witty, or even interesting. We are to simply take the stand as witnesses and tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help us God.

This place must be the place where true faith is defended.

3. Thirdly, we, as a church, must be the place where faith is developed.

In his second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul wrote,

We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is only fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged, . . . therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith . . . (II Thessalonians 1:3-4)

Now there are misconceptions of faith that are fueled by the church at large, to the detriment of the believer.

One misconception is that true faith is evidenced by an amount. In other words, if you just had more faith, you wouldn’t get sick; you’re car battery wouldn’t die; your boss would give you a promotion . . .

Jesus Christ said,

. . . if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, “Move from here to there,” and it will move . . . (Matthew 17:20).

You might say, “See, you need to get more faith.”

This is not the lesson that Jesus Christ is teaching. He is teaching that if you have faith in *Him*, your faith can be as small as a mustard seed and you can still move mountains.

The amount of faith is not the issue, the object of your faith is the issue.

Think for a moment of the disciples’ faith. What if Jesus Christ had really wanted “good” material; those who were already way down the road in the subjects of religion and faith? What if He had gone to Jerusalem and put an announcement in the “Jerusalem Gazette” that read: “Needed: twelve men to introduce the kingdom of God on earth”?

Who do you think would have applied? All the qualified people – the capable; the scholarly; the religious; the pious – would have applied. They would have come to their interview with Jesus and said, “I’m

just the one You're looking for; I'm just the one You need to introduce the kingdom of God on earth."

Yet, who did Jesus choose? A man named Simon the Zealot, who would just as soon put a dagger in a Roman than lead him to Christ. A tax collector named Matthew, who was so greedy that he would not even hire another person to help him collect the taxes. Fishermen, who were qualified to learn the greatest lesson about living out their faith. They would learn what Christ taught them,

. . . apart from Me you can do nothing. (John 15:5)

They learned this, and turned the world upside down for Christ.

My friend, the assurance that God is involved in your life and is developing your faith in His word and in His will is not related to how self-confident you are; how self-assured you are; how qualified you feel; how much faith you think you have. Faith, developed according to scripture, is related to who God is. He is eternal. He is unchanging. He is faithful. He is at work in the world as the sovereign Ruler who rides the wind and sends the thunder.

The person who says, "I wish I had more faith," is in reality saying, "I wish I knew more about God."

This church must be the place where people discover more about their one and only, true and living, majestic, holy, sovereign, gracious God.

This must be the place where faith is developed.

4. Fourthly, we, as a church, must be the place where faith is demonstrated.

Our faith is demonstrated in a myriad of ways.

A. W. Tozer wrote, "Millions of professed believers talk as if God were real and act as if He were not. Our actual position is always to be discovered by the way we act, not by the way we talk."

I was at the hospital this past week, visiting in a room where a couple from our church were grieving the loss of their baby. Born prematurely, their baby lived only a few hours and died. With tears in their eyes, I heard them speak of their trust in God's plan. We gathered around the hospital bed where the mom was recovering, held hands, and prayed. I walked out knowing I had witnessed a demonstration of faith.

We must be a body of believers that demonstrates our faith. It reveals to the world what we really think, deep down in our hearts, about our God.

Mark Little recalled a childhood memory and wrote it down in his book, saying,

As a child, I loved to curl up in the back of our car as we drove through the night on a trip. I felt so safe curled back there with dad in the driver's seat. But sometimes, my grandmother would go with us. She would sit on the edge of her seat barking instructions about every car that came our way, "Watch the side of the road there . . . Be careful with that guy next to us . . . Don't go so fast . . ." I don't think she ever enjoyed the ride. Why? Because she simply did not trust my father's driving. She could not rest in his care. Grandmother and I both reached our destination, but one got there with frazzled nerves while the other arrived contented and rested. And all because one of us trusted ourselves to my father's care.

Ladies and gentlemen, the church must be a place that revels in and reflects to our watching world, trust in our Father's care.

Conclusion

The church must be the place where faith is defined, defended, developed, and demonstrated. It should not be a surprise that the apostle Paul, in Galatians 6:10b, would describe the church as a,

. . . household of faith.

May it be true of us, as a church. This must be the place of faith.

ⁱ USA Today (Feb. 4, 1999), <http://www.preachingtoday.com>.