

I am glad that our summer Wednesday services are back. These are valuable to me. I like that we gather at the end of the day. This opens up a couple of my favorite hymns. And I like the simplicity. I like that we can wrestle with topics or texts with depth.

These services give us an additional opportunity to hear God’s Word, to pray, and to place ourselves under the authority of the Church. Finding our place under that authority is a real need today in our world. The rebellious and autonomous spirit is alive and well.

As Christians, we really should be at Church as often as we can. Not just an occasional Sunday. Not just on Sundays. And not because of me. The Church isn’t about celebrity or popularity. We can’t think like consumers. We can’t let individualism hold sway over us. We are here because of what the Church is—and what we are—and what happens here.

The Church is the Bride of Christ. It is a spiritual house. But it’s not just the building. It’s also not just the people. It is the gathering of true believers around the means of grace—the Word preached, and the Sacraments stewarded. These are the ways in which Christ has promised to be with His people.

Remember—in this post-Ascension season—Christ rules over His Church from above. In Colossians 1, Paul tells us that Christ “is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.” Then Ephesians 5, he says, “Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.”

We are going to talk about the Church this summer—its purpose—and its role in our lives. Paul’s Epistle to 1 Timothy will lead the way. It’s one of those books that doesn’t get much time in our lectionary. And yet, it is rich in content.

It all begins with Paul—sometime shortly after his first imprisonment in Rome—maybe AD 65 or so. He writes from Macedonia—possibly Thessalonica or Philippi or Neapolis. On his way there, Paul encountered Timothy in Ephesus—on the western coast of modern Turkey. Timothy served this Church as a young pastor—even as Paul served Timothy as a father, a bishop in the faith. And Paul urged him to stay there. He has a task for Timothy.

He is to address false teaching in the Church in Ephesus. This is not a pleasant task. But it is a necessary one. The doctrine that we hold matters to Paul. Ideas have consequences. The way that we worship—or don’t worship—truly impacts our faith—and thus our eternal destiny.

There is a Latin phrase from the 5th century that gets at this, “*lex orandi, lex credendi*” and it translates to “the law of worship is the law of faith.” And I have seen it again and again. When people stop attending Church—or when they hold the true Church at arm’s length—they inevitably embrace ideas and lifestyles—and ultimately an eternity—not in keeping with God’s Word.

The drift happens so fast. It happens with individuals. And it even happens with whole denominations. And let’s take up these warnings as Paul shapes the Church through Timothy, confronting both false teaching and false living.

His letter begins like this, “As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine.”

The verb that gets translated *urge* in this context has a warm personal feel. Paul *urges* Timothy to stay in Ephesus. But the verb translated as *charge* is much more direct and forceful. This verb occurs five times in this Epistle. Timothy must *charge*—he must *demand*—certain persons not to teach false doctrine.

Paul gives Timothy the Apostolic authority to require certain members to stop spreading error. Authority is an important concept in the Pastoral Epistles—1&2 Timothy and Titus.

In Ephesus, there were certain members teaching different doctrines. The word *orthodox* means right teaching—and right worship. Here, some are promoting ideas that are *heterodox*—something other than right teaching—or right worship.

Paul uses this same word later in chapter six. He says, “If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing.” Notice the categories—sound words and godliness. This is doctrine and life.

And Paul gives us details. These people in Ephesus are devoted to their own false teachings—myths and endless genealogies—speculations. And here, some explanation is necessary.

Much of the New Testament deals with the relationship between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant—between the Mosaic Law and the coming of Christ. And this seems to be the debate over *genealogies* in Ephesus. The craze for genealogies inevitably spawned a type of Bible interpretation that lost itself in trifles and fables—to the neglect of what is important—divine training in the faith.

Myth is a negative term in Scripture characterizing beliefs that are fanciful, untrue, and even deceptive. Think about the ancient pantheon of Greek and Roman gods—and even the writings of many of the philosophers. Or today, this might refer to urban legends, conspiracy theories, and end-times speculation. And the result is controversy, idle chatter, useless talk, and vain discussion.

The problem is that certain persons want to be teachers on such topics—but they think too highly of their own opinions. They don’t understand Paul’s teachings. They lack the theological precision of the Apostles. Some of the errors include their teachings about the Law. And as is often the case, their view of God allowed them to continue in sin unchecked.

We see this in our day too. People use the love and grace of God to excuse all kinds of immorality. We have discussed this at length in our Tuesday Bible study. But Paul’s is not having it. Timothy is called to correct these errors. The moral law of God—written on our hearts—and encapsulated in the Ten Commandments—remains. It is even good—as Paul says here. It still gives us wisdom about what pleases or displeases God—even though Christ has perfectly fulfilled the Law in our place.

In fact, Paul’s list reads much like the Ten Commandments. Verses 9 and 10 nearly mimic the First, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth Commandments. These commandments remain especially for all those who would prefer to break them. In Christ,

we should want to keep the commandments. But for those who prefer to rebel, the Commandments remain. His commandments are sacred and cannot be escaped.

To get specific, Paul tells us that there are illegitimate attractions. Not every desire is beneficial—adultery and homosexuality. These are affections humans can develop that are neither natural nor healthy. These are loves that we cannot accept—that no one should accept. Such passions produce complete chaos and moral anarchy. They end in lawlessness and disobedience to God.

And the heart of all of this is self-love. In Greek, this is called *φίλαυτια*. Paul uses this word in 2 Timothy 3. And notice the recapitulation of the Ten Commandments in this list as well. “For people will be *lovers of self*, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.”

This is the greatest obstacle to Christian progress. With such things, we dishonor the God who made us. Such behaviors also treat our neighbors with disrespect. And Christ came to redeem us from sin—not so that sin would remain in our hearts unchecked. The Church must teach rightly and honestly about such things. But with all humility and compassion as well. Or as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10, “Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.”

Paul calls the Church to sound doctrine—healthy doctrine that accords with the Gospel of the glory of God—with which he has been entrusted. And with these words, Paul affirms that whatever is contrary to the Old Testament Law is also contrary to Christian doctrine. God’s Law can legitimately be used to point out sin in whatever form it may take in a given culture.

This is why Luther includes the Ten Commandments in the Small Catechism. They still have moral authority over our lives. They still call us up short when we sin. They take away our excuses. They show us the true life of the Church. And they invite us to see the world through God’s eyes—as He designs life for us.

But as usual in most of his Epistles, everything flows from the Gospel. Because of the Gospel, the Church has a very specific charge from Jesus Christ. The Church has a stewardship from God that is by faith. Sound doctrine conforms to the glorious Gospel. And it is grounded in what God has done for us.

He says, “The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” The goal for Timothy as he instructs the Church is love—rightly defined in Christ. And clearly, for Paul, love doesn’t hold back from confronting error with the truth. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, love “does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.”

But the love of Christ produces in us a pure heart—free from sin—free from drama. This is rather shocking because in so many passages we are reminded that the condition of our hearts is fallen and corrupt. Jesus Himself will say in Matthew 15, “Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person.” And so, the purity of heart is a gift of forgiveness—it is a gift of regeneration.

The love of Christ produces a good conscience. This is not the kind of good conscience that says we have no regrets—that our sins made us better—that we refuse to feel guilty. It is, instead, a conscience that has been set free from sin.

It is knowing that our sins have been covered in the blood of Christ—that He has taken our guilt away—and we are set free to live without all those things from our past hanging over us. The humiliation of confessed sin does not paralyze the penitent in impotent self-recrimination. Instead, God’s forgiving grace releases us for a new and abundant life.

And finally, the love of Christ produces a sincere faith. Faith is trust in Jesus Christ for what He has promised to do. It is belief by way of the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets. Faith means eyes fixed on Jesus as Savior, Lord, and Guide. Faith is loyalty to the Lord of the Church. It means being where He has called us. It means loving His Bride, the Church.

As usual, Paul covers a lot of ground quickly. His epistles are packed. It all comes at us like a firehose. Paul’s introduction—and his initial charge to Timothy are meaningful. He begins to define the Church for us. Paul was a spiritual father to Timothy—and all of us need spiritual fathers.

The Church is Apostolic—it needs sound doctrine—and the correction of error. And this means we start believing like the Church. We know the Scriptures—and our creeds and confessions. Our thoughts, words, and deeds conform to the tradition that we have been given from Christ Himself. We prioritize the corporate gathering over everything else in our schedule—because we know what God does for us here.

He forgives our sins. He corrects false doctrine and frees us from myths and conspiracy theories and other meaningless discussions. He puts the love of God in our hearts. And He grants us a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith. So, come under the authority of the Church. Share our confession of faith. Walk in the ways that have been passed down to us. It’s a good place to be. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+Soli Deo Gloria+