

The Church Is A Pillar

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[0:00] Well, I'd like us to turn back to 1 Timothy chapter 3 together for a short while this evening. And tonight we are going to start a short series about the church and the title for our series is a pictures of the church and I've called it that because if you look in the New Testament there are a lot of pictures used to describe what the church of Jesus Christ is like. In fact, I saw that one author has said that he's written a book that identifies 96 different images of the church in the New Testament. So this is part one of a 96 parties.

No, I'm joking. It's not going to be that long at all. I'm not sure that it has many as 96. But it's definitely the case that there are some very vivid images used in the New Testament to help us understand the nature and purpose of the church. And we're going to look at five together this evening and over the coming weeks. These are that the church is a pillar, the church is a farm, the church is a body, the church is a mother, and the church is a bride. Some of these might be quite familiar to you, others maybe not so much, but they're all important in shaping a view of the church. And I think this is a very important topic for us to think about because throughout her history, the Christian church has been greatly harmed by two things. The church has been misunderstood by people outside her. And the church has been misrepresented by people within her. And for both of these reasons as Christians or whether we're not sure if we're a Christian yet, it's really important to have a clear understanding of what the church is because the church is utterly bound up with Jesus and therefore with God. We want to know what the church is and we want to know what God wants the church to do. So we're going to look at these over the coming weeks tonight. We're looking at the first one, the church is a pillar. So let's turn to 1st Timothy 3 and I can read again at verses 14 through to 16. Paul says, I hope to come to you soon, but I'm writing these things 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. One of the things I love about Paul's letters is that very often he just throws in a wee tiny comment. And here is a brilliant example of that. He talks about coming to see Timothy in person. He's explaining about the fact that he's going to be delayed and as he does so he just throws in a statement that's full of crucial teaching.

As we read this passage, we saw that in this chapter he's outlining what biblical leadership should be, the qualifications for elders and deacons in the church. And the chapter gives this wonderful description of what God wants leadership to be like and it's so good because it's so different to what the culture around us often values. Part of the reason why Paul was writing that is because he's conscious that he might be delayed in coming to Ephesus to see Timothy in person as you can see in the verses there. And then as I said, he just throws in this wee comment about the church. He says, it's a pillar and buttress of the truth. And it's that wee statement that I want us to focus on tonight. I want you to imagine that you're at work tomorrow morning or that you're meeting somebody in town and they ask you, how was your weekend? And you say, it was good. You say, I was at church and then they say to you, oh, okay, what's your church like? What would you say? How would you describe it? And there's probably lots we could say, but you say, well, a church is a community of believers. We're worshiping, we're singing, it's a family, we're together, it's a time of fellowship. All of that is true. But if somebody said to you, what's your church like? Would you ever think of saying, my church is a pillar and buttress of the truth? That's maybe not what immediately comes to mind. And yet right here, Paul is telling us that that's exactly what our church is meant to be. There's a lot that we could focus on here. So I don't want to, I want to kind of be selective if possible and I'm picking out three things. We're going to start broad and then we're going to kind of narrow down as we go. So first of all, we're being taught here a big lesson about Christianity.

So I want to think about that for a few minutes. Then we're being taught a lesson about us as a church. And then we're being taught a lesson about ourselves as individuals. So we're starting big and we're getting smaller as we go. So first of all, we have a big lesson about Christianity here. And the lesson that's being taught is that at the very heart of Christianity is one absolutely crucial principle. The truth. At the core of Christianity is a quest for truth. And so Christianity is a worldview that's made up of words, statements, doctrines, prophecies, historical records and promises. In other words, it's grounded on a vast collection of data and in seeking to present various pieces of information to the human race. But in presenting that information, Christianity is not saying, here is a pathway for life that might be true. And even if it's not, it'll do you good. Christianity is not saying that at all. Christianity is saying, here is the truth. And we will gladly openly say if it is not true, it's worthless. But if it is true, then it is the most important message that you will ever hear. And Paul himself spoke in those terms in 1 Corinthians, he says, if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain. And your faith is in vain. Biblical Christianity has no interest whatsoever in being a maybe. It's got no time for the idea of being one truth among many. Its goal is not to inspire or fascinate or even to astound people. Its goal is to tell the truth. And that concern for truth is seen throughout the whole Bible. That's why if you go back to the Old Testament, you see a firm prohibition against bearing false witness. You see a constant concern about false prophecy. And there's an abhorrence of any idol that falsely claims to be God. And the same concern continues into the New Testament. It's what lies behind this letter that Paul wrote to Timothy. If we turn back into chapter one, you'll see that this concern for truth is one of the key issues that lay behind this letter. Let me read these verses from the very beginning. Paul says, as I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrines, nor to devote themselves to myths, in other words stuff that's not true, and endless genealogies, which promote speculations against stuff that's not true, 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 swearing from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they are making confident assertion.

[8:34] Paul is writing this letter because there's people in Ephesus talking rubbish. Teaching stuff that's not true. And Paul is opposed to that speculation and to all this false teaching that's contrary to what the Gospel says. And the reason for that is because as far as Paul is concerned, it all comes down to a question of truth. If the Gospel is true, then the teaching that contradicts it is false and dangerous. That's why in the next chapter Paul will talk about those who followed false teaching and he describes them as liars. All of this should make perfect sense because it's bringing us back to one of the most basic presuppositions of Christian theology, namely that only certain stuff is true. So Christianity is one of many world views that you can hold. Now a world view is just a way of understanding the universe. Everybody has a world view. You've all got a world view, whether you've thought about it or not. Everybody has a conception for understanding the reality that's around them. Here's a rather unimpressive picture of four of the main world views that you have. First one is the naturalistic world view, which you can see there, which is basically the idea that the universe is a closed unit with nothing supernatural. It starts with nothing. It then exists for a period of time as almost like a mechanical machine that just is based on processes, connect one to another, and then the ultimate culmination of it is nothing. So you go from nothing to a machine to nothing.

That's a purely naturalistic, closed world view. The other one is a pantheistic world view, where you view everything as kind of divine. So the first one says nothing is divine.

The second one says everything is divine. So when you live, you then die, but you're kind of absorbed back into the ground, which is also divine. And then you can come back into life, maybe as another human or something else. And everything goes round and round in circles. And that's very much what dominates a lot of the Eastern religions and the New Age philosophies that have

been arising in recent years. You've got that kind of cyclical mindset. There's also the mystical world view. That was very prominent in kind of Greek mindsets, but it still exists right through to today, with the idea that there's physical stuff in front of us, but there's also mystical stuff. So people say, yeah, I believe in a higher power. I believe there's something out there. And, you know, when we die, we'll go to be together in the spirit and the far side of the sky or whatever it might be. That kind of mystical world view. And then there's the biblical world view, where you have a creator and a creation. God is the creator and the explanation of everything. And the whole of history and the whole of the universe is his creation. These two are distinct, but the creation derives its existence from the creator. Paul's basic presupposition is that only one of them can be through. And I think common sense should tell you that as well.

And that's because they're incompatible with each other. They can't all be right. And so we have to pick one that we choose as the truth. But we can go a wee bit further, because even if you accept the bottom right hand one, the biblical world view, even within that there are differences as to how our relationship with God, our creator, is to be understood.

So this morning I was in the mood of using my imagination. This evening I'm in the mood of throwing terrible pictures. Here's another one. There's three different views as to how the Bible can be understood in terms of our relationship with God. The first is a staircase where we work our way up to God. So God's up there, and if we can be good enough, we can climb that staircase and reach God. It's a workspace salvation. And we see that in many aspects of many Christian heresies basically, and also in religions that are connected to Christianity, particularly Islam would be the great example that you have to be good enough to work your way up to God. And part of the Islamic world view is that you've got an angel on either side of you. One counts all your good deeds and one counts all your bad deeds. And obviously you want the good ones to outweigh the bad ones. Others have a kind of smiley approach where they think everything's going to be fine because God loves everyone and everyone will be saved. And so it's all fine. It's just like a smiley face, no worries. And some Christian theologies have been based around this. The idea, you know, we can do what we like because God will save everyone. And it's almost as though God owes it to us, you know, because we're so good. Or there's a relationship based on love, a relationship of privilege and responsibility, a relationship grounded on commitment, cost and grace. And again, Paul's concern is that only one of them is true. The first one is based on people who are scared of God, trying to impress him and be good enough for him.

[14:49] That is not the Gospel. The second is based on a God who's scared of people. That is not the Gospel either. The third is based on a God who so loves his people that he sent to some to die for them. But who also expects us to love him so much that we will live for him in a committed, meaningful, beautiful relationship. And that's the Gospel. The Gospel is not the message of a brutal taskmaster that we have to impress. That's why Paul opposes the teaching in this letter that says, you know, you need to observe this festival, you need to avoid this kind of food. Paul's saying, no, that's not the Gospel. But neither is the Gospel the message of a pathetic God who's trying to indulge us in fear of our reactions. That is not the Gospel. God is neither brutal nor is he spineless. He's holy and he is compassionate. He is righteous and he is kind. Or as the words of verse 16 say, great is indeed the message of the, you just go forward one, great indeed is the message, he was, is the mystery of

Godliness. He 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. That's the truth which Christianity claims that the Creator has come to rescue His creation from death through the blood of Jesus Christ. It is a factual, objective, empirical, unchanging truth. Now we need to pause here just for a wee moment because the culture that we live in today struggles with this. The idea of exclusive truth is not popular and people don't like claims for truth that are as strong as this. So sometimes people respond to that by kind of trivializing truth and saying, well, it doesn't really matter too much. For others, truth has become relativized, the relativized, sorry, mispronounced that, so that what's true for me might not be true for you. But I think that most of all, truth has become mysticized in the world that we live in today. If we go back to the first diagram I put up of different world views, which

one is the most popular in Britain today, do you think? Which would you say is the most popular world view in Britain today? Now you might be prone to think, well, naturalist because everybody believes in science and everyone's atheists, but I don't think that that's true because I don't think that people can live with the logical implications of saying that the whole of existence is just a journey from nothing to a machine to nothing. I think the world view that's most popular today is the mystical one. I think Western society today is full of mystics, even though

I'm not sure people are aware of it. And the reason that I'm saying that is because the culture around us repeatedly makes truth claims by means of mystical statements. Now what do I mean by that? Well, if you look at the difficult situations, the difficult questions that our culture is dealing with today, questions of equality or rights or Brexit or gender or whatever it may be, very often you'll discover that the final claim in all of these questions is to the mystical. So when people talk about equality, they talk about it on the basis of their dignity. When people talk about their rights, they talk about it on the basis of being themselves. And politicians are probably the greatest mystics of all. They love to use terms like we are going to be better, stronger, we will pursue worth and value and will. I remember once Boris Johnson in the midst of the whole Brexit mess, this isn't necessarily a dig at Boris, maybe it is. But in the midst of the Brexit mess, I remember him saying the most important thing is that there's a lot of positive energy. That's the most important thing. And you're thinking, I'm not sure that is the most important thing.

But what I'm trying to say is that these things, being myself, positive energy, my dignity, these are all mystical terms. Because no one ever explains what they mean. I don't think anyone even knows what they mean. What is our dignity? What is better? What is being myself?

What is positive energy? We have no idea. These are all abstract mystical terms. There's nothing concrete, verifiable or factual about what these statements mean. And yet these are the final quote of appeal, aren't they? These are the unquestionable truths. And we are already at the point where the mystical is more real than the physical. And we can prove that because in our society today, biology always loses to identity. So my identity, which is an abstract concept, you can't pick it up. That is more real than my biology in the world around us today. Investigation is ruled by ideology. Debate is crushed by dignity.

[20:57] And my rights are more important than whether or not I'm actually right. That's where we are as a culture. But none of this is new. Paul saw exactly the same thing in the false teachers at Ephesus. As we read in chapter one, he said, these people make confident assertions about stuff that they do not understand. The mysticism of the world today is full of confident assertions. I'm not sure that they're so clearly understood at all. It's all led us to a point where truth can become something that we declare. So we just declare it and it's true. And the one who shouts the loudest is the one who gets listened to. But what we must never forget is that in reality, truth is never something that we just declare. Truth is something we discover. That's true whether it's in a science laboratory, a court of law, a research degree, or a medical diagnosis. The great aim is to discover the truth. If you were going in for an operation tomorrow and the surgeon came in and said to you, I can't remember how to do this procedure, but don't worry, there's loads of positive energy in here. That's the most important thing. I think that would be a bit terrifying.

Because what you need from that surgeon is the truth in terms of your diagnosis and in terms of the knowledge to perform that procedure. In every area of life, we need the truth.

Truth is no different. And Christianity's claim is that the Bible is where we find truth about life and death, about God, about humanity. That is where the truth is discovered. We are being reminded in all of this that Christianity is all about the truth. But if we narrow it down a wee bit, we're also learning a lesson here about the church. If we go back to our text, Paul is telling us something about the church. And to do so, he's using imagery from the world of construction. And so he's talking about a pillar and a buttress. Both of these things are used to support a building. You can see pillars in here. We've got them all around our building. A buttress is like an external reinforcement to a wall. A bit that sticks out of a wall to help make sure that the wall stands. I've got a picture here of an example. We don't have buttresses, but you see the bits down the side, the bits that are kind of

jutting out. They are all buttresses. If anyone knows what that building is, I'll be most impressed. You can tell me after the service. But the bits sticking out of the buttresses and in here, we have got pillars. They both serve the same purpose. They hold the building up. Now, immediately, that, if we think about that, it can strike us a bit because it can seem as though it's the wrong way around. We're saying that the church is a pillar and buttress for the truth. But we would tend to think of things the other way around. We would tend to think that the church is standing on the truth, as though the truth is our foundation and we are building ourselves up on top of that. That, of course, is true that the foundation of the church is the apostolic teaching that we have in scriptures. But here,

Paul is not saying that the church is built upon the truth, even though he says that elsewhere. Here he is saying that the truth is held up by the church. So just as this building is held up by these pillars, the truth is held up by the church. And I think the reason that Paul is using that imagery is that he's telling us that if the Bible is where we find the truth, then the church is the place where that truth is being held up for the world to see.

The church is where the truth is proclaimed. The church is where the truth is lived out. And so just like a pillar and buttress holds a building up, so too the church is holding up the truth for the benefit of the world around us. I want to just unpack that in a little bit more detail. Again, there's loads we could say. I've just picked out four things that I'll say very briefly. What does a pillar do? What does it bring? First thing it brings is stability. A pillar keeps a building stable, so does a buttress. That means that the building stays standing, it's held up, it's secure, consistent, solid. And that's exactly what the church is here to do in terms of the truth of the gospel. We're here to be a place where it is held up, stable, consistent, and secure. If we believe as Christians that the Bible presents us with unchanging truths, then we want to hold them up with unshakable stability.

[26:32] And it's a reminder that there is a great unchangingness about the Christian church and its message. Now when I say unchangingness, I don't mean the kind of like we don't change sort of traditionalism that has sometimes been present in our churches across the whole Christian church. What I mean is an uncompromising commitment to the truth, the unchanging truth of God's Word. So if you look at that pillar, when do you want that pillar to stop doing its job? When do you want it to change its task or to do something different? Never.

You want that pillar to stay exactly where it is. And if you think about it, the worst thing that a pillar can do is move. And it's exactly the same for us. We are to consistently hold up God's Word, the gospel message of Jesus. And we do not for one second think that oh well now that it's 2000 years later, it's not so relevant. Absolutely no way. We are sticking to the truth of what Jesus taught. We are staying exactly where we are. We want to be stable as a church, holding up God's truth. Second thing a pillar gives you is confidence. So these pillars all look nice, but they're not primarily here to be decorative.

They are here for a structural purpose. They are here to hold up the balcony. And if you were all sitting upstairs, you would all be trusting these pillars because they're what's keeping you in your place. And Paul is implying that the church should give the same confidence to people in terms of God's truth. Now we know that many times throughout the last 2000 years the church has done the opposite. And it's undermined rather than fostered confidence in God's truth. But the reason that happens is when people detach themselves to what God has actually said in his Word. And if you think about it, that makes sense structurally.

If that pillar detaches itself from the rest of the building, then it's all going to come down. But if it stays connected, then it gives confidence to everyone who would be in that balcony. That was what was happening in Ephesus. There was false teachers coming in. They were rejecting the truth, shipwrecking their faith. It's happened throughout the history of the church. Timothy has been told by Paul to stand thorough. And every church needs to do the same. So it gives us stability, gives us confidence. The third thing a good pillar gives us is usability. That may seem very obvious, but the presence of the pillars in this building means that we can use it. It's able to serve a purpose. And that's one of the great roles of the church to make God's truth usable. In other words, the truth of the gospel is not some secret knowledge that we keep tucked away. Instead, it's knowledge that can be used. It's, in fact, it's the most useful and important knowledge that can ever be shared.

And our role as a church is to hold that up so that you can use it. And the amazing thing about God's Word is that you can take it and use it for every single need that you have.

[30:10] You can use it to take away the burden of all your mistakes. You can use it to find peace. You can use it to transform your life. You can use it to overcome sin. You can use it to obtain hope. You can use it to remove the fear of death. You can use it to know God himself. That is such useful knowledge. So we've got stability, confidence, usability.

The fourth thing is presence. It's easy to think that the idea of being a pillar involves being kind of static, motionless, maybe even passive. That's too in the sense of a kind of consistent stability. But in terms of reaching out into the world, it's not true. In fact, as pillars and buttresses, the church is performing a vital role in mission. Because as every pillar and buttress holds up a building to give it a presence in the community it lives in. So the church is holding up the truth so that we can have a presence in the world.

Every single person who drives past here can see this church building. Why? Because the pillars are holding it up. We want it to be the case that every single person who meets us this week can see the truth of God in our lives because we are holding that up. We want to keep it ever present to the people who are around us. Our role as a church is to be a pillar and buttress for the truth, to hold it up for the world to see. So there's a lesson about Christianity, a lesson about us as a church. Lastly and very briefly, we learn a lesson about ourselves as well. Every time we think or talk about the church, we always remember that we're not talking about a building. When the New Testament talks about the church, any building imagery is precisely that imagery to describe people. It's speaking about us. So when Paul talks about a pillar and buttress of the truth in 1 Timothy chapter 3 verse 15, he is talking about you. You are the ones who are holding up the truth of the Christian faith. This is our duty that we hold up the truth of the gospel. We all play our part in that. And there's one very important thing I want us to note here. If you look again at this pillar here, when is that pillar not holding up the balcony? Again, the answer is never. It's always doing it. So this week, as you go into this week as a Christian, at what point are you not holding up the truth of God's message in your life? The answer is never. We are these pillars all the time. And that means this has got to shape the way we live our lives. And that's reinforced in the way Paul speaks in this chapter. He says overseers need to be above the above reproach. Deacons must not be double-tongued. Wives or women must be faithful. Widows must not be gossips. Servants must be honourable. All of that is because the truth contained in the Christian message needs to be seen in the integrity, honesty and consistency of the lives that we live. And it all makes perfect sense because the truth of God's message, if it's true, should transform the way each one of us lives. It should humble us because it shows us that we're tiny before an infinite God.

But at the same time, it should make us gentle because God has been so kind and tender towards us. It should make us compassionate because the people around us are broken and precious.

[34:23] It should make us self-controlled because we know that we're capable of sin and of hurting others. It should make us generous because we don't need to love money. It should make us truthful because Christianity is all about the truth. We want it to be the case this week that people can look at me and look at you and think there is something amazing in their lives. There's something that's got to be true because it's transforming them.

And I think that that's where it's really important to remember that if I am a pillar and but this is the truth, and if you are, as you go into the week ahead and you think of the people that you're going to encounter, whether it's with work or with the community or whatever, you might be the only pillar and buttress of truth that they're ever going to meet.

They've got, I think, literally thousands of voices talking nonsense around them, whether it's in the media or whatever it may be. But in you, they're going to find a pillar and buttress for the truth. And wouldn't it be brilliant if the people who knew me would say that about me? What's Thomas like? Well, I think he's a pillar and buttress of the truth. Wouldn't that be amazing to have that written on your gravestone? That is how we want to live our lives.

So the church is a pillar, a pillar and buttress of the truth. And may that encourage us because it reminds us that Christianity is the truth, but may it also challenge us so that our lives reflect that and display it. And just as we close, maybe the last thing that we need to say is this, that if you're maybe

not yet a Christian or not sure, then I want you to go away and spend the rest of the week thinking about this question. Where is the pillar and buttress of truth in your life? If it's not Jesus, then what is it?

I mean, let's pray. Father, we thank you that in your word, you give us the truth.

[37:14] We pray that we would be a pillar and buttress of that truth, collectively as a church proclaiming your message and living it out in our day to day lives, but may it also be true of us as individuals that we would consistently and faithfully live every day of our lives in a way that is following your truth and in a way that's displaying your truth. We need your help with it all. We pray.

Our closing Psalm is from Psalm 25, a Scottish soldier version singing verses four to eight. And these are the great, these words are a great prayer to pray as we think about all these things. Show me thy ways, O Lord, thy paths, or teach them me, and do thou lead me in thy truth, there in my teacher be. Let's stand and sing these words together.