

12. We believe in the true church, composed of all blood-washed believers.

(Transcript of message preached by Pastor Rick Minett on May 15, 2005 at Grace Community Church)

"These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of truth" (1 Timothy 3:14-15).

The Apostle Paul teaches us that the true church is composed of all blood-washed believers. He is not talking about a social club that meets on Sundays and Wednesdays, he is not talking about church membership, nor is he talking about a host of other things that many people think makes them part of the true church. Frankly, one can belong to "a church" and never be part of the "true church." Let's remember that Nicodemus was a religious man before he met Christ, but religion wasn't enough. And though he could talk religiously and act religiously, Jesus wanted him to know that those things would not open the doors of heaven. Religion won't "cure" a lost man; he needs something more, he needs a relationship. He needs regeneration. He needs to be born again. He needs to have his sins washed away by the blood of Jesus. "What can wash away my sins?" the hymn writer says, "nothing but the blood of Jesus." And when we confess our sins, repent and change the way we are going, our heart changes because it is cleansed by the blood of Jesus and our life changes as a result of regeneration. Now that we are saved, we want to follow His statutes and now that we are "blood-washed" we have the power necessary to keep them.

Prior to His ascension, Jesus told His disciples to remain in Jerusalem and wait for what He called "the Promise of the Father." And then Jesus told them that something supernatural was about to take place; they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit. In Acts 1:8, Jesus said, *"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."* The next thing we know we find about 120 followers of Christ in an upper room of someone's house, very possibly the house that belonged to Mary, the mother of John Mark; and they are gathered together in one accord in prayer. Then something incredible happened! Acts 2 begins this way, *"When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance."* Immediately we see a dramatic change in the lives of these believers; they are filled with power and the church is birthed.

Simon Peter, who only weeks before, three times denied that he even knew the Lord, now boldly stands up in the middle of Jerusalem and preaches the first sermon of the church and says, without timidity, *"Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."* And the Bible says that *"those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them"* (Acts 2:41). And verse 47 of Acts 2 says, *"And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved."* Now, I would call that power, wouldn't you?

As you know, power can be used in at least two ways. It can be unleashed or it can be harnessed. For example, drop a match into ten gallons of gasoline and you will have an explosion; it will be immediately unleashed. But when that same gasoline is channeled through the engine of a car in "a controlled burn" it can be used to transport a person several hundred miles. There are times when we need "explosions" and there are times we need a "controlled burn." Pentecost was an explosion. His presence was like "tongues of fire." And thousands were affected by the "burst of God's power." But that same Spirit works through the church, which is the institution that God established to channel the power of the Holy Spirit for the long haul.

Colossians 1 begins this way, *"Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are in Colosse: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of your love for all the saints; because of the hope which is laid up for you in heaven..."* Those few verses tell us a lot about the church.

The Church: People Who Have A Strong Faith In The Savior

Paul says, *"...since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus..."* Members of the true church are easily identified. They are not only people of faith, but they are people who are faithful. True faith isn't a single action, but a lifelong way of living. In other words, we are "saved" by faith and we are called to "live" by faith. *"For the just shall live by faith"* (Galatians 3:11).

All of us exercise faith daily. When you drive across a bridge, whether you realize it or not, you exercise faith. Every time you eat in a restaurant you exercise faith. When you sit in a chair, you exercise faith. You believe the bridge will hold the weight of your car, the food will not kill you, and the chair will be able to bear your bodyweight. Faith in Christ is very much like this as well. It requires that we both believe and then act on that belief. And the early Church not only believed, but they acted on that belief and the results were incredible. They believed in the promise of the Father. They believed that the power of the church was not in their abilities, but the power of the church was in the presence of the Holy Spirit that had come to fill the church. So they essentially said, "Holy Spirit, flow through us." And when that happens; when a church truly allows the power of the Holy Spirit to flow through it—watch out. The gates of hell shall not prevail against it!

I get letters nearly on a weekly basis, and I'm sure that you do as well, to join a group, a club, or an organization. Our culture is filled with a multiplicity of organizations. And sadly, a lot of folks see the church as merely one more organization, one more option on their

list of choices. Many people view the church as a spiritual Lion's Club. "They are both engaged in good works," people say, "but the church has a spiritual tint to theirs. So if you want to engage in benevolent work with a spiritual flavor, join the church. If that doesn't interest you, then there are lots of options; any will do, they are all basically the same." However, Paul calls the church much more than a social organization. He calls the church "...the pillar and ground of truth."

There was a time when people were saying all kinds of things about Christ. Some said he was John the Baptist, others said he was Jeremiah or Elijah back from the dead. So Jesus asked His disciples, "*But who do you say that I am?*" (Matthew 16:15). And Simon Peter said, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*" (Matthew 16:16). And then Jesus said that "on this rock" He would build His church and the gates of hell would not prevail against it. The "rock" wasn't Simon Peter; the "rock" was truth! Jesus is the Son of the living God! The church must be built on truth or it simply cannot stand.

John 1:17 says, "...truth came through Jesus Christ." John 8:32 says, "*And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.*" In John 14:6, Jesus proclaims, "*I am the way, the truth, the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.*" When Jesus prayed for His disciples in His high priestly prayer before His crucifixion, He asked this of His Father in John 17:17, "*Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.*" Romans 1:18 says, "*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and the unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness...*" And you may remember that Paul warns Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:7 to turn away from certain types of people who lead people astray because, as Paul says, they are "*always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of truth.*" As a church, we are not only called to proclaim truth, we are called to safeguard truth.

I sense a tendency in the contemporary church to "soften the truth" for the sake of growth. We know that sometimes the truth hurts. For example, last year I went to my urologist for an annual exam and he found that I had cancer for the second time. And when he found it, he didn't try to spare my feelings. He said, "Rick, you've got cancer. You need surgery and you need it right away. We've got to get the tumors out of there or they will eventually kill you." Isn't that what you want your doctor to do? I do! I don't want him to say to himself, "Well, I hate to give this poor guy bad news, so I'll just tell him that if he eats healthy and thinks positive, he'll be fine." If I'm dying, I want to know! If there's a remedy, I want to know what it is. And my concern is that our churches may be filled with people who are dying, but we aren't directing them to the remedy because we are afraid to tell them the truth. But Paul said the church must be the "*pillar and ground of truth.*"

Oprah is not the pillar of truth. Dr. Phil is not the pillar of truth. Hollywood is not the pillar of truth. Washington D.C. is not the pillar of truth. So where do people go who are searching for truth? They have to go to the church and that is why we cannot afford to compromise it for any reason! That is why our faith must remain strong in the Savior and not in the passing fads of popular opinion.

The Church: People Who Have A Sincere Love For The Brethren

In Colossians 1, Paul says, "...since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of your love for all the saints." John Wesley said, "There is no such thing as a solitary Christian." That means that our faith in Christ must not only be "worked out" in living witness to the world; it must also be "lived out" in love and friendship and fellowship with other believers. One of the reasons the early church made such an impact on its world is because, according to Acts 2:26, "they continued daily with one accord in the temple." The church affords us the privilege of togetherness and fellowship. Great strength comes by being able to share our lives with one another and mutually care for one another. Perhaps that's the reason why the writer to the Hebrews warns us in Hebrews 10:25 to "*not forsake the assembling of ourselves together.*" People so often join a church and think that because they've joined the church, that's it—they don't need to attend, they just need to join.

It reminds me of the old story about the three pastors that got together one day for lunch and discovered that all three had a problem with bats in the attic of their churches. One pastor said, "I got so fed up with them that I took a shotgun up into the attic and started firing, but all it did was make holes in the roof." The second pastor said, "Yea, I know what you mean. I set a trap, caught them, and drove 100 miles away before releasing them, but they beat me back to the church!" The third pastor said, "I used to have a problem with bats as well." The other two looked at him and said, "Used to? You mean you got rid of them for good." He said, "Sure did." They said, "How?" He replied, "I simply baptized them, made them members of my church, and I haven't seen them since."

But we need each other! All of us have our own unique gifts, which together, make up the body, and that togetherness and dependency upon one another is very healthy spiritually. Scientists are now suggesting that it may be very healthy physically as well. An article from a recent edition of the Wall Street Journal was entitled, "Body and Spirit: Why Attending Religious Services May Benefit Health." The article said several things, such as, "A growing body of scientific evidence shows that Americans who attend religious services at least once a week enjoy better-than-average health and lower rates of illness, including depression. Perhaps most important, the studies show that weekly attendance confers a significant reduction in mortality risk over a given period of time." One of the doctors quoted in the article was a Dr. Powell, who said, "After seeing the data, I think I should go to church." In other words, the article said that if you go to church on a weekly basis not only will you live longer than people who don't, but you will enjoy better health while you are alive. Pretty amazing!

Let us never forget that the church wasn't man's idea, it was God's. That means the church is obviously very important in God's plan for man and that also means that church attendance isn't optional. God established corporate faith and the New Testament just assumes that people who are believers are connected to a local church where they live out their faith. You can search the scriptures from cover to cover and you will not find "individual and independent Christianity." Just think of the images or expressions that God uses in defining the church in the New Testament; images such as: "An army, a body, a fellowship, a community, a family..." None of them suggest an individual or independent Christianity. And all of those are powerful images, but possibly the most compelling is the image of "a family."

We know that the most significant relationships that we have in life are with our family. We are related to one another by blood; therefore the old saying, "Blood is thicker than water." And it's true! And members of the true church are united by blood as well—the blood of Jesus Christ. The blood of Jesus unites us, the blood of Jesus empowers us, and the blood of Jesus compels us to live in community and love and serve one another as the family of God. When one member is hurting, all the members suffer and should come to the aid of the one hurting. We are also called to equip, disciple, encourage, admonish, and at times, possibly even rebuke one another in the spirit of love and humility. And these things aren't done by programs—they are done by people! These things only occur in the context of community and that is why all of us must become involved. I need you and you need me. You need what I have in God and I need what you have in God. And when we are willing to walk in the light of that revelation, the whole church is not only built up, but it becomes a powerful force in the world.

The Church: People Who Have A Sure Hope Of Heaven

In Colossians 1, Paul said, "... because of the hope which is laid up for you in heaven..." I've met Christians all across this globe and one of the things that unite us is the blessed hope that we have of heaven. Today our lives may differ greatly, but our hope for the future is the same. Members of the true church know this world is not their home. Members of the true church not only long for, but they live for heaven. And members of the true church lay up their treasures in heaven, not on the earth. As members of the true church, we know something; we know that this life is not all there is. Matter of fact, we know that the best is yet to come.

The philosophy of the world is instant gratification. Call it the "buy now, pay later" plan. We are not conditioned by the system of this world to hope for anything and we surely don't want to wait for anything. But for true believers, it's altogether different. We have a hope that reaches beyond the parameters of this globe and life. 1 Peter 1:4 speaks of an inheritance that is *"incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith..."*

Five years ago we bought a new SUV. When I drove it off the lot it only had 10 miles on it. At first I loved that car—I washed it, waxed it, changed the oil every 3,000 miles and pampered it like a baby. But something happened at about 60,000 miles; it started to fall apart. And for the next 40,000 miles everything that could go wrong, did. First, it was the air-conditioning, then the ball-joints, then every single window motor, the transmission...and finally the engine. But all of us know that things this side of heaven, usually disappoint us eventually. They break down, they rust, and they fail to keep their promise. But there is a promise that will never fail us, never disappoint us and never be any less than it always has been and will be—and that promise is heaven. Maybe that is why Paul says, *"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us"* (Romans 8:18). That's why we endure. That's why we persevere. We rest in a promise that tells us that *"eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him"* (1 Corinthians 2:9). Remembering our blessed hope will give us the perspective we need to not only live in the here and now, but it will also help us to recognize what is really important and lasting in contrast to that which is temporary and fleeting.

So what is the church? The church is composed of people redeemed by the Son of God, brought together by the will of God to live together as the family of God, in order to do the work of God in the power of the Spirit of God, all for the glory of God, while longing for the home of God. Therefore, let us stand in faith, walk in love, rest in hope, without compromise. If we will do this, our lives will be transformed and so will the lives of more people than we can probably imagine.