

The Truth About The Church

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[0 : 00] I met in Nashville this past week and received a lot of media coverage, mostly negative. That's really to be expected when the mainstream liberal media covers a conservative Christian denomination like the Southern Baptist Convention.

I have attended most of these annual meetings over the last 40 years. And I must admit that we as Southern Baptists, we bring a lot of the negative publicity on ourselves.

We have a track record of publicly arguing over denominational disagreements, airing our dirty laundry in public. That's not good.

Years ago, one of my favorite columnists, Louis Grisard, described being in a tense meeting like this.

There was enough tension in the room to have a Southern Baptist Convention. Now, if you know Grisard, you know he's a funny guy, but he always has a point.

[1 : 10] And he made his point. Last week, conservative Christian columnist, Cal Thomas, blasted Southern Baptists in a column that was published in the Greenville News this past Wednesday.

I want you to look at what this very conservative Christian writer, commentator, had to say. Instead of obeying their professed leader who said, a new commandment I give you, love one another.

As I have loved you, so you must love one another from John 13. They are bickering with one another. What a terrible witness this is to those who do not share their faith.

Part of the conflict has to do with the interpretation of Scripture. Southern Baptists see other denominations that have gone theologically liberal and fear the same could happen to them.

It is a legitimate concern, but the way it's being debated is embarrassing. And it's hard to argue with what he's saying.

[2 : 25] Now, since we, we, Pickens First Baptist Church, we're a part of the Southern Baptist Convention, we should care what is happening in our denomination.

But we should never let it distract us. Our real focus needs to always be on Pickens First Baptist Church. Because the focus of the New Testament is always on the local church.

There are no denominations in the New Testament. Denominations were formed by churches to help individual churches work together and do missions more effectively.

And some other ministries. But I want to make it clear. Denominations are not essential. They're not essential to the kingdom of God.

They're not essential to us as a church. The only required organization in the kingdom of God is the local church. The only one.

[3 : 37] And that is essential. That's what I want us to look at this morning. Last week, I told you that Billy Graham's final public statement was this.

With all my heart, I want to leave you with truth. Well, I'm borrowing that statement as the theme of my final five messages as your pastor.

My intent last week, this week, and the next three weeks. With all my heart, I'm going to leave you with truth. Last week, we looked at the truth about the Bible. Jesus said, your word, speaking to the Father in prayer, your word is truth.

Well, today, I want us to look at the truth about the church. Now, since this is my final message on the church, I want to call your attention to several things the Bible has to say about the church.

But because of the time, you can't look at it all in detail. We're just going to hit some high spots. The first truth about the church is this.

[4 : 41] The basic nature of the church must never change. The basic nature of the church must never change with the times. You know, the owner and builder of the church must never change.

That's Jesus. Jesus made it clear. The church belongs to him. He builds the church with this statement to Peter and the other disciples in Matthew 18.

I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Now, when Jesus made that statement, he was actually referring to the universal church, which is made up of all Christians of all times.

Jesus was saying, I'm going to build my church. Not a building. I'm going to build my church. My gathered people.

My called out people of all time. I'm going to build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. But the universal church that Jesus is talking about functions, only functions, as a local, individual church family like ours.

[6 : 01] For example, most of the books of the New Testament are actually letters that Paul and some of the other apostles wrote to churches. We spent a long time this year looking at Paul's letter to the church in Philippi.

You're familiar with Paul, especially Paul's letters to the Romans, Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, the church in Thessalonica. These are all local churches.

The universal church functions as local, individual churches made up of people who are committed to Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

Jesus is the owner and builder of every local church. You know this, but let's just think about it.

Pickens First Baptist Church is not my church.

It's not any of the staff members' church. It's not the deacons' church. It's not your church. Pickens First Baptist Church belongs to the Lord.

[7 : 09] It's His church. We must never, ever forget that. We are the Lord's church. Now, as long as we understand that, it's very healthy and good for us to say, this is my church.

For the past 25 years, I have enjoyed telling people, this is my church. This is my church family. And I hope you think the same way.

I hope you feel the same way and can talk about this church in a personal way. It's my church, my church family, my brothers and sisters. But in big picture terms, never forget the church belongs to the Lord.

Now, I hope that the Lord has used me for at least a little bit of good in the life of this church along the past 25 years.

But I want to be real clear. The Lord is His church. He builds the church. And He's not going to miss a beat in doing what He's going to do after I'm gone.

[8 : 23] So I want to say to you, stay faithful. Stay faithful to the Lord. Stay faithful to this, His church. And I want to encourage you, pray about how, where you should serve.

And get involved with the spiritual gifts and talents and abilities that God's given you. And if you will do that, prayerfully, faithfully serving this coming year can be the best year in the life of this church. We, as God's people, if we really think rightly, if we understand this is the Lord's church, He builds the church. And if I will be faithful, if I'll do what the Lord has put me in the church to do, every year should be a better year.

We should be more spiritually healthy, vital. We should experience some growth. We should experience being a healthy, growing, maturing family of God.

The owner and builder of the church must never change. That's the key. Number two, the foundation of the church must never change. The church is built on the solid foundation of God's Word.

[9 : 42] I want you to look, if you would, Ephesians chapter 2. It'll be on the screen. Now, if you read through the New Testament, you've studied the New Testament, you know that the biblical writers sometimes use various metaphors, illustrations, examples to describe the church.

There's no one way that the church is described. But in this passage, I want you to note how Paul, in writing to the church at Ephesus, describes the actual foundation.

Look at it. So then you are members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

Jesus is described here as the cornerstone, the key part of the foundation. But at the same time, the apostles and prophets are described as the actual foundation.

Now, the reason why here is described in the next chapter. Look at this, in chapter 3. He says, when you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.

[11 : 16] He's saying that the Holy Spirit revealed to the apostles and prophets that there's only one way of salvation for all people. There's not one way for the Jews and one way for the Gentiles.

There's one gospel, one way of salvation for everybody. It's through faith in Jesus. Jesus said it to the clearest.

I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. Well, the truth about the Christian faith, comprehensively, was taught by the apostles and prophets, written down, and collected into the form that we call the New Testament.

This means that Jesus is building his church on the foundation of Scripture. I emphasized last week that the Bible is God's inerrant word.

And because of that, it must be our, as Christians, our authoritative guide for what we believe and don't believe. And for how we live and don't live.

[12 : 29] And just as God never changes, we can be certain his word will never change. What we believe, how we live, it will never change.

God declares it, and God doesn't change. What this means is that this church must continue to be a Bible-believing, teaching, and living church until Jesus comes.

There is no other option. That's what every church that the Lord owns and builds should be known for above everything else.

Years ago, someone asked me what I thought was an odd question. Everyone asked before. They asked me what we, as a church, were doing in the community that would be missed if our church just disappeared.

What are we doing that would be missed if the church just vanished? Well, the implication was, I took it, that we should be doing what organizations like United Christian Ministries and the Dream Center do.

[13 : 49] Now, these are great Christian organizations that help a lot of people in need, and that is a good thing to do. But that is not the mission of the church.

Now, we support those organizations with some financial assistance. Some of you in this room, you are volunteers in those ministries.

It is very good for individual Christians to serve in those kind of ministries. But those ministries are not a local church.

And they are not fulfilling the mission that Jesus gave His church. My answer to that person who asked that question, what were we doing that would be missed if our church disappeared, was this. We are dispensing the truth of God's Word. We are seeking to be a spiritual wellness center, first and foremost.

[14 : 56] And I want to just make that real, as clear as I know how. The purpose of the church is not to be like some social agency that just meets physical needs.

The church is to be the Lord's body that is preaching and teaching the Word of God and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Calling men and women to faith in Jesus and helping them to grow and mature in developing Christ-like character. We, as a church, our purpose in this community is to be a dispenser, first and foremost, of the truth of God's Word.

And we need to be at the top of our priorities. A spiritual wellness center. And that can't change in order to be faithful to the owner and builder of the church.

That's really a part of the next thing that must not change. The mission of the church must never change. The mission that the Lord has given us. So we don't decide our mission. You don't get to sort of get groups together and dream up of what should we do as a church.

[16 : 16] Jesus has already told us. It's real clear. Most of you know this. Matthew 28. Jesus, just before He ascended into heaven, gave His church their mission, their purpose, their marching orders.

What they're to do until He returns. He said, Several years ago now, we put together a purpose statement.

Based on how the early church was carrying out that great commission you see on the screen. It's in Acts chapter 2, verses 42 through 47.

Luke is the author of Acts. And at the end of chapter 2, he summarizes what the early church was doing. We, as a church, we had a lot of people involved in putting this thing together.

We came up with this to express how we're going to be faithful to our mission. Look at it. Pickens First Baptist Church exists to be a worshiping, evangelizing, learning, and loving, well, family of God.

[17 : 42] Family of faith to the glory of God. When your next pastor comes, he may help you come up with a better way to express the mission or purpose of this church.

And that's fine. You can say that in a lot of different ways, I'm sure. And to change that, make it more memorable or something, that would be good.

But the mission of the church that Jesus calls us to, charges us with, will never change because the Word of God will never change.

But the way churches explain and apply the truth of God's Word should always be changing in order to be able to communicate well to another generation, the next generation.

Life is all about change and the way we communicate things. Now, it won't be any of my business at all how you express things in the future.

[18 : 59] You know, this time next year you come up with a new purpose statement. I may look at it and I may think, well, that's the dumbest thing that I've ever heard. How in the world could they do that? But you know what?

I will never tell you that. Because it's none of my business. However it happens, whatever is said, be faithful.

Say it different ways. But it's always going to be my prayer that you, as a church, will never stop being a dispenser of the truth of God's Word.

It's my prayer that you'll never cease to be, first and foremost, a spiritual wellness center in this community.

But do it whatever way you need to do it. Now, we're looking at things that must never change. And these are hills you need to die on.

[20 : 09] Never change what we've looked at. The owner, the builder, the foundation of the church, the mission of the church. But some things should intentionally be changed from time to time.

So let's look at this. The programs and organizational structure of the church must intentionally change with the times. This is where I'm going to make some people mad.

And I understand that. Because change is hard. But listen with an open mind. Back in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Southern Baptists put together a strong organizational structure that encouraged all Southern Baptist churches to have the same basic program.

Do it all the same. And most churches adopted this cookie-cutter structure. It's all the same. Wherever you go. Whatever state you're in. Whatever size of the church.

It's all the same. Now, that organizational structure worked well back in the 1950s and early 1960s. And by the way, that's when Southern Baptist Convention was truly the strongest and continuing to grow.

[21 : 25] But the Southern Baptist Convention has been declining now for over 50 years. I want you to understand that. The Southern Baptist Convention has been declining for over 50 years.

Now, if you were really a committed Christian, you'd be involved in Sunday night services. We used to have them. And you would know that statement because I said it before a few years ago.

I did a study and talked about, showed you statistics and charts and all this kind of stuff. I just want to sort of bring a little bit back up right now. Ed Stetzer, who was the Southern Baptist Convention's leading researcher for years.

He described the decline five years ago like this. He said several years ago, our team, our team of researchers, brought attention to the fact that the Southern Baptist Convention was in a long-term decline.

It was and remains a multi-decade decline. And it is accelerating. I wrote about it in 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2012.

[22 : 32] As I had noted, the membership decline of the Southern Baptist Convention is not a matter of debate. It is a matter of math. Now, Stetzer wrote that in 2016.

The Southern Baptist Convention is still declining. In fact, in that article, Stetzer quotes one denominational leader as saying Southern Baptists are shrinking faster than United Methodists. And that's not good. Now, there are many reasons why our denomination has and is declined. There could be a whole list of things.

One that's on everybody's list who writes on this is that many churches have refused to change. I mean, they're just not going to change anything.

Now, Stetzer loves humor. If you've ever read or heard him, I've heard him say on several occasions that if we ever, if this country ever returns to the 1950s, Southern Baptists will be ready for it.

[23 : 44] We'll be ready for the 50s if they ever come back. Now, Stetzer and others explain some, not all, but some of our refusal to change is due to generational division.

Old versus young versus medium age, middle age. Here's his explanation. Stetzer says, although generational division isn't as evident nationally today, it still abounds in many places across the Southern Baptist Convention.

Many younger believers have left the Southern Baptist Convention, but they aren't leaving the faith or becoming Wiccans. They're becoming non-denominational evangelicals who still believe like us, but now want to go on without us.

We should continue to ask why. The Southern Baptist Convention needs to determine how to help all generations engage in the mission of God together before the Southern Baptist Convention grays even more.

I got gray hair so I can say this. Brian does too. So, you don't want to come to church and look out over a sea of gray or baldness.

[25 : 05] You don't. That'll be the last generation of the church. Next generation will sell the building. It is vitally important that we as a Southern Baptist church understand change must happen the right way, in a way that's biblically sound, or we won't survive.

Many churches at Southern Baptist Convention are closing every year. Some are merging, get this, some that refuse to change are either selling their building or letting a new contemporary church come in that will blow the glass out of the windows from their being so loud and so, you know, doing that contemporary stuff.

And that church is letting them come in, take their building, buy their building. But they never would have gotten to that point if they had been willing to change a little bit over the years.

I don't know about you, but I don't like the idea of going down on a sinking ship that refuses to bail water and repair the leaks. Now, I'm talking about the denomination as a whole.

I truly believe that the ship called Pickens First Baptist is not a sinking ship. We're not taking on water.

[26 : 39] There's no need to bail. But we've got to be alert. We've got to be willing to do what's necessary to be strong and healthy and thrive.

Now, when you call a new pastor, I say all this, I'm getting to a point. Be open to changing the programs and the organizational structure that will help you to be more effective in making disciples.

Some things, you know, some things have to change in order for you to be well. Well, some things have to change in order for the church to be or stay well.

As I look back over the 25 years that I've been pastor here, I have very few regrets about the changes or the maintaining of programs and organizational structures that we've done.

Very few regrets about what we've changed, what we didn't change. But I have one real regret. About 20 years ago, when Chris Gray was our youth pastor, he wanted to start Awana.

[27 : 58] And we talked about it, had some meetings with people in church and things like this. I thought it would be good for our church to do that. But at the same time, I thought there might be a battle with people who were involved in RAs and GAs because you can't do everything.

Now, believe it or not, I didn't want to do battle. I didn't want the controversy over that. But looking back, I was wrong.

I think right now the makeup of this church would be we would have more younger families and more children today if we had made that change to Awana 20 years ago.

Let me clarify something. There's a lot of faithful Christians in this church and in other churches that have really put their time and life into RAs and GAs and things like that.

And that's something good to serve the Lord in that kind of way. But those kind of programs have never really taken off, been as effective as Awana in reaching children, helping children to memorize God's Word, grow in their faith.

[29 : 27] Just here in our church, in one year that we had Awana, and start back this fall, but in the one year we had it, we had 50, 60, 70 kids here on Wednesday nights.

Without Awana, when it's just RAs and GAs, maybe two handfuls. Do the math. As Ed Stetzer says. Now, I should have said this 20 years ago, but I'm going to say it now. For the benefit of the church and the new pastor.

You don't have to have a, quote, missions education program today to get people thinking about and possibly involved in missions.

Are you aware that the current Lifeway Children's Sunday School literature has a missions education component? A Sunday school teacher told me that.

[30 : 30] The most effective mission education, or the most effective way to do missions education today is to get adults, youth, and children involved in hands-on mission projects and mission trips.

A lot of the old way of doing mission programs in the days gone by, it was designed for when, like WMU, most women didn't work.

And they had the time to be coming to the church during the middle of the week and meeting and doing these things. Life was much simpler in the 1950s and 60s. Life is very, very different today.

And a lot of the old programs of various natures don't work today. Whoever you call as your new pastor, he will most likely come from a church that no longer uses those old programs and structures because fewer and fewer churches are actually doing that.

He will most likely think of teaching missions to all ages by encouraging members of this church of all ages to go on mission trips. To do things like have an annual church missions conference like we do, like Jeff has brought about here, a good thing.

[31 : 55] He'll probably talk about, you can teach about missions and missionaries through Sunday school and other organizations. You know, I am very thankful for the changes we have made in our programming and organizational structure over the past 25 years.

A lot of things have changed in this church. You know, Brian has done a great job in helping us make positive changes in the way we worship. I appreciate a lot of the things he has done to bring about change and singing more contemporary type songs and stuff like that, but I appreciate especially the way he has involved people of every age in our music ministry.

Just this morning, middle school, high school, college, young adults were up on this platform leading.

When I first came here, nobody of that age was on the platform leading. When you look around, look up here now, the look of this platform has changed drastically since I've been here.

Some people would say, yeah, you cluttered it up. Look at all this stuff up here. Used to be all nice and neat with the organ and the piano and little benches up here and everything this neat and tidy and everything.

[33 : 27] But think about how few people were involved. Nobody was playing an instrument other than piano and organ. Nobody was standing up here in a group like this we had of all ages singing and leading us in praise and worship.

Let me tell you this from the bottom of my heart. I love this crowded, junky, cluttered place up here because it represents people involved in leading us and helping us worship Almighty God every Sunday.

This church was not built to be a doggone museum. It was built, designed, made for people, got people to come together and worship God in a way that people of this day can be involved, participate, understand, and get a lot out of it.

We've broken some barriers to change over the last 25 years and I thank God for that. And like I say, I'm not going to be here in the future.

But I want to pave the way and help the next pastor, help this staff, help our church leaders of the day make more changes in the programs and organizational structures that need to take place.

[34 : 51] Some that maybe don't need to take place today will in five years. These kinds of changes that I've been talking about, they need to change.

It needs to happen until Jesus comes back. Change. But, the truth of God's word will never, must never change. And the church must always be faithful to believe it, teach it, and live it.

Never even consider changing it. I want to close this morning by asking you to make the following commitments to God and to this, your church. Listen, will you commit yourself to standing firmly on the truth of God's word as your ultimate authority for what you believe and how you live? Will you do that? Number two, will you commit yourself to doing your part to make sure Pickens First Baptist Church always looks to the Bible as the church's source of authority for what you teach and for how you actually practice ministry? Number three, will you commit yourself to making and supporting the changes to the programs and organizational structures that the leaders of this church, your new pastor, staff members, deacons, that they present is what they believe God has called them to implement for the overall health and growth of the church? [36 : 27] And finally, will you commit yourself to promoting and building the unity of the church and do everything that you can to prevent or heal the vision?

We're looking at this morning the truth about the church. Some things never can change, but some things can and should and must change.

I encourage you make the commitment to God in this church to do your part to never change the truth, but to be always willing to change the methods of communicating that truth.

Let's pray. Dear God, work in the lives of every person in this room to help them to know the importance of this church, the local church.

Help them, dear God, to be committed to you and this church family. Make it clear, dear God, what must never change, but dear God, make it equally clear what can and should change as needed for the church to effectively reach people with the gospel and help Christians to grow and mature.

[37 : 58] Let's just, in an attitude of prayer, listen to the Lord and respond to Him. You respond to Him as He speaks to you. for the Lord. from heaven and put will be Shane to to heaven in turn and find that God unto you of the temple to have a very competent to help Silhnize during the time that children from boozier surf and theippi and to be helpful, on the food and it affects Him