

THE CHURCH: A HARBOR OF GRACE

Various Scriptures

Intro – Most of the time when I start a church membership class, I start with this question: “What word to you think of when you think of CHURCH?” When some people think of church, they think of nice things. They think of fellowship and worship. Other people think of not so nice things. What they’ve experienced has been hypocrisy and church splits. Some people think of care and love, others think of domination and past pain. Some think of boring sermons and others think of the exciting journey of learning from the Bible.

Now, I realize that sometimes we have to deal with the baggage that “church” may have left behind in our lives. And perhaps one of the ways of doing that is to just think together about what church is supposed to be. And I’ve kind of been thinking lately that maybe when it comes to what church is supposed to be we should think about the church with the analogy of a harbor.

Jenny’s dad was in the Navy. And we were talking about this yesterday. I told him the basic outline of my thinking on this, and he added one thing. He said that coming into harbor is a time of JOY! After you’ve been at sea for weeks and months, you are delighted to see land, but especially your home port! So there are many ways in which church should be like our home port, a harbor of grace and joy.

Over the next couple of weeks we are going to talk about the church being like a harbor in 3 ways...
Church should be like a HARBOR for rest, encouragement, and growth...
The Church should be like a HARBOR for launching out in ministry...
Church should be like a HARBOR of safety for the hurting...

But today we are only going to be able to deal with the first one...

* When I compare the church to a harbor part of what I’m talking about is that the weekly gatherings of the church can and should be a place and time where the “crew” can rest and be refreshed.

* When the church worships and teaches, when the church fellowships and disciples people the result should be a recharge for our spiritual batteries, just like a ship in harbor would take on provisions for the next leg of the journey. But how is that going to happen? This morning I’m going to talk about our weekly gatherings on the Lord’s Day and the various meetings throughout the week providing this harbor of rest and growth in 3 ways:

- the preaching and teaching of the church
- the protection of the church
- the worship of the church

1. **For the church to be a harbor of rest, encouragement, and growth, it must be a place of preaching & teaching...**

- a. Quoting Moses, Jesus said, “Man shall not live by bread alone (Luke 4.4).” The full quote from Moses goes on to say, “... but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord (Deuteronomy 8.3).”
- b. Clearly, Jesus and Moses are saying that the very bread and drink for our souls is the Word of God. And we all need to have the Word of God proclaimed to us. Otherwise there wouldn’t be so many sermons in the Bible. So take a look with me at...

- 2 Timothy 4:1-2** - I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: ²preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.
- c. There is no doubt whatsoever from this verse that the church is supposed to be a place where our souls are nourished on solid food! Now I realize that this passage from 2 Timothy is directed to a pastor. This passage applies first to me. Not everyone is told to “preach the word” in this passage.
 - d. I believe that we should ALL be able to share the basics of the Gospel.
 - e. I believe that we should ALL know what we believe.
 - f. But it is the responsibility of the pastor to preach the Word!
 - g. (Deal with “open platform” approach to church?)
 - h. But at the same time, the pastor isn’t the only one that can teach the Word of God. Our church has an army of people teaching the Word. In Sunday School classes and Youth Group and Bible Studies there are plenty of opportunities to feast your soul (or provision your ship ☺) on the Word of God!
 - i. **Application** - And of course the question is: are you feasting your soul? Are you coming with a heart that is thirsty for the truth? And then are you sharing the meal? Are you passing on the truth? And finally, are you obeying! We can’t say that we are really listening to God and growing in faith unless we are obeying.
 - j. **Transition / Illustration** – A couple of weeks ago, I met a pastor at a concert. We were both volunteering at the concert because we were both involved in adoption. Anyway, we got to talking and one of the things that he said caught me off guard. He said that out of all the things that he does in a given week, preaching the sermon is the least significant! And I would just say that here at Community Bible Church we operate differently than that. We believe that interacting with the Word of God, and having it preached to our hearts with the seriousness that comes with knowing that it is GOD’s Word is one of the MOST significant things that we do. For the church to be a harbor of rest for our souls, it must preach and teach the Word of God... #2...

2. For the church to be a harbor of rest, encouragement, and growth, it must be a place of protection...

- a. **Acts 20** is where Paul meets one last time with the elders of the church of Ephesus. It was kind of a staff meeting and a farewell combined. And listen to what Paul includes in his final exhortation to these men who had the responsibility of caring for the church...
Acts 20:28-31 - ²⁸Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. ²⁹I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears.
- b. Again, we see that this is the primary responsibility of the elders. So to my fellow elders I say that this is a serious responsibility. We are to be alert to the reality that false teachers would like to suck our people away from the truth and feed them on the husks of false teaching.
- c. But at the same time, as a community we should also be watching out for our own selves and for one another. We should be encouraging one another with truth, with Scripture,

with faithful teaching. And frankly, we should warn one another if someone is getting drawn away by false teaching.

- d. **Illustration** – I have basically taken the approach of J.C. Ryle in preaching and teaching the Word. He said that he wants to simply fill his people's baskets with good wheat so that there is no room for the tares of false teaching.
- e. I mostly want to feed you the truth and allow that to be you inoculation against error. But we can't ignore the reality. All throughout the New Testament there are warnings about false teachers.
 - i. Jesus warned about wolves in sheep's clothing.
 - ii. Many of the NT books were written to combat specific errors.
 - *Galatians... legalism.
 - *Colossians... human philosophies that pull us away from the simplicity of Christ.
 - *1, 2, 3 John... Docetism.
 - iii. Paul regularly mentions false teaching. Listen to what He says in the verses that follow what we read earlier in **2 Timothy 4.3-4** - ³For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, ⁴and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.
- f. **Application** - Please, please, please realize that so much of what is on "Christian" television and is sold at popular "Christian" bookstores is popular because it itches people ears. It tells people what they want to hear. But the truth cuts across the grain of our natural desires.
- g. Again, I've mentioned already that I've not made a habit of calling out false teachers and error from the pulpit. But it still is part of my responsibility and the elder's responsibility to be alert to false teaching and warn against it. So I thought that part of what I should do this morning is simply lay out some categories of false teaching..
 - i. syncretism – mixing false religion, pagan teaching with Christianity. For example, you can't mix some ideas from Buddhism and Christianity and think that you've got the truth.
 - ii. human wisdom – another name for this would be psycho-babble. Just because someone has a PhD behind their name doesn't mean that what they say is true. So often what comes through the pulpits of America is just "self-help" instruction. There is often some truth in it, but that doesn't mean that we should be preaching it in church! And it usually is motivation through our selfish desires.
 - iii. promises too much – The prosperity gospel is simply a false gospel. It takes the promises that God has given us for heaven and assumes that they are for now! We will be rich and healthy in heaven. But now we should expect our blessings to be mixed with trials and even persecutions.
 - iv. requires too much – Legalism says that to be a true Christian you have to keep a certain set of rules. In the New Testament times it was the rules of the Old Covenant like circumcision and Sabbath and food laws. (And by the way, that false teaching is making a comeback. There are people teaching that to be a true Christian you basically have to keep the Jewish feasts, Sabbath, and food laws.) But there are other forms of legalism that require you to dress a certain way, do certain things. Certainly if we love God, it will change our lifestyle, but our "good works" don't save us!
 - v. requires too little – The opposite of legalism is "easy believism". The idea that all you have to do is give mental ascent to a set of truths and then you are a Christian is just as false. True salvation is more than just believing a set of facts, it is a

submission of all that we know of ourselves to all that we know of Christ and it does result in a changed heart.

- vi. liberalism – What I’m talking about here is basically major theological error. If we believe that the Bible isn’t true of that Jesus didn’t rise from the dead then we are not Christians.

Illustration – Steve Brown – Was a theological liberal and was pastoring a church before he was a converted. Finally, God got a hold of his heart and he got on his knees and said, God I believe that this book is Your Word, and I’m going to take it as my authority from now on!

- vii. cult of personality – When there is a controlling leader at the top of a ministry or so much dependence on the personal charisma of the leader that you cross the line into idolatry it is seriously dangerous.

h. Application - Just to close out this point, I think that there are a number of things that will help us guard against error.

- i. We need to be humble because false teaching appeals to our pride.
- ii. We need to love the Lord because false teaching appeals to our love of self.
- iii. We need to love the truth of God’s Word because the authenticity of Biblical truth guards against fraud and error.
- iv. We need to be discerning so that we can know the difference between a legitimate difference of opinion or interpretation and false doctrine.
- v. Finally, I think that we need what I’ve heard called “humble orthodoxy”. That simply means that we have a humility about our firm desire for doctrinal purity. We are humble enough to realize that we have mistakes in our own thinking. But we are also humble enough to submit ourselves to the clear doctrines taught in the Bible. We reject obvious error, we might even be “fierce” in our stand for the core doctrines of the faith; but we are humble enough to realize that genuine brothers are sisters in Christ are going to disagree on some minor issues (like church government) or methodology. May God grant Community Bible Church a “humble orthodoxy”!

- i. **Transition** - So far we’ve said that the church needs to be a place of teaching and preaching. Part of what we do here is feed our souls on the Word of God. A significant portion of my time is spent on preparing Bible centered messages and lessons. And then related to that is the fact that the church should be a place of protection. False teaching is a reality that we must deal with, so we must be alert to error, but also alert to the errors of our hearts that would lead us into pride. But the church should also be...

3. **For the church to be a harbor of rest, encouragement, and growth, it must be a place of worship..**

- a. Now, I want to make sure that we don’t make a serious mistake at this point. We don’t want to think that “teaching and preaching” is all for the head and that worship is all for the heart.
- b. If the preaching only touches your head, then there’s either something wrong with the preaching or the listening! And if our worship isn’t connecting with our heads and our hearts on the level of truth, then we aren’t really worshiping!
 - Sometimes people draw this distinction between the head and the heart. Sometimes, we think that teaching is only meant for our heads. But truth is intended to touch us at the level of LIFE! All of life!

- c. So... just because of the outline, don't think that our hearts can be separated from the preaching and teaching or that our heads can be separated from the worship.
 - But, back to the main point of this section, the church, to be a harbor of grace needs to be a place where we worship God.
- d. Our corporate worship of God includes basically three things:
 - * listening to the proclamation of God's Word (but we've already dealt with that)...
 - * depending on God in prayer...
 - * and praising God in singing...
- e. So let's look at prayer in **1 Timothy 2.1-4** - ¹First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, ²for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. ³This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.
- f. The obvious thing is simply that God wants us to pray. And since this book was written by Paul to Timothy for instructions on how the church should operate, we can assume that God wants us to pray together!
- g. The other thing that we should notice is that Paul wants us to pray for all kinds of people for all kinds of things. There is nothing wrong with praying that the government will let us live and worship in peace and according to our conscience.
- h. But we should also notice that since Paul talks about prayer and then talks about God wanting all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth that we surely should be praying for people to be saved! In fact, we should ESPECIALLY be praying for people to be saved!
- i. Bottom line, if we have not engaged in prayer, we have not worshiped God!
- j. Now let's take a look at singing:

Colossians 3:16-17 - ¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. ¹⁷And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Ephesians 5:18-19 - ¹⁸And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart,

- k. Of course, there is more in this passages than we can cover this morning, but I think that there are two take aways for the purposes of this message:
 - l. Our singings need to be informed by the Word of God ("Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly... singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs..." I think that the idea here is that the truth so impacts our life that we can't hold back! We've got to sing praise to God!
 - m. And then, our singing needs to be empowered by the Spirit of God Himself! "... be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs..." Our praise to God would be empty, it would be meaningless apart the blood of Jesus Christ. He makes our small, human, flawed worship acceptable to God. He "sanctifies it". But in addition to that our praise to God would be just so many words and notes apart from the power of the Spirit. There is no way that we can praise the Almighty sufficiently! Our paltry words and harmonies would be so insufficient and so empty if the Spirit did not take our praises and sanctify them and make them acceptable praise to God!

- n. And the fact that we cannot praise God apart from the empowering of the Holy Spirit means that we should pray to the Spirit to help us to be fully engaged when we worship and to help our hearts to sing and soar to the glory of God!

Conclusion – Next week we will deal with...

The Church: a HARBOR for launching out in ministry...

The Church: a HARBOR for safety for the hurting...

But for this morning, we need to consider whether or not Community Bible Church is a harbor for spiritual rest and growth. And if it is, are you taking advantage of it.

- Do we preach and teach here? If we do are you listening and growing.
- Do we preach and teach the TRUTH of God's Word here or the philosophies of men? And are you guarding your own heart against false teaching? Maybe even more important, are you so filling your storehouse with solid food, steak and baked potatoes, that the "White Castle" of false teaching doesn't appeal to you.
- And finally, do we worship God here? Are you worshipping? Are you participating when we pray? Do listen when we preach? Do you sing when we sing?

And then finally, I've used this analogy of the church being like a "Harbor of Grace" for more than one reason. If we are constantly comparing ourselves with one another (like the idea that I worship God better than this or that person, or like the idea that our church worships God better than this or that church) then we are being especially "ungracious" in our "Harbor of Grace".

There's room for some variety in these areas. And again, ultimately what I think that we need to be a harbor where people can re-provision their souls is a "humble orthodoxy", a "gracious firmness". I believe that these things, preaching the Word, protection from false teaching, and genuine worship will create an environment where people can grow!