

God's Benchmark for the church

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[0:00] Ephesians 5 verse 21 1-2 1-3 1-3 1-3 1-3 1-3 1-3 1-3 1-3 1-3 1-3 1-3 1-3 1-3 and the shop assistant pulled the fabric over to the benchmark.

They measured it by the benchmark and then cut it with the scissors. The benchmark dictated the size of the cloth. The fabric measured was the benchmark.

And we need a benchmark today. There's a lot of talk about benchmarking. In organisations they talk about benchmarks and about certain standards and excellence to achieve within organisations. But what of the church? What of the church? What is God's benchmark? What is God's benchmark for the church? How do we measure a church?

Measure it, whether it stacks up, whether it measures up to the benchmark. What should the church look like? It's interesting in Ephesians 5, isn't it, that God uses the context of family, of marriage covenant, of relationship, as setting the scene for what God spells out as his benchmark for his church.

[3:18] The benchmark, it's the standard against what we measure. As the shop assistant measures the cloth, there's a point of reference there, there's a mark there against which everything is measured and evaluated and it's expected to measure up.

What would it be like if there was no benchmark? If there was no certain benchmark? If each assembly was governed by just some arbitrary standard that man was to place?

From person to person it would vary. From place to place it would vary. From culture to culture it would vary. In these days of spiritual decline, are we meant to be market driven?

Market driven? Purpose driven? Or are we to be word driven? Driven by the Spirit? By his benchmark?

Is God's church meant to be some kind of a synthesis, a kind of mixing together, a melting, blending together as we talked about of late, of worldly ideas, of worldly concepts, such that the church today should resemble a circus in some scenes, a circus or perhaps maybe a concert, perhaps a carnival or a club.

[4:44] Christianity is just about joining a club as you would join anything. No, it's much, much more than that. There is a benchmark against which God expects us to measure up, to be a healthy church, an absolute benchmark, a biblical benchmark, a criteria that God sets for his church that we should aspire to, a biblical model, a biblical benchmark, biblical standards that dictate what we believe and practice.

Or have we lost sight of what God wants for his church? How do we measure up in terms of the benchmark, so to speak, that God sets for us? The benchmark of the soul saving gospel of values that accord with the gospel.

Not settling for some empty, cheap substitute, some inclusive, crossless gospel. Have we lost the benchmark?

You know, the benchmark could, maybe it could get blurred. We might rub out after a bit of time and you've got to kind of redraw it. Is the benchmark blurred as it got lost?

Are we like the people of this song? To the tune of Onward Christian Soldiers it goes, Backward Christian Soldiers, fleeing from the fight, with the cross of Jesus nearly out of sight.

[6:07] Like a mighty tortoise moves the church of God.

Brothers, we are treading where we've often trod. We are much divided. Many bodies we having different doctrines, but not much charity. Crowns and thrones may perish.

Kingdoms rise and wane. But the cross of Jesus hidden does remain. Gates of hell should never, against the church prevail. We have Christ's own promise, but we think it might fail.

Sit here then ye people. Join our sleeping throng. Blend with ours, your voices, in a feeble song. Blessings, ease and comfort. Ask from Christ the King.

But with our modern thinking, we won't do a thing. Is that the benchmark? No. So what is the benchmark? What is it to be? What is God's idea for His church?

[7:15] What He wants it to be? What He wants us to be? I put it to you, there's some signs of that in this passage here in Ephesians 5. In verse 24 it says, As the church is subject unto Christ.

It's number one, a church with submission. A church with submission. A submission that is unto Christ. The church's benchmark is a submission to His authority, to His leadership. Ephesians 1.22 tells us that He hath put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be the head over all things to the church, which is His body.

The fullness of Him that filleth all in all. He has given Christ to be the head, the head of all things. The Master, the Lord Jesus. In Ephesians 3.21 it says, Unto Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end.

It is to Him we submit. It is to Him we give glory. Verse 21. It's a church with submission. A church with submission to one another.

[8:28] To one another. Not some kind of hierarchy, or some kind of potpourri, or some kind of denominational pyramid structure, but a submitting to one another.

Where we submit to one another in the fear of God. That is the submission that we ask, that we should long for, that we should seek. Not a cultic kind of submission to some human head, but a submission as unto the head, our Lord Jesus Christ.

He is the head, the authority. And we submit to that. It's when we miss that, when we lose that benchmark, that things go astray. We get off the rails, as cults do.

Julie and I watched an interesting video about the Amish people. The Amish people. And it was quite interesting, because they got in such a pattern and a habit that they were using a Bible in German that many other people couldn't even read, apparently.

They were using a German Bible in Gothic kind of text. And it was kind of a foreign thing to them. And these Amish people, many of them were really not saved at all.

[9:43] But there were some that were getting saved. It was wonderful to see in this BBC documentary of some who actually were getting saved. And were reaching out with the Gospel to their fellow Amish community members.

They just pictured for us how things can get askew. Where in this group of church folk, they were splitting and separating over splitting of hairs really.

It got to the point in this documentary that different Amish groups were splitting over the kind of braces that they wore. But some braces weren't the same as the other braces or different colour or different way the braces were set up on these folk.

And this was the kind of pettiness that divided. The colour of the buggies had to be all just the right colour. It must have been a variation of a shade of grey.

And this was the danger when other things become the benchmark. We don't want to have that mistake. The benchmark is the authority of the Scriptures. It's the authority of the Word.

[10:52] It is to that we come. In submission it's to Christ as the head of the church. To His authority. Where it's the authority of the Scriptures. The authority of the Scriptures guides us in Biblical training.

In Biblical fellowship. In Biblical worship. In Biblical witness. And it's a submission to Christ as the head of the church. The benchmark must be followed.

Now there are some things that are black and white. You can't really argue or dialogue or discuss or debate such things. Such things as for example the subject of homosexuality.

The Bible says homosexual conduct is an abomination in the sight of God. I read this just this morning. Clash with gays splits Anglican Church.

This is a church in Semaphore, South Australia. The Reverend Allie, short for Allison. She announced that she was leaving St. Bede's Anglican parish.

[11:52] Because of concerns about her sexuality. She writes here, There must be full inclusion at all levels of life within the church.

We need to ask ourselves as a church what do we stand for? She wanted the church to be standing for such things. And she says she hoped her departure would prompt Anglicans to become more courageous about, quote, standing up for what really matters, which are the core values of Christianity.

Amazing, isn't it? And she goes on, The implications are that the church loses credibility to the outside world because it is seen as prescriptive, patronising and non-inclusive.

Friends, she's missed the boat. She's missed the benchmark. The benchmark that must guide church life and practice.

The core values of Christianity are found here. Not in modern thinking that is astray from that. A submission must guide our church practice.

[13:05] A submission to God's authority, to the authority that comes from God, from God's word. We read elsewhere, remove not the ancient landmark. It talks about a boundary mark for property to align the boundaries.

They set landmarks. They set stakes in the ground that are solid and firm and not to be moved. And yet the landmarks are getting moved.

The benchmarks are being moved today. They're being blurred. Christ is the head of the church. Christ is the head. He is our supply. He is our source.

He is our sustainer. Our stability must come from His authority. And we are a church, I pray, that is submitting to one another in the fear of God.

That is the fear of God that is wanting to honour Him, that's wanting to depend upon Him. Bonded together in that love that is a love for the word, a love for the brethren, a community with true reverence for Him.

[14:10] The benchmark must be a submission, not to a cult leader, not to a pastor, but a submission to the head of the church, Christ our Lord and His Holy Word.

A church with submission. A church with submission. Secondly, a church with stature. A church with stature. Another benchmark we need is the stature of Christ.

It is to that we aspire. The church is not a building of bricks and mortar. It is people. It is living people. Living stones. Lively stones. Different shapes and sizes.

Brought together as a body. As a functioning body. Not a dead and lifeless organisation, but a living organism. Organic, dynamic, alive, vibrant and growing.

That is what God wants His church to be. A body. A body. A healthy body. Where there is a function in every part. An order. And a unity.

[15:11] A living church. The body of Christ. And we can be a church of action. A church with one anotherness. A church with function. As we read in Ephesians 4, 13.

Till we all come into the unity of the faith. And of the knowledge of the Son of God. Unto a perfect man. Unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

Not tossed about, it says, by every wind of doctrine. But speaking the truth in love may grow up into Him in all things. Which is the head. Even Christ. From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted.

By that which every joint supply. According to the effect you're working in the measure of every part. Make an increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.

Notice their measures. The measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. It's to that we aspire. It's to that stature. It talks about the measure of every part working.

[16:13] Making increase. What of this body? What of this body? What of this body? This local expression of His body, corporate.

What are we like? Are we a part of that living, functioning body? Where every part maketh increase of the body.

Unto the edifying of itself in love. What? It's been said there's four main bones in every organisation.

You might have heard this. The wish bones. The wish bones wishing somebody would do something about the problem. The jaw bones doing all the talking. But very little else.

The knuckle bones, those who knock everything. And the back bones, those who carry the brunt of the load. And do most of the work. What kind of bone are you? What kind of function are you in the church of God?

[17:13] Pray God help you be an active, functioning part of the body. Building up one another. Growing, loving with biblical values in one accord.

Love is part of the measure of the benchmark. We read in verse 16 of Ephesians 4. Making increase of itself. Edifying of itself in love.

Are we growing in love? Are we growing in love? It's the measure. It's the benchmark. The measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

To be found in Him. Not having my own righteousness. To be found in Him. But that which is through the faith of Christ. The righteousness. Which is of God by fame.

Let us prayerfully seek to be that body. That is submitted unto Him. Submitting to one another in the fear of God. And that has that stature of the fullness of Christ.

[18:14] We want to aspire to be like Him. To be like Him. To be His expression in our world today. Every part functioning and fulfilling its role. As it ought to.

And thirdly we see another benchmark you could put. Is that God wants His church to be spotless. That's a high benchmark isn't it? You know worldly organisations they've got to set the benchmark such that you've got to. The bar has got to be set high enough. That there's something to aspire to. To attain to. God's benchmark is that the church be spotless. As a bride. Without spot. Pure. Uncontaminated.

With a relationship to the groom that is faithful. Are we such a church? A church spotless. Untainted. Where there's a high calling.

[19:12] To be that called out. That separated people. That set apart. The ones Christ has loved. And loves still. With His agape love. Self-sacrificing.

Undeserved. Agape love. A church without stain. Without floor. A church that is a spotless bride. That has had an extreme makeover. If you like. Not a spot. Not a wrinkle. Husbands love your wives. Even as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it.

That He might sanctify and cleanse it. With the washing of water by the word. That He might present it to Himself. A glorious church. Without spot.

Or wrinkle. Or any such thing. But that it should be holy. And without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own selves.

[20:12] As their own bodies. He that loveth his wife. Loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh.

But nourisheth. And cherisheth it. Even as the Lord. The church. He loves you. He wants to nourish you.

He wants to cherish you. He wants to. Hold you. As His church. As His people. To nurture you. To care for you.

Care for you. What a picture of relationship. And there's references elsewhere. The church is a family. It's a relationship.

It's a household. As we read in 1 Timothy 3.15. Paul exhorts Timothy. How he ought to behave himself. In the house of God. Which is the church. Of the living God.

[21:09] The pillar. And ground of truth. The house of God. It says. It says. House. We read. The same word. Elsewhere translated. Household.

It's like when Paul said. To the Philippian jailer. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. And thou shalt be saved. And thy house. He wasn't talking about. The bricks and mortar.

He was talking about. The family. Of the jailer. The same word. House. What God uses. Of the house. Of God. The church of God. Not a church of bricks and mortar, but a family, a household, a related group of people.

And he wants us to be that spotless character of a radiant bride, glorious and glowing, perfect, prepared, pure, even in the midst of a hostile pagan culture, his precious bride, without blame or blemish.

Can we aspire to that, brothers and sisters? I trust we can. Think of it, friends today, of the church of God. What we're meant to be. Now to be the church, we do have to be there as well.

[22:24] To be the church, we have to be together. It follows naturally and logically really. Here's a tongue-in-cheek article about sport.

And the writer says, football in the fall, basketball in the winter, baseball in the spring and summer. It's an American one. This pastor has been an avid sports fan all his life, but I've had it.

I quit this sports business once and for all. You can't get me near one of those places again. Want to know why? Every time I went, they asked me for money. The people with whom I had to sit didn't seem very friendly.

The seats were too hard and not at all comfortable. I went to many games, but the coach never came to call on me. The referee made a decision with which I could not agree.

I suspected that I was sitting with some hypocrites. They came to see their friends and what others were wearing rather than to see the game. Some games went into overtime and I was late getting home.

[23:28] The band played some numbers that I had never heard before. It seems that the games are scheduled when I want to do other things. I was taken to too many games by my parents when I was growing up.

I don't want to take my children to any games because I want them to choose for themselves what sport they like best. Of course, it's tongue-in-cheek, isn't it?

The picture of ball sports, of games, of sports people playing. But the Church of God can be compared to that.

Some get put off for lots of reasons and largely not spiritual ones. Friends, we need to consider the benchmark that God sets for His Church.

And God helping us, we want to aspire to that. We know we'll fall short off times, but that submission to Him must be centre stage.

[24:26] It's not a submission to the fans and changing thoughts of men. The benchmark doesn't move. It's static, it's stationary, it's solid.

God's truth doesn't change to suit our whims and fancies and the latest fads. The benchmark of submission to God and His authority must be strong and steadfast.

We see that the stature of Christ doesn't change. Christ's stature is holy, holy, holy. That stature of our Saviour, the measure of His love, it's abounding, it's abundant, it's beyond compare.

His stature doesn't change. It's to that. We want to reach up to that measure of who He is, of what He wants us to be. Will we be the Church?

Will we be that Church that is a family, that is relational, that is spotless, that God helping us, and it's not a pickiness or a pettiness.

[25:40] It's God helping us examining ourselves, isn't it? That each one of us individually, as individual members, consider, how can I function better? How can I honour God?

How can I glorify Him more? How can I aspire to that stature, the fullness of Christ, for my life? How can I be part of that spotless, untainted bride to be honouring to Him?

Let us pray. Let us pray.