

The Church of the Living God

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[0 : 00] Well, when I was at school, I remember being taught how to write a letter. Perhaps some of you remember that lesson as well.

I don't imagine schools still teach something so arcane and outdated as letter writing, perhaps. But we, at least, were taught to start a letter like this.

Dear so-and-so, I am writing to you because... Whatever you're writing about. Greet the person and tell them why you have written them this letter.

Give them your purpose statement. Because whoever's reading the letter knows why you have written it, it gives a context and direction, doesn't it, to everything that the letter then goes on to say. And that's basically no different from letters in the New Testament. Over 2,000 years, some aspects of letter writing have changed.

[1 : 02] But every letter still has a purpose. Sometimes in the New Testament letters, the purpose statement isn't at the beginning of a letter. Sometimes you have to work hard to understand what is the purpose of this letter.

But the New Testament writers, no biblical writer, put pen to paper aimlessly or pointlessly. And so whenever we open the Bible, a good place to start, a good question to ask is, why did the writer write this?

What did he want this letter, this book, to do for the people who first read it? And in that sense, of all the letters in the New Testament, Paul's first letter to Timothy is an easy one.

As a church, we're halfway through this letter together. And if you've been here throughout the series, and I asked you to point me to the verses that tell us why Paul wrote the letter, well, I hope by now that you would point me to these verses that we are looking at this evening.

Now, the big clue, of course, is the purpose clause. You see right at the end of verse 14, do you see that? So that, I'm writing to you with these instructions, so that if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household.

[2 : 28] So this is what Paul wants his letter to do for the church, to teach them back then, and therefore us now, how to live under God's roof, how to be God's household, how to be his church.

I wonder if you've ever tried to imagine, perhaps, if Paul were to come to Bon Accord, to our church today, what he would have to say. If he were to walk in off the street through the doors at the back and walk up to the pulpit here and open his mouth, what would he have to say to us?

Well, Paul isn't here, and he wasn't there either in this church, but he says he sent this letter, the letter that is open in front of us tonight, in his place.

So that if for whatever reason he couldn't be there, they would still get to hear what he had to say.

So there's good news and bad news tonight. The bad news is that you are stuck with me.

Paul can't be here. But the good news is that we're not here, are we, to hear what I have to say.

We're here to hear what Paul has to say.

[3 : 45] And more to the point, what God has to say to the churches. And tonight in this letter, he wants to tell us then what a church is, where the church comes from, and to help us then to live rightly as a church.

Three points for us this evening. Family values, the family home, and the family head. That's where we're going. Beginning with family values.

Now I don't know if you had any particular family values, house rules growing up. Perhaps values in your home, like listening to mum and dad, speaking kindly to your siblings.

You can see which ones rubbed off on me, or rubbed up against me, perhaps. Maybe rules like taking off your shoes at the door, perhaps cleaning up after dinner.

I suppose the test of those values and rules is really if we have families of our own, whether they have stuck, and we've kept doing them. But whatever values we grew up with, our families all had them, didn't they?

[4 : 52] Whether they were taught to us, or whether we simply picked them up from our surroundings. And in every household, it's a little bit different.

We all grow up, of course, thinking that our own family is normal. But something that those of you who have just moved away from home are discovering, I imagine, is how unique, if not to say peculiar, your families are.

And Paul's saying here that the church is sort of like that, and sort of not like that. See what he calls the church in verse 15 there. He's writing, so that you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household.

Household, a family home. And God's family home has its own values, its own way of life, how God's family is to conduct itself.

And so it's as if Paul had to write down for Timothy the family values, the house rules that belong in God's household. And now why would he have to do that?

[6 : 03] Well, remember, the church where Timothy's in charge when he gets this letter is a little bit like if a bunch of adolescent sons and daughters had broken off, decided to leave home and set up on their own.

But they've become slightly feral since leaving the protection and careful watch of their parents. The family values are being ignored, house rules being broken, a new way of life has taken hold.

That doesn't belong in God's family. We've seen the kind of thing through this letter, haven't we?

Arrogance, one-upmanship, brothers and sisters pushing to get their own way to be recognized.

A culture where leadership equals dominance and elegance rather than humility and service. And Paul's writing then as a father figure to his true son in the faith, Timothy, to tell these rebellious brothers and sisters, that's not how we do it in this family.

To teach them again the family values that belong in God's family home. I think that's a really helpful way for us as a church to hear this letter, to digest it together.

[7 : 24] Everything that we've learned so far, everything we're going to see, not as a set of rules to follow or a formula that if we just get all the pieces right we'll be a good and a healthy gospel church, but a way of life that sets us apart as God's household.

If we are in Christ, we are God's family. Steve led us in prayer. He spoke, didn't he, about our adoption into God's family in Christ.

And so Paul wants us then to live, serve, and worship together as God's family. But it's not a normal way of life, is it? If you didn't grow up going to church, you probably feel this more than those of us who have.

This, what we're learning in this letter, is not how every family works, is it? Church can feel weird sometimes. Maybe as we have listened to what Paul has to say, we've felt that.

But that's not a bad thing, if it is for the right reason. Because the church is where we taste and see and soak up God's family values. How we are to conduct ourselves in his household.

[8 : 43] And those values are not of this world. We do not find these values anywhere else on earth. And they are infinitely better than whatever we could come up with to direct our lives, to form a community.

Church is different. A unique family. And in that way, church is very much like our own families.

What is not like our families, though, is that even when you move away from home, well, you can still live under God's roof.

You can still be in God's household. These values are not specific to one time or place. Because God's household, his church, isn't specific to one time or place.

It was wherever his children come together as a church, in the way, and on the basis of what Paul is teaching. That Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, which we are.

That through faith in him, we are put right with God and made part of his family. Praise God. And that through that faith, through our faith in him, we grow, we bear good fruit in the service of him as a family, a holy way of life that sets us apart as the household of God.

[10 : 04] And God's family isn't normal, but it is everywhere his people are. And perhaps you need to hear that particularly tonight. If you are finding your feet in a new church or a new city, you've left home, you've finally got your independence, you're away, maybe from mom and dad, and perhaps

you're not totally sure tonight whether church is going to be a part of your new life now that you can make your own decisions.

Well, you need to know that being part of God's family isn't normal. If you are part of it, you will feel different, you will be different.

But you also need to know that if you call yourself a Christian, you do have a home in this city.

You're away from your family, but you have a family here that is ready to welcome you.

So let me urge you not to step back from church. Do not, if that is you, save church for when you go home or for when your parents are coming to visit. Pick a faithful church.

This church, another faithful church, and make yourself at home here. Be part of God's family, his household in Aberdeen. Get to know his family, become part of his family, live out his values.

[11 : 27] We all need this family life as Christians. You cannot live without it. That's really why we're studying this letter here at Bon Accord. We want God's family values to sink down deep, don't we, into the life of this church so that we can bear fruit in the years to come.

But Paul now adds two more layers, if you like, to this picture. He's teaching us how to conduct ourselves in the church. But secondly, we're going to zoom in on what the church is.

Secondly, then, the family home. What is a church? It's one of those deceptively simple questions, isn't it?

What is a church? Well, if you've spent any more than five minutes thinking about it, you'll know it's not as simple as it sounds. Hefty tomes have been written on this question.

I've not read many of them. Don't ask me their names. But perhaps it's not something that many of us give much thought to. Often, church is just something we do as Christians.

[12 : 35] But do we know what a church is? Is it a building? Is it coming to a service? Is it simply a group of Christians?

Well, in verse 15, Luke, Paul gives us three pictures to work with that are on a much, much bigger scale than we often think a church is.

God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth. What is a church? Firstly, God's household.

We touched on this in our last point, didn't we? This metaphor. But interesting that that is his point of comparison. Not God's social club, where we go to hang out with people just like us who share our interests.

Not God's hospital, where we go when we are feeling spiritually or physically sick. Not God's restaurant, where we go perhaps to be served a nice spiritual meal.

[13 : 41] We could go on and on, couldn't we? But he doesn't compare God's church to anything in this world, but God's family home. What do you go home for?

It's a ridiculous question, isn't it? What do you go home for? Well, I go home to be there because it's my home, because I live there. Home is where I live, where I rest, I sleep, I eat.

Home is where I spend time with my family. I go home to be there. And friends, that is what a church is. One of the things that makes my heart sing is when we are all still here an hour after the service is finished and someone's flicking off the lights at the back and 10 minutes later we've still not finished our conversation and we traipse out onto the street and somebody's locking the door behind us and we're still having a little conversation.

I love that. The people who turn the lights off and lock the doors up also love that. Although we all need to get to our beds by that time. I love that because it is a wonderful, wonderful thing to be part of a church that loves to be together, where people are at home with one another.

It feels really like being a family, which is what we are. It is a good thing. And it's a good reminder, isn't it, if we need it, that church isn't something then that we can consume.

[15 : 13] Home isn't where we receive a service. Family isn't the people that we can pick and choose. It's who we are. It's where we live as Christians.

God has adopted us as his own children when we put our trust in his son and he's brought us home to his church to meet our new brothers and sisters.

And so the question surely we should ask when we meet a fellow Christian surely isn't, which church do you go to? It's as ridiculous as asking, which family do you go to?

It's a nonsense question, isn't it? What do we ask? What family are you part of? What family do you belong to? What church are you part of? What church do you belong to?

Well, how do we know which church we belong to? Well, the biblical word for belonging to a church is membership. That word has been taken over a bit, hasn't it, by kind of corporate language.

[16:13] You can be a club member or a gym member. But getting closer to what the Bible means, we speak also, don't we, about being a family member. In Ephesians 2, verse 19, Paul writes, consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, family members together.

When you put your trust in Jesus, if you have put your trust in Jesus, you became, at that moment, a member of God's global family, his invisible church.

But we show that reality in our lives by becoming a member, then, of a local, visible church.

Whether it's for the first time or transferring membership from one church or congregation to another, becoming a member of a local church is saying to the church and to the world, this is the family I belong to.

These are my people who I identify with. In that sense, being a church member is much simpler than we often think, isn't it? Membership is not a special class of Christians who have made it, who deserve to be here.

None of us do. It is not a group of extra committed Christians who sign up to do lots of things. You do not have to do everything. It's not even, in a Presbyterian church, only the Christians who believe everything that we believe.

[17:55] We don't ask that members subscribe to our confession of faith. No, it's simply this. If you are a Christian and Bon Accord is your church home, normally, normally, you should become a member.

That is not because it looks good on a list. It's because that is what a church is. It is the household of God. And by his grace, we are members of this family if we are in Christ and the church is the family home.

And so it is right that we are members of that family home. It is also, the church, says Paul, the church of the living God.

Now, this one's a bit self-explanatory, doesn't it? It doesn't need much unpacking. We know a church church is a church, but I'm a preacher, so I'm going to unpack it anyway.

The word for church in the New Testament is ecclesia. It literally means assembly or congregation.

So we're talking here about a gathering of people. So what's Paul saying?

[19:05] A church is also the gathered people of the living God. And perhaps this hit home hardest for us when we weren't able to do this.

Remember how soul-destroying it was when we could not get together on a Sunday during the week. There was something unnatural about it.

It cut against the grain of our spiritual DNA because as God's people, we are by nature a gathered people. If we are part of his family, we don't miss the family gathering unless we really have to.

And when we do have to, it should feel hard. We can't possibly think, can we, that because belonging to a church is for all of life that Sundays, therefore, are less important.

No, Sundays are important because we're part of the church. Sundays, the gathering, should be the highlight of our week because it is when we get together with our whole church family in the presence of the living God.

[20:11] we miss those. You can't be here with us on a Sunday, don't we? And we should miss being here if we ourselves really have to miss it.

It is the gathering of the living God. And finally, says Paul, is the pillar and foundation of the truth.

This is a picture of the church's calling to uphold the truth of God's word, the gospel, in the same sense that the pillars that we see in here uphold the gallery and the pillars downstairs uphold this room and the foundation below that upholds the whole building.

So the church upholds the truth, says Paul. And now perhaps that sounds a bit too strong. You know, does the truth of God's word need the scaffolding of the church to keep it standing?

Well, if I can put it this way, who heard the truth apart from the church? Who first heard the gospel without a member of God's household explaining it to us?

Or without coming among the gathering of God's people? Or without the testimony of the apostles in the New Testament? To be really clear, the church does not define or create or change the truth.

[21:40] God's word has an authority all of its own. But the church must uphold the truth for it to be seen and heard in this world. Now, Paul himself traces that back through in Romans 10 from the

point of conversion, someone calling on the Lord back to the church.

He says, how then can they call on the one in whom they've not believed? And how can they believe in the one of whom they've not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?

And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? You see, for anyone to call out to God for rescue, the church needs to send people to tell them what to believe in.

Or in the words of the church Father Cyprian made famous by John Calvin, God as father, no one can have God as father who does not have the church as mother.

Again, perhaps that sounds almost too strong. But I wonder if that is more because our 21st century view of church is too small.

[22 : 49] We live, don't we, in an individualistic age where who I am is what matters. Even that individualism has seeped into our Christian bloodstream in so many ways.

But the idea, friends, that being a Christian is something we can do on our own is not biblical. To be a Christian is to be part of a family.

We can't be part of a family on our own. The church is much, much more, isn't it, than a building, even a service, even a group of Christians. It is God's household.

The gathering of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth. The church is the family home where God's family values are lived.

And we really cannot live the Christian life without being part of it. So how then do we belong to the church?

[23 : 47] Well, finally, coming to our third point, Paul points us to the source of the church's life, the family head. Notice verse 16 is talking about the source of this set apart life.

Beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great. Where does this great reality of the church and its life come from?

From a person. He appeared. He appeared in the flesh. This is the mystery, isn't it? The birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, glory of the man Christ Jesus.

He is the founder and perfecter of the faith. He is the beginning, the firstborn of the dead, the head of the church. He is the mystery out of which all true godliness flows.

See, the church was not set up, was it, by human hands. Sometimes people imagine that some guys had a meeting at some point in the distant past and decided that simply being a Christian wasn't enough.

[25 : 00] So they set up an institution with a hierarchy and rituals. They chose the books of the Bible. They decided on the right doctrines.

Friends, that is a total myth. The church was born out of Jesus' finished work. When he had lived and died and risen again, he returned to his father in heaven and poured out the Holy Spirit.

And in the book of Acts, we see that the product of that finished work is the church. A church that goes out to preach repentance from sin and faith in Christ.

A church that defends and upholds the truth of the gospel. A church that baptizes people and shares communion. A church that has elders to lead and deacons to serve.

A church that cares for God's family. A church that takes the good news out to the ends of the earth. Friends, the church is a spiritual reality that has a spiritual source.

[26 : 06] It is not of this world. And its source is the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Writers point out that verse 16 was probably a kind of early hymn or confession of faith that Paul's quoting.

And like the other historic creeds of the church, it's written to capture the complete full-orbed mystery of Christ in a few memorable lines. The first two lines speak about his finished work.

He appeared in the flesh. He was vindicated by the Spirit. This takes us from his incarnation, his appearing, his taking a human nature to himself, being born into the world as a baby, all the way through to his glorious resurrection, where he was seen to have been right all along, as he was raised from the dead by the Spirit.

The second two lines speak about the witness that followed that work. He was seen by angels, was preached among the nations. This takes us from the empty tomb, and the angels who first witnessed his resurrection.

He is not here, they said. He is risen through to the witness of those disciples as they spread that message throughout the world. And the last two lines speak about his welcome on earth and in

heaven.

[27 : 33] He was believed on in the world and taken up in glory. That witness, that message was received and believed by many who heard it throughout the world.

They called on the name of the Lord and they were saved. And Christ himself was received into heaven, welcomed into his glory. Now you'll notice the timeline kind of falls apart a bit at the end because of course, Christ was in heaven, in glory, as the message of the gospel was being spread. But you can see that there is a pattern to this creed. the point is that it is the work and witness and welcome of Christ that is the source of the life of the church.

And some would say understandably that this is the climax of the whole letter. It's as if we've kind of climbed up one side of a mountain. And at this point, Paul brings us through the cloud cover to simply bask in the glory and the radiance of the sun.

This is who it's all for, he says, because this is who it's all from. Next week, we will begin our descent back down the other side.

[28 : 51] But let us not forget then what we have seen just now. The glory of the gospel, the glory of Christ's work, is where our church comes from.

The family values of the family home come from the family head. So let's not pretend then that we can be or belong to God's family without him.

If you have not yet put your trust in him, don't think that you can do church without him. If that's you, here you are, surrounded by God's family, under God's roof, won't you become a part of God's family then?

And part of his household, join this family by putting your trust in Christ, God's son. And if our trust is in Christ, well let our lives spring then from his source.

We can't fake it till we make it in the Christian life. We can't be part of the church and pretend to be a Christian. God's family home, as we hold our faith in Christ.

[30 : 11] Let our church family here at Bonacord share more and more and more in the family likeness as we put down deep, deep roots in the gospel. And so let us learn to conduct ourselves rightly as we rest our faith in him, as the children of the living God, as God's family home, his church.

Let's pray for that together now. God, our Father, how we thank you that we can call you by that name, that you are our Father through Christ your Son.

Father, we thank you that you sent him into this world, that he appeared, that he came, that he lived, died, and was raised, that he lives and is reigning in glory.

And Father, we pray that our church and its life would flow from him, Lord, that our church would be filled with his spirit, Lord, that we would be animated by his gospel.

Father, we pray that we each would be transformed more and more into his likeness, as we trust in him, and as we follow him. Father, we pray that many would come to put their faith in him for the first time here.

[31 : 38] Lord, that many would become part of this family and learn to live for him. Lord, we pray that we would become more and more like a family, your family.

Father, we thank you for the great measure in which this church is your family and acts like your family. Father, we thank you because that is all of you and it is your blessing.

Lord, we pray that you would sustain that. Lord, that you would keep us united, that you would keep us loving one another, that you would keep our hearts set upon Christ. Lord, that you would allow nothing to distract us from him or to divide us from one another.

Lord, keep us, we pray, your children in your household. Lord, for we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.