

The Church

Titus 1:1-4

It started a few years ago when one of my children was having a birthday party and wanted to do axe throwing.

We crunched the numbers and it was pretty obvious that the best way to make that happen was to build an axe throwing target and get some throwing axes from Amazon.

I looked up the official dimensions from the World Axe Throwing League, made a material list, pieced together what I could from scrap wood and went to the hardware store to get the rest and after a few hours of work we had a target.

I am happy to report that everyone still has their ears intact and everyone in the family can throw an axe and hit the target.

Next came the archery target.

I had made a flimsy make shift one for the kid's small bow, but a while ago we bought a second hand adult size compound bow for target practice which required something fairly substantial.

Using scrap wood, somewhere between twenty and thirty cardboard boxes, and a sheet of Styrofoam I fashioned a three foot square target.

Again I am happy to report that the strict safety rules I have in place have always been followed and no one has ever been in danger.

Around the same time we got the compound bow, Kevin received a pellet gun so I added a shelf to the archery target so we could set up soup cans to shoot at.

With axe throwing there is a bit of technique but for the most part taking aim is a matter of getting the feel for it.

With the bow and pellet gun there is certainly technique involved but there are also sights to help you take proper aim to hit the target.

I learned right away that the sights have to be adjusted properly in order for someone to hit the target they are aiming at.

I did some research and went through the process carefully and repeatedly to ensure that I could be as accurate as my ability will allow and because the sights are reasonably accurate we can hit the target reasonably consistently and even hit the bullseye on a regular basis.

If the sights were way off, then there would be little chance of hitting the bullseye and even hitting any part of the target would be doubtful.

That is a good illustration to have in mind when we think about the Christian life and the church in general.

God has made a clear target for us to aim at as believers and while it is true that no Christian and therefore no church will hit the perfect bullseye on this side of eternity, we should be striving to aim at the bullseye to the best of our ability.

We should want what we believe and what we do here at First Baptist to come as close as we can to the pattern the LORD lays out for us in His word.

[One of the places we find in the Bible that gives the church a sense of what we are aiming at in the book of Titus. This book is written by the apostle Paul to one of his pastoral disciples. Titus has been sent to a place called Crete and Paul is writing to him about establishing healthy churches in that place. This morning we are looking together at **chapter one verses one through four**, so I invite you to turn there in your bibles to follow along with me. These verses form the introductory greeting to the letter and I believe they also give us the starting place of a healthy church. If we have any hope of hitting the target, any hope of getting as close to the bullseye as we can, then we need to start here where the apostle starts and that is with God. He shows us here three important lessons about why the church exists and each one is very much God centered. Lesson one is this...]

Point #1 – The church exists by the sovereign will of God. (Verse 1)

People belonging to Jesus are gathered together by the LORD acting in the world to bring about faith and holiness in those He has chosen.

Like many letters in the ancient world and most of the letters that Paul writes in the New Testament, this letter to his younger co-worker, disciple, and friend opens with stating who the letter is from.

Paul's goal here, however, is to do much more than simply say, "It's me Paul", his goal right from the outset is to turn Titus' attention and ours towards the Lord.

He first calls himself "a servant of God."

There are a couple of Greek words that we translate as 'servant', the one used here is *doulos* which means servant in the sense of being owned by a master.

He sees himself as a slave who has been bought and therefore owned by the LORD.

When we first hear that, a negative picture might form in our mind, but to understand this properly we first have to understand that everyone is a slave of one kind or another.

Jesus says in John 8:34, "Everyone who sins [That is everyone who disobey God] is a slave to sin!"

Now how many people sin/disobey God? Everyone does! Many of you know Romans 3:23. What does it say? It says, "...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

That is more than a tiny bit short, by the way, that is missing by a magnitude that we can't even wrap our minds around.

Every human being starts out in life as a slave to sin.

Where does being a slave to sin lead? It leads to death and destruction.

Thankfully Jesus also says, "...if the Son (meaning Himself) set you free, you will be free indeed."

Belonging to God through Christ sets us free from the power of sin.

So you see slavery to God is freedom from sin.
 Where does that lead? To eternal life and joy.
 That is what Paul means when he calls
 himself 'a servant of God'.

He also says here that he is 'an apostle of Jesus Christ.'

An apostle is someone who is appointed with authority to speak on behalf of the one who is sending them.

Paul did not make himself an apostle! In fact, when God called him he was working to destroy the name of Jesus not be His messenger.

In spite of everything Paul had done God stepped in his way, the Risen Lord Jesus appeared to him and set him apart for glory of God.

Why does God exercise His power in Paul's life to make him a servant and an apostle?

He tells us in the second half of verse one and it is very important that we see Paul's answer is focused outside of himself. (**Verse 1b** starting at "for...")

The phrase "God's elect" refers to the people who have been set apart by God before time began to belong to God in Christ.

I know that is a big concept and I further know that it is a troubling one for some people and I hope you believe me when I say I empathize greatly with the difficulty of wrestling with this mystery.

We must, however, wrestle with it if we are to see the glory of what is being said here.

God sovereignly acted in the life of Paul, so that Paul would be used by God's grace to bring people to faith in Jesus whom God had resolved to save in all eternity past, so that they would learn and understand the truth, and have that truth applied to their lives resulting in holy living.

Paul is who He is because God acted and is acting in His life and everything good that the apostle accomplishes for God's people is because of that.

[Think of it like the Sun. The energy that the Sun gives to the earth is one of the things that makes life possible on this planet. If the LORD had never put the Sun in its proper place at the size that it is, at the right energy output, and put the earth at the exact right distance from it, then nothing could live on the earth. On top of the necessity of the Sun in the past it is also necessary every day. Take the Sun away and everything is gone.]

It is the same thing with the church.

The reason why anyone is a Christian let alone gathers together in a place for worship is because almighty God has exercised His power to bring us to Himself for the good of His people, which serves the glory of His name.

That is the only reason the church exists, because of God's work in the world.

He chooses to work in time and space throughout every moment in all of history to redeem a people to Himself.

Does that make everything we do meaningless? If we accept that the church is here because of God's will, do we sit back in our easy chairs and do nothing?

This verse teaches us the exact opposite. It is teaching us that God is doing much of His work through people.

[The power of God is motivating the apostle to serve God in faith rather than do nothing and it should do the same thing for us! There is more to consider though than God's power at work in the world for the sake of His people. If it were merely a question of power and ability it would be a shaky proposition. Power and ability do not automatically result in action and so what the apostle says next in verses 2-3 is also important for us to hear. In addition to the church existing *by the sovereign will of God*, we also see here that...]

Point #2 – The church exists according to the character and nature of God. (Verse 2-3)

The promises of the gospel of Christ are made by One Who always tells the truth and One Who never changes throughout all eternity; therefore, they can be fully trusted.

So far Paul has talked about the faith of God's people, their knowledge of the truth, and how that corresponds to with a godly life.

Now he explains why that holds any kind of meaning for us. (**Verse 2a** stop at 'eternal life')

The message of the gospel is much more profound than live out a temporary existence as a slightly nicer person or live a slightly better life.

If all there is to our lives is a few decades upon the earth and then nothingness afterwards then none of this matters in the slightest.

Belief, unbelief, good, bad, or otherwise it just doesn't matter at all.

The message of the gospel is that there is someone worth trading all this world has to offer for.

The message of the gospel is believe upon Jesus Name, be born again and live forever in the light of His glory in maximum joy.

That is what we call 'eternal life' and that is the hope we are called to live in.

Why can we have the 'hope of eternal life'? (Verse 2).

This tells us something important about the character of God.

It says that He "never lies"!

That means He can never promise something unless He is 100% certain He can follow through.

That means that what He says can be absolutely trusted.

So when He says that faith in the death of Jesus means that our sins are forgiven that is true.

When He says that the power of Jesus' resurrection has conquered death for those who are trusting in Him; that is an unchangeable fact.

No one holds any power over the LORD to get Him to bend the truth, He does not sugar coat reality to make people feel better about a bad situation, He cannot be persuaded by temptation, and He is able to do all that He pleases.

Because that is true we ought to have a certain hope of eternal life in Christ.

Besides telling us something about God's character we are also told something here of God's nature.

It is certainly wonderful that God's promises are always true because God is always truthful, but the apostle adds to the marvel of all of this by telling us when the LORD made this promise of eternal life for His people.

The ESV translates it as "before the ages began."

Another way that could be translated is "before time everlasting."

The idea is that the LORD made this promise in all eternity past which means that this promise has always been in the mind of God.

That means that God resolved within Himself into all eternity past to redeem a people to Himself.

Jesus had to come into the world, live a perfect life, die, rise again, and ascend into heaven.

Not because God was obligated to save us according to what is just and fair, but because He bound Himself to display His incomprehensible love for His people to the glory of His Name forever.

To say that is astounding is an understatement to say the least.

Verse 3 is the working out of the promise.

Jesus appeared to Paul for the purpose of fulfilling the promise He made in all eternity past and because God's promises are true He has acted and is acting according to His perfect timing to bring about all that He pleases.

The church exists because God is eternally truthful!

[I am amazed at the idea of eternity. It is beyond human ability to comprehend but at the same time the human mind cannot escape it whether we realize it or not. All we have to do to realize that is ask a simple question. The question is, "What came before?" We are hardwired to think in terms of cause and effect and we are hardwired to think that every cause has a cause. It is also true that we come to the end of ourselves pretty quickly when we ask, 'what came before?' we either come to the answer of an incomprehensible eternal God or we say I don't know, but either way we have to keep going back into eternity.]

Why do we do that? The Bible's answer is that God has "set eternity in the hearts of men" (Ecclesiastes 3:11) and He has done that because that is His nature.

The hope of the gospel is rooted in the certainty of God's consistency which stretches throughout all eternity.

That is amazing! The only question we have to answer is "Do we trust in what God says because of Who He is?"

If we fail to trust His promises, His promises are still true we just miss out on them.

On the other hand if we trust and delight in the hope of eternal life through faith in Jesus we will certainly inherit it because the LORD cannot go back on what He said before time began.

[Apart from that the church would not and could not exist. We would never come to love the LORD unless He worked in our lives and He would have no reason to work in our lives if He did not bind Himself by His eternal promises. That brings us to one more lesson from this text. Now that we have some sense that the church exists by the power and promise of God, we also need to see why He chooses to exercise His power and why He was willing to make this promise in all eternity past. We see the answer in who this letter is addressed to, Paul's younger pastoral disciple named Titus. From what he says to Titus in verse four we learn that...]

Point #3 – The church endures by the grace of God. (Verse 4)

Everyone who really appreciates who God is and who we are as human beings will never think of themselves or anyone else as worthy of the gifts of God in Christ, but rather rest and rejoice in the mercies of the LORD.

The beginning of verse 4 tells us about the relationship Paul has with Titus (Verse 4a stop at "faith").

Some people think that Paul referring to Titus as a child in the faith means that Titus came to faith through Paul's ministry.

That may be, but the phrase is not always used in that sense and here it probably has more to do with discipleship than it does with conversion.

Titus is one of Paul's pastoral trainees, likely a man many years younger than the apostle, someone who has worked alongside Paul, someone who has shown some desire to serve the LORD and the church, someone who Paul has taught and trained to do true gospel ministry in the world.

Paul knows that the work of the gospel is bigger than him. He cannot be in all places at once and he is not going to live forever and so he understands the need to invest in godly young men to do the work of ministry in his absence and after he dies.

So he is clearly looking ahead to the future and he is doing so with much more than a teacher student type of mind set, he has a deep affection for Titus, he cares for him like a son.

What does he want from God for this younger minister of the gospel whom he loves like a child?
Listen! (Verse 4).

If you have read through the New Testament a few times you will likely recognize the phrase “grace and peace” as a common greeting in a number of letters.

I did a search for the phrase and found it is used seventeen times and thirteen of those times it is used by the apostle Paul.

What I find fascinating about the phrase is that every time I could find it the word order is always the same.

Word order in Greek is often significant in terms of the importance or emphasis an author is placing on the word.

The fact that grace always comes first, I think tells us something about its place in the theology and life of the church.

The fact that it always precedes ‘peace’ I think tells us that peace is impossible without it.

So what is grace? It seems to me the best phrase that defines grace is ‘unmerited favour’ or ‘an undeserved gift.’

This may be one of the biggest stumbling blocks people have with understanding the message of salvation.

People want to think they are worth saving, people want to think that God in eternity past looked down the corridors of time and saw something good, some kind of desire to seek him out, and so He decides on His plan of salvation because He could see that we deserve it even if just a little bit.

It is certainly true that the LORD has made amazing creatures in humanity.

We are the only beings said to be made in the image of God.

The Bible does say that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made.”
(Psalm 139)

But it also says we have willfully rejected the Lord, that none of us seeks Him and that we all go hard after evil
(Romans 3).

The fact that we are stamped in the image of God magnifies the weight of our sin rather than alleviates it.

So when the Lord looks down the corridor of time from all eternity past He does not see people who are worth saving, He sees people who need grace.

When we understand that, then we can begin to understand what it means to have peace.

We have peace with God because the Father sent the Son into the world to die in our place to pay a debt we could never pay and God offers that incredible gift even though we deserve the complete opposite which is His judgment and wrath.

That will never change. There will never come a day when we need the grace of God less in our lives.

That is why the church endures.

[Remember the parable Jesus told about a master who hires some workers for the day. He hires the first guys and agreed to pay them a denarius (a day's wages), he hires another group at the third hour, the sixth hour, the ninth hour, and some near the very end of the day at the eleventh hour. When the day is done the master pays those hired last a denarius and when the guys hired first saw it they thought they were going to get more, but when their turn came they too received a denarius. Anybody remember how they reacted? They were unhappy because they thought they deserved more. What were they missing? They were missing the need of grace. Whether you come to the master early on or later in the day you need grace.]

What happens with those workers can easily happen to us can't it?

We can walk with the Lord, grow in faith, grow in understanding, grow in godliness, and begin to think that somehow we are earning our way to heaven.

Nothing could be further from the truth brothers and sisters.

If you have been a believer for ninety seconds or ninety years you never need the grace of God less.

God brought us here this morning by His grace.

He gives us life and breath because of His grace.

This church has endured for 170 years by God's grace and it is only by God's grace that we will meet again next week.

If we are going to aim at being a healthy church we need to have our attention fixed on the LORD.

To be a healthy church our theology needs to begin with God.

We need to see that the church exists because of God's sovereign will, the church exists according to His character and nature, and that it only endures by His grace.

Praise the LORD for there is none like Him and because that is true we can be saved.