

What does a healthy church look like?

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[0 : 0 0] Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God according to the promise of the life that is in Christ Jesus. To Timothy, my beloved child, grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors, with a clear conscience, as I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. As I remember your tears, I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy.

I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well. For this reason, I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.

For God gave us a spirit not of fear, but of power and love and self-control. Therefore, do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works, but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearance of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

For which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me.

[1 : 3 8] Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

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, preach the word, be ready in season and out of season, reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.

For the time is coming where people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

[2 : 5 9] As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come.

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but also to all who have loved his appearing.

Well, the question I want to ask this morning is the question which is there on the outline on the back of the service sheet, and on the screen. What does a healthy church look like?

What does a healthy church look like? I guess that's an important question to ask at any time, but especially when a church is about to go into an interregnum, and will be looking for a new pastor.

Of course, the question is not just who you should appoint, but also who you shouldn't appoint as well. And perhaps above all, it simply raises the question, what kind of church are we?

[4 : 13] What are our values? And if we belong to Jesus, then what kind of people are we? Well, if you're here this morning and you're looking in on the Christian faith, or perhaps you're here and you're looking for a new church to belong to, why, it's really important we are clear on what is a healthy church, and by implication, what is not a healthy church.

In other words, don't make the mistake of imagining that most churches are pretty much the same, except the kind of obvious differences of style or building and that kind of thing. More broadly, of course, the question of what a healthy church looks like is one that has been asked in many evangelical churches over the last few years or so.

Some of us will sadly have experienced unhealthy church cultures and even abusive leadership. Now, 2 Timothy was written by the Apostle Paul at the end of his life.

It's very much a passing on the baton to Timothy, a next-generation leader kind of letter. As the first generation of church leaders, the apostles, begin to die, the baton is being passed on to the next generation.

I guess rather like Wimbledon this year. A number of commentators I've heard commenting on the fact that Roger Federer has retired, that Rafa Nadal is not taking place, not competing this year in Wimbledon.

[5 : 47] So Novak Djokovic is the only one of that generation, and there's this whole other generation of players coming through. Well, the key verses of the letter are back in chapter 1, verses 13 and 14, which we heard in our first reading.

Let me read them for us. Chapter 1, verse 13. Follow the pattern of the sound words. That word sound literally means healthy. Follow the pattern of the healthy words that you have heard from me in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

By the Holy Spirit who dwells within you, guard the good deposit entrusted to you. Guarding the good deposit of the gospel.

In other words, a healthy church, both created by the message of Jesus, and then proclaiming the message of Jesus.

And we're focusing on chapter 4, verses 1 to 8, where we see three key marks of a healthy church. Firstly, a healthy church preaches the word.

[7 : 03] Verse 2. Preach the word. Be ready in season and out of season. Reprove, rebuke and exhort with complete patience and teaching.

What must be at the heart of Timothy's ministry as a church leader? Preaching the word. God's word. The Bible. Now that word, preach there, means to herald, to proclaim, to herald good news.

And it's not simply a kind of standing up as I am now, addressing a whole bunch of people kind of word. It's much broader than that. So it includes kind of one-to-one, meeting up with people.

It includes a kind of Bible study situation in a small group. It includes what's happening at the moment in Sunday club, teaching little ones, or the youth group, or perhaps doing a hospital visit, bringing God's word into that situation, or marriage preparation, or a whole host of other things, bringing God's word to bear on people's lives.

Timothy is to preach, teach, proclaim. He is to herald God's word, the Bible, in everything that he does. In other words, the primary task of a pastor, of a church pastor, is not to be a manager or a CEO, although, of course, lots of churches look for one of those because it makes things run smoothly, nor a therapist who kind of makes us feel good about ourselves, nor an entertainer who makes church sound fun, nor a priest who makes us feel spiritual.

[8 : 44] After all, Jesus is the only priest we need. But instead, a proclaimer, a herald, a preacher of God's word, the Bible.

And what Paul says here follows on from what we see in chapter 3, verse 16. Just a reminder, really, that sometimes the kind of chapter divisions in our Bibles are not kind of very helpful because we kind of lose the thread of thought.

But chapter 3, verse 16, one of the best-known verses in the Bible, let me read it again for us. All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.

Now, one of the core convictions underlying to Timothy is that God has spoken. As we come to the Bible, therefore, we hear the voice of the living God speaking to us and addressing us.

And therefore, Timothy is to preach and teach God's word because there is nothing more important for us as a church, indeed for the church in every age, than we hear the voice of the living God addressing us.

[10 : 02] Which means, therefore, that teaching, preaching is done, I can put it like this, purposefully. You see, why does God speak? Have a look again at chapter 3, verse 16.

God speaks to change us, to change our thinking, to change our living, to change our behaviour, to equip us to live for him. Which means, of course, that when we teach the Bible, our teaching should aim to do exactly the same thing.

Just notice how some of those words in chapter 3, verse 16, are then echoed in chapter 4, verse 2. So, to reprove, which means to correct, to rebuke, again an echo, and to exhort, which means to teach.

In other words, we should beware of the kind of preaching that is only ever encouraging. Paul is saying that healthy churches preach the word, and as he says that, therefore, he's saying far more than simply conveying information.

That is not the job of a preacher. It's not simply a kind of a download of ideas. It's not simply enabling us all to understand a Bible passage better.

[11 : 21] It's not even explaining the Bible, or even teaching. It is far more than that. It is preaching. It's bringing God's word to us, with a view then to our lives being changed.

Because that is precisely the reason why God speaks. Not simply to give us more information, or to help us to understand a Bible book, or a Bible passage better, but for our lives to be changed and transformed.

There was an article in the Times some time ago, you may have read it, about sermons, along with a picture of Rowan Atkinson as the hapless clergyman in the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral*.

And the article began, in many churches, the sermon, this most vibrant of moments, has withered to little more than 20 minutes of tired droning that serves only to pad out the gap between hymns and lunch.

Well, hopefully you won't go to your lunch thinking that this morning. But of course, that is such a tragedy, isn't it? When God has spoken. Instead, the genuine Christian pastor will preach God's word, the Bible.

[12 : 42] Indeed, this is how you go on the offensive, if you like, in ministry. This is how a local church goes on the front foot by enabling that verse 2 is what is taking place.

And does so, notice verse 2, both in season and out of season. In other words, when it looks appropriate, but also when it doesn't look appropriate.

When people want to hear what's being said, and when they don't want to hear what's being said. When it looks fruitful, but also when it doesn't look fruitful.

We live in a culture that is increasingly hostile to the message of Jesus. A healthy church is a church which will hold its nerve and be committed to chapter 4, verse 2 all the time, in season and out of season, rather than retreating.

And of course, by implication, an unhealthy church is a church which fails to do that. Now, one of the things I'm so pleased about is that the church profile that's been drawn up, which I've had very little to do with, is that it makes this very clear.

[14 : 00] That a church pastor leads a church by preaching God's word, the Bible. It's how he pastors, it's how he nurtures, it's how he builds up, it's how he evangelizes.

So what does a healthy church look like? Well, firstly, a healthy church preaches God's word. Secondly, a healthy church knows that nothing is more important than doing that.

Verse 1. I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is the judge, the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom.

Now, I wonder if you can feel the kind of, the weightiness of what is being said in verse 1. This is why it's so urgent and important for a church to have Bible teaching ministry at its heart.

Because you see, Timothy's ministry, as he pastors this church, and all Christian ministry is carried out under the permanent watch and presence of God and of Jesus Christ.

[15 : 05] isn't that a very striking thing? In other words, it's his, it's his verdict that matters. You see, the danger for every pastor and every church is they cannot see God, but they can see people.

That's the big danger for every pastor. They see people in the church, they see people out in the world, and the big danger is that they come to care more about what people think than they do about what God thinks.

And what happens when a church loses sight of those two things, that God is present and that Jesus is the future judge? Well, it's very simple.

We start looking for the approval of other people, those we can see, because it's their presence that we can kind of, that we sense the most.

And we focus on what looks important in the here and now, again, because that's what we can see, rather than actually what matters in the future.

[16 : 18] In other words, we end up not preaching God's word when we feel it's out of season, because we don't want people to hear it. Or we'll only teach the positives and not the negatives.

Jesus loves you, but not he calls you to repent. We'll avoid the things our culture doesn't really want to hear, and instead we'll focus on things our culture does want to hear.

We'll warn about climate change, but we won't warn about the reality of future judgment. We'll be encouraging and affirming, but not rebuking and correcting.

In other words, ministry priorities then become focused on what is seen rather than unseen spiritual realities. And focused on present needs rather than future needs, the needs that matter to each one when Jesus appears on the final judgment day.

Now, if you want to kind of work an example of what this looks like in practice, then you need to look no further than what is going on in the Church of England at the moment.

[17 : 36] So, I was very struck reading a couple of weeks ago that I gather that the bishops who are in favour of same-sex marriage in the Church of England are exactly the same bishops who are universalists.

In other words, they believe that everyone goes to heaven. So, in terms of verse 1, you see, what is it that they've done? Well, they don't believe in the judgment and therefore, rather than looking for the future approval of Jesus Christ on the day when he returns, instead, they are looking for the approval of the world in the here and now.

And therefore, they don't preach God's word on this whole issue of marriage because it's not something that our world wishes to hear. A young concert pianist had given his first London concert and he had just left the stage to rapturous applause.

Go back for the encore, the impresario urged him. No, said the young pianist, reluctant to do so. Oh, but you must, you must, people are rapturous, they want you to come out for the encore.

Yes, said the pianist, but there is one man who is not clapping in the audience. Oh, don't worry about him, said the impresario, look at everyone else. But that man is my teacher.

[19 : 09] Sometimes, there is only one person whose opinion really matters. Now, that is something I need to hear for myself. It's something we all need to hear as a church, as we move into an interregnum in a few weeks' time.

God is watching. He is always present. Christ will return. And therefore, it's not up to us to decide what is going to be at the heart of Grace Church's ministry.

God himself charges us it must be the preaching of the Bible. Indeed, in verses 6 to 8, Paul comes back to the glorious future reality which is true for all those who are in Christ.

Each one of us, if we belong to him, it's as if he wants us to fix our eyes firmly there. Have a look at verses 6 to 8. For I'm already being poured out as a drink offering and the time of my departure has come.

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day.

[20 : 23] And not only to me, but also to all who have loved his appearing. Notice at the end of verse 8, he's not just talking to Timothy, but to everyone in the church because the pressure to move away from this kind of ministry that's about preaching the word can come from within the church just as much as it can from outside the church.

So then, here's a word not only for pastors but for growth group leaders or those who teach in our youth group JAM or in Sunday Club or at the Elms Care Home or Quest Club or Scannywags or perhaps you help a CU at university or school or you're in a Christian group and help lead that at work or perhaps you're about to go off and lead on summer camp.

All ministry takes place in the presence of God and of Jesus Christ. In other words, what does Jesus the judge ask of us on the day he returns?

Not were we successful in the eyes of the world? Not did people appreciate you and thank you for what you did? but did you preach the word?

Yes, of course we need to do so in a way that's encouraging in a way that's appropriate for where they are at and engaging but the focus is on preaching the word.

[21 : 57] So what does a healthy church look like? One, a healthy church preaches the word. Two, a healthy church knows nothing is more important. Three, a healthy church knows there is a dangerous alternative.

have a look at verses 3 to 5. For 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 and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry. Now if you know something about 2 Timothy you will know that one of the issues that Timothy faces is the issue of false teachers who are pledging a kind of fake Christianity and are leading people away from the Lord Jesus.

But the shock of these verses is that people will move away from the Lord Jesus themselves. They won't put up with sound teaching. Again, just as in chapter 1, a word which means healthy, but instead second half of verse 3, having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions.

In other words, instead of wanting to listen to the truth of the Bible, they will line up behind teachers who simply say what it is they want to hear.

[23 : 30] I think this is very striking because I think we often think, we often believe that our behaviour follows our beliefs. In other words, I believe this thing to be true.

You know, I believe this chair is a solid chair and therefore I sit on it. My behaviour follows. But here actually is a reminder that in real life it's actually the other way around.

Our beliefs follow our behaviour. So imagine, for example, you bump into a friend, perhaps someone who you haven't seen for a while, perhaps someone who used to go to the same church together or you were part of the same Christian group at university or something like that, you get talking.

Oh yes, they say, I used to believe those things but actually I don't believe them anymore. And as you talk with them and kind of tease out what's happened, it becomes clear that actually their beliefs have changed changed in order to fit their lifestyle.

Now let's be frank for a moment because that is not simply a problem out there, that is also a problem in our own hearts.

[24 : 46] It's a temptation isn't it that each one of us faces. You see, just ask yourself the question, what do you do when God speaks to you in the Bible as of course he always does when we open the Bible, when his word says to you something that you do not wish to hear?

What do you do at that point? Just kind of fix on the issue for you in your mind for a moment. I wonder what it would be.

Perhaps it would be the fact that actually you cannot simultaneously pursue your career flat out as if nothing else matters and serve Jesus because that is idolatry.

You cannot do that. Or perhaps you don't want to hear about the idolatry of education or beauty or bringing up successful children. Or perhaps you don't want to be challenged about giving up some of your precious me time to serve Jesus.

Or perhaps it's simply Jesus called to repent and to follow him. You see, what's the danger at that point? The danger is we simply become selective listeners.

[26 : 06] Now, there is not a single person in this room for whom that is not an issue, myself included. And what do we end up doing instead? Verse 4, we end up believing in myths.

That is what happens when we stop listening to the Bible. Oh yes, of course I can pursue my career as if nothing else that matters and yet also follow Jesus. That's a myth.

Now, those other voices we listen to, they may clothe themselves in the language of alternative spiritualities or different theological traditions or whatever it is. But in reality, they are myths.

One of our mission partners, Mark Oden, serving in Naples in Italy, used to be on the staff of a church in Sevenoaks. And on one occasion, he preached a sermon which was very countercultural, where the Bible is very countercultural, and a number of people took offense.

And because Sevenoaks is Sevenoaks, you can imagine this happening, and people are well connected, it then appeared in the national media, and this enormous media storm.

[27 : 17] And of course, it raises the question, what do we do when we hear something from God's word that we don't like? Do we write to the media, as they did, but also then move churches in order to go somewhere where they would hear what their itching ears want to hear?

or are we willing to listen to God's voice and to be corrected and rebuked? So then, what are those in Christian leadership to do?

Well, we need to remember that people won't always wish to hear the truth of God's word, the Bible. And therefore, we mustn't be diverted from teaching it when we encounter opposition.

it's why Paul tells Timothy in verse 5, as for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry.

In other words, he's saying, keep your nerve, stay steady, don't give up. But of course, the spotlight here isn't simply on church pastors, the spotlight is actually on all of us.

[28 : 34] Because it begs the question, do we really want to hear God's word? Or do we simply want our own beliefs and mindsets and lifestyles to be affirmed?

In other words, do we evaluate what we hear by whether it's based on the truth of the Bible or whether it's what we want to hear? It's why false teaching thrives.

It's why there are so many different types of false teaching which is always sprouting up because people want to hear it. It affirms the lifestyle they wish to live.

In other words, a healthy church isn't simply a church where God's word is preached faithfully. It's also a church where people are willing to hear God's word and be changed and transformed by it.

I wonder if that's a new thought to us. It seems to me the danger of a church like Grace Church is that we pat ourselves on the back because we are serious about preaching God's word.

[29 : 45] But actually that's only half the story. Are we equally serious about being challenged changed and changed such that we become more and more like the Lord Jesus.

What this means of course is that the way we each individually respond to hearing God's word will either enable Grace Church to guard the gospel or will contribute to Grace Church drifting away from the gospel.

Now I suspect the temptation is basically to think well that's my job or that's the church council's job or that's my successor's job. But actually each one of us in the way we respond to God's word has a huge impact.

Do you want a new pastor who will always agree with you? Who will always be encouraging? Who won't challenge you? Who will always say what you want to hear? That is the way a church drifts away from the gospel.

Instead are you willing to be challenged? Do you long to be conformed to the likeness of the Lord Jesus? Are you unashamed of being part of a church which seeks to proclaim the message of Jesus and preach the Bible?

[31 : 15] That's the way a church will guard the gospel. Let me lead us in prayer. Father's prayer.

Let's pray. Amen. 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.

Heavenly Father we praise you for these glorious unseen realities. We praise you for your presence here this morning. We thank you for the Lord Jesus, the one who is indeed the judge of the living and the dead, the one who will appear, whose kingdom we will see in all its glory and splendor.

We're sorry, Heavenly Father, when we forget that it's under your sight that we live and serve. That it's under your gaze that as a church we exist.

And we pray, Heavenly Father, please would Grace Church continue to preach your word in season and out of season. And we pray that each one of us would be longing to change and to be transformed more and more into the likeness of our Lord and Saviour.

[33 : 02] And we ask it in his name. Amen.