

III. Christ's Church in Biblical Perspective
The Ekklesia—Seven Distinctives
“#1: Biblical Fidelity and Confessional Integrity”
I Timothy 3:14–16
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This is the third study of the seven distinctives of a faithful, refreshed, renewed church in the name and for the glory of Christ, His church. We have already established what Christ has said concerning the church, the Ekklesia – the called together ones. God has called us out of darkness into His light to Himself and then assembling of the saints are to be together in the Lord. Jesus said ‘I will build My church’ so the task we have before us is not to redesign or reengineer the church but to understand Christ’s church and then go to work led by the power of the Spirit, led by the Word, on that church that He builds through us. And He promises that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. We have this great promise and assured hope because of Christ’s victory on the cross which He shed for His own church. In doing that He has purchased a triumphant and militant church that is in this world serving Christ and that means it will ultimately prevail until Christ comes again. It does not mean that every local church or every denomination will prevail. If the local church or denomination leaves the Divine design for the church then it will not long last in society.

What is that Divine design that has been established by the Lord? We know that once we understand it that church has to land in a location and in a generation. We have to be careful not to unplug and plug a successful church somewhere else. It doesn’t mean we can’t learn from other churches but it does mean that we don’t start with contextualized models to try to understand Christ’s church. We start with the Word of God and what it reveals for that church transcends all of the ages, all of the cultures. Regardless of where the church is located it will be the same by principle, by mission, by message and by ministry. Now the worship services may be shorter or longer, the small groups may be defined differently but all those things are contextualization issues. We first start with what the church is.

I’d like to share an illustration from my new found observing hobby of flipping housing. One program which I thought initially was a doctor’s program is called Good Bones. The basis of the program is that these houses they came across that were supposedly run-down had all kinds of possibilities because the house still had ‘good bones,’ the foundation, the skeleton that it needed. That is what we are looking at here, the good bones, when God visits His church to refresh, renovate or renew it or when you plant one, this is what we’re aiming at. I have tried to put them in seven distinctives which are the good bones that a living church grows from – how it exists and how it functions. So what does that church look like and how does it contextualize in the location and generation it is being planted or where God in His kindness is bringing revival and renewal?

As we go through these seven distinctives I will expound a key passage of Scripture or a couple of passages that relates to each distinctive and in this study we will look at one of those seven distinctives. The distinctive we are looking at in this study is Christ’s church for the ages, that is effective, bears fruit, God uses and is prevailing where the gates of hell cannot stop it, is identified with Biblical fidelity and confessional integrity. This one is foundational and all the rest of the six distinctives that follow flow from this one. Before we get to the text of Scripture I want to talk about the two terms – Biblical fidelity and confessional integrity.

What is meant by Biblical fidelity? There are four things I want to point out in this about Christ's church. Christ's church that has Biblical faithfulness has the Word of God in the right place. One, the Word of God is the foundation of the church, the saturation of the church and the proclamation of that church. Biblical fidelity of a church is one that has its foundation, saturation and proclamation in the Word of God that is prevailing by the grace of God and to the glory of God. Two, the Word of God is the final authority and is the only rule of faith and practice. It is the supreme authority in that everything we believe and do is ultimately settled by the Word of God. Thirdly, the content of the Word of God is throughout the life and ministry of that church and it is the message that the church sends out because the Word of God is the call of that church. So what do we believe the Word of God teaches?

This brings us to its tandem in the distinctive which is confessional integrity. The confession is what we tell people we believe the Bible is teaching. Is the confession exhaustive? No. Is the confession of the church infallible and inerrant? No. There is a reason that this tandem is expressed the way it is. The Word of God is infallible, inerrant, inspired but our confession is not infallible or inerrant. The Word of God is sufficient for all matters of Christian doctrine in life. Our confession is not sufficient. So we realize that a confession which is the work of men and women led by the Spirit in the distillation of what we believe the Bible teaches, then making that confession visible and vocal that confession may have error.

This is a crucial time in the life of the church because in this moment we are remembering something that happened 500 years ago on October 31, 1517. This year Reformation Sunday will be celebrated in a special way due to this time. So 500 years ago an Augustinian monk who was a professor in systematic theology at Wittenberg University was confronting so many errors in the church that he was a part of and it had risen to the point that he was ready to call for a debate in hopes that the message of the call for the debate would go all the way to Rome, to the Pope, Leo the X and would respond by entering into the debate. This was an academic enterprise that was taking place. This monk had taught the books of Galatians and Ephesians and had gone to the Castle Church in Wittenberg to nail to the door 95 Theses. The 95 Theses was ultimately a call to debate the authority of the church and that would become more than evident over the next three years.

This led to various debates until finally this monk would have to appear before the Church and the State to defend his theses and he acknowledged and finally arrived that *Sola Scriptura* – where the Scripture alone is our only rule of faith and practice. As he stood before the holy Roman Emperor, the kings, princes, electors and representatives of the Roman Church, knowing that he was likely to be sentenced to death, he said 'Here I stand I can do no other. My conscience is held captive to the Scriptures. It is not good to go against conscience. I cannot go against conscience unless I am convinced from Scripture or clear reasoning from Scripture. Counsels err, popes err and men do err, only the Word of God is inerrant.' That means if counsels err then that means their statements, their confessions can err. There are considered authoritative as long as they faithfully represent what the Scripture actually teaches but the final rule is the Scripture.

I want to show you another way that we embrace this. There is this thing called *analogia de fide* which stands for the study of or analogy of faith. This means when you get to a difficult doctrine, a difficult text, and seemingly there is an issue of contradiction or something hard to understand, the final interpreter of Scripture is not the preacher, the counsel, the teacher, the confession or the commentary but that doesn't mean you don't consult them because God uses them and they all have their values. But they are not the final authority of what we believe and

practice. Therefore if there is a difficult issue, it is settled by going to a clearer text because in understanding the more difficult text it cannot contradict the simpler text so you go to the simpler text to understand the more difficult text. That affirms that the Scripture alone is the supreme, final statement on what we believe and practice.

I believe confessions are extremely valuable but they are not inerrant. Almost every single General Assembly of every Presbyterian Church in America are entertaining some overture to change the confession or our constitution. At Briarwood we take oaths to the larger and shorter Westminster Catechism, Confession of Faith and the Book of Church order with the principles of government, worship and discipline. Some probably thought the constitution of this church would be the Bible. So why is the constitution of this church not the Bible based on what I've just said? It is because the role of a constitution is to declare what you believe is actually true. Where do we beget what we believe is true? It is from the Scripture. How do we express it? We express it through our confession but we do not believe that confession is inerrant. Any time you want to change it you don't appeal to the confession, you appeal to the Scripture for it is the Scripture alone that is our only rule of faith and practice. A constitution can be changed or amended but the only way to change the Bible is upon the penalty of malediction – anathema to anyone who adds or subtracts to this Book.

Then our faithfulness to the Scriptures is to be confessed before the world. So why do we believe a confession is crucial to the expression of our Biblical fidelity while recognizing the confession is not inerrant but the Bible is inerrant? It is because the Bible tells us so. So now we are ready to look at I Timothy 3. Here Paul is talking to Timothy at Ephesus.

I Timothy 3:14–16 says [14] *I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, [15] 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.** [16] Great indeed, we **confess, is the mystery of godliness:** (The following is a portion of or composition of a confession concerning how to conduct yourself in the church of God, the household of God, the church of the living God.) *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.**

There is the foundation of Godliness for us in the Christian life for those who find their place and their life within the church of our God, the household of God, the church of the living God. I am going to focus on the part of this text that says **15] 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.**

I hear this continually that you're saved by grace and that there are no 'ought to's' in Christianity. What do you do with that? How one ought to, that is ethically obligated for we have ethical obligations as to how we live as Christians. We don't embrace them to be saved. We embrace them because we're saved. We don't embrace them to enable God to save us, because God has saved us. We embrace these Gospel imperatives, these ethical obligations of how one ought to behave in the household of God.

Notice in the text how he describes the church with multiple titles. One is he calls the church the household of God. The Greek word for house or household is *oikos* but it could also be translated as family. So here this text is referring to how you conduct yourself in the family (household) of God. In other words, the rules of the house. Growing up we had rules in my household. For instance, one rule we had was as soon as we entered the house we had to take off our shoes but that rule didn't come about until my mom talked my dad into getting a light beige carpet. Another rule was we had to all be at supper unless there was an athletic practice and

every Saturday night my family would always eat together. We would always eat Sunday lunch together. I could tell you more of our basic rules but those were just some of them that had to be followed. My mother was supercilious or what most of you would know, obsessive compulsive. I just to tell people my mother would spread newspaper under the coo coo clock just in case. So there were rules of the house we had to operate by. So Peter is telling us that there are rules in the house of God of how the sons and daughters of Christ, brothers and sisters in Christ of how they are to live.

A second way he describes the church is that the household of God is also the church of the living God. The key word here is the Ekklesia – the gathered together ones of the living God, the assembled ones, the called together ones. God has called us together as His people. Hebrews 10:25 says *[25] not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.* We are always to be assembling together in the Lord. The church assembles. This passage is telling us that the Sunday school declaration of *here's the church, here's the steeple, open the door and there's the people,* is a wonderful rhyme but theologically and ecclesiastically full of people because this isn't the church. It is where the church meets. The church are the people that assemble in the meeting place.

The church is also described as the pillar and buttress (foundation) of the truth. What is the truth? The truth is the Word of God. Then he gives us a confession of that truth. He gives us the title of this confession as the mystery of godliness. Let's now look at how the Word of God gives direction to the church and the church is the pillar and buttress (foundation) of the truth. Why is it said like that? You can see pretty quickly the danger some could fall into in the statement 'the pillar and buttress of the truth.'

What would be the danger be? The danger would be if the church is the pillar and foundation then it's the church that makes the truth but that is not true. Remember that no one passage is exhaustive in everything you need to know. What about the church and its relationship to the Word of God? On the one hand, we are built on the Word. On the other hand, we are built to uphold the Word. It is not an either/or but it's a both/and. We are also built to affirm, assure and proclaim the Word.

So what does a buttress do? A buttress holds something up. So the church that is built on the Word then in turn holds up the Word as it elevates the Word because it's also the pillar of the church. What do pillars do? They hold up roofs. They hold up something above them. So as the church is the foundation of the Word, it then becomes a buttress to uphold the Word and then is the pillar of the truth because it proclaims the Word as it lifts up the Word to the world. It proclaims the Word through its confession. One of the distinctives we'll cover in a future study is personal evangelism and that will be proclaiming what we confess in a very pointed way where we have the opportunity to lead others to Christ.

Now let's look at Ephesians 2 so I can support what I just said from another key passage of Scripture. Here is a marvelous statement the Apostle Paul is giving to us about the church. Ephesians 2:18–22 says *[18] For through him we both (Jew and Gentile) have access in one Spirit to the Father. [19] So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the **household of God**, [20] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, [21] in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a **holy temple** in the Lord. [22] In him you also are being **built together** into a **dwelling place** for God by the Spirit.*

Here is the church, the dwelling place of the living God, the Ekklesia, the assembled ones, the household of God and we are built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. The Apostles give us the New Testament and the Prophets give us the Old Testament. The Old Testament points to Jesus the Cornerstone, and the New Testament explains and expounds Jesus the Cornerstone so that all of the Scripture is the glory of the Triune God revealed in Jesus as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. And the church is built on the foundation of the Word of God.

Now, what else is the church supposed to do? It is to be a foundation for the Word of God as long as this church exists. It exists to glorify God through the inerrant, infallible, sufficient Word of God. If this church ever tries to be built on another foundation it will crumble. If this church ever attempts any other mission other than what is defined from the Word of God it will become truly irrelevant, even though it will have probably abandoned the Word of God because the world has said they are irrelevant. Anytime we try to be relevant by the world's definition we will become irrelevant to God. The church is built on the foundation and then built as a foundation and buttress for the Word of God. Then as a pillar, it lifts up the glory and grace of God by the truth in its proclamation of the Word.

Let's look at Jude. Jude 1:3-4 says [3] *Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.* [4] *For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.*

We have a common confession about what our salvation is. 'The faith' is our confession. Our confession of the faith was delivered to us once and for all in the Word of God and in the completion of the Word of God. Jude is telling us to contend for the faith that was delivered to us through the Word of God – Biblical fidelity. But there is something called 'the faith' where we tell people what we believe, our confession. So with Biblical fidelity we embrace confessional integrity. We will not only tell you what we believe through the Word's essentials but we will tell you what it means with clarity and transparency, not hiding it with word games, as to what the Bible means.

Confession is our distillation of what we believe the Bible is saying about those subjects that are in the confession. A confession is telling the world what you believe the Center, the Circumference and the Substance of what our life and ministry is. The Center is the anchor and what it has to hold. The Circumference is telling people we don't believe things that are outside of this, concerning Divine truth about our God. We believe this is what the Bible says and it is the substance of what we believe. When we say it we are going to be loving but clear – confessional integrity. Biblical fidelity and confessional integrity is where we are going to say things in such a way that we're going to take responsibility not just to be technically correct but we're going to take responsibility that you understand us correctly. We are going to be loving, clear, transparent and faithful because the Scripture is the Center, the Circumference and the Substance of where we are and what we believe.

Is our confession inerrant? No. Can it be changed? Yes, it can be changed by appeal to the Scripture in Biblical fidelity but when it's there we will hold to it. When it needs to be changed we'll take the steps to change it but until it's changed we will embrace it as we hold to the system we are confessing. Many think catechisms and confessions sound funny and they may even say 'we don't have that in our church for we have no creed but Christ, we have no confession but the Bible.' So what do you need to say to that? You ask them, who is Jesus. No creed but Christ, then who is Christ? The Mormons would say the same thing but they don't

mean what I mean about Jesus. No confession but the Bible, so what do you mean about the Bible? Many of the churches that say that have about eight more books than we have and they don't give the same authority and integrity to the Bible that we do in our confession, nor do they give it, its place as the final rule of faith and practice.

When they say they have no creed but Christ and no confession but the Bible, then say 'Yes you do for you just gave it to me. It may not be a long one but you just gave it to me when you said no creed but Christ and no confession but the Bible. I don't know what you mean but Christ or the Bible here either.' What we are trying to do is to be clear with people when we say this is what we believe and this is what we hold dear. Why is that important? It is because God's people need to be equipped with it and there are certain persons who try to creep in to pervert what we believe. I wish I could tell you that's not true but it has always been true and it will always be true until Jesus comes again. There is not only the anti-Christ but there are many anti-Christ's. There is not only the Spirit of truth but there is the spirit of error. The testing of the prophets must always be done.

Take the time to know your confession because when you are going along in life and you begin to wonder if it's accurate or not when you know your confession you have something to test what you're hearing. Recognizing the confession is not exhaustive, sufficient or inerrant but it is invaluable to make use of because it has been drawn from the Word of God. Ultimately what we rest in and is our final authority is in the Word of God itself. So Satan has not finished attempting to pervert our message. Satan is at work sending false teachers.

In fact, the very context of the passage in Ephesians I've read to you is when Paul has been released from Roman imprisonment. Before Paul was in Roman imprisonment he was in prison at Caesarea by the Sea and before that he was arrested in Jerusalem. Before Jerusalem Paul was in Asia Minor as he spent three years at Ephesus. Before he left Ephesus he brought the elders together and said this in Acts 20:28–30, *[28] Pay 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. [29] I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; [30] and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.*

That's exactly what happened to Ephesus. It was about to die and Paul sent his best man there, Timothy. Paul laid out for Timothy how to lead that church back to health and vitality. In I Timothy 1 he tells them what true teaching is. In I Timothy 2 he tells them about prayer and then evangelism. In I Timothy 3 he tells them the qualifications of leaders. After giving him some of these 'good bones' for the church he then tells him the real, ultimate, governing purpose he has written this to him. So Paul tells Timothy the purpose he sent him this letter and why he sent him there because he isn't sure he'll be able to make it back in person to tell him this. His purpose is how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God and what is this house of God that is to be built upon the truth? It is the assembly, a family, the buttress of the truth and it is to be the pillar that lifts up the glory of God with the truth.

When our founding pastor, under the direction of our elders participated in a service he was instructed to pray about it for the man who follows you is the one you put your mantle on. At the end of the service Dr. Barker handed me a Bible for I was the one who followed him and this is what Briarwood was built on, this is what it upholds and this is what it lifts up – the glory of the Triune God and the preeminence of Christ as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer as revealed in inerrantly in the Word of God.

When Briarwood was being built in this present location and the platform for the pulpit was being built a man who worked for the construction company came in unnoticed and the day the cement was being poured for this platform he put a Bible in it. So if you tear this concrete out you will find a Bible underneath it. We are built on the Word. We are built to uphold the Word and we are built to lift up the Word and its message to this world. And we tell people what we believe.

Our confession is not inerrant but that does not mean it is not important and our integrity is that we will say what we believe, we will contend earnestly for the faith once and for all delivered to us so that the next generation will carry it on as we hand it to them. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the time we could be together in Your Word. Thank You for the opportunity, not exhaustively but at least to some degree to be going over these essentials of the church that is alive in Christ and for Christ. So Father, we don't want to just stand but we want to go into all the world and preach the Gospel but we first must stand. So we stand upon the inerrancy and integrity of the Word of God that the Scripture alone is our only rule of faith and practice. Then we want to confess what we believe from the Word of God to this world so give us Biblical fidelity and confessional integrity and then God, be pleased to bless us that we would bless Your Name in worship and in witness for I pray in Jesus' Name, Amen.