



Sermon Transcript

May 20, 2018

Shepherds and Souls Guard the Flock

Selected Passages: Pastoral Epistles

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on May 20, 2018 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon can be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text

1 Timothy 3:14-16

14 I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, 15 if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. 16 Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:

He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory.

2 Timothy 1:13-14; 2:1-2, 8-10

1:13 Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 14 By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.

2:1 You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, 2 and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.

8 Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, 9 for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! 10 Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.

Titus 2:1, 11-15

1 But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine.

11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, 12 training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, 13 waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, 14 who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works. 15 Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you.

Introduction

What is an elder in the church like? He is like a Great Pyrenees Livestock Guardian Dog. As we watch this video about Great Pyrenees, see if you can identify some of the similarities between them and elders in the church.¹

From the video, here are some of the statements that point to the similarities I see between elders and Great Pyrenees Livestock Guardian dogs.

- “It is not a matter of if coyotes will come, it is just a matter of when.” That is the warning of Paul in Acts 20, *“fierce wolves will come.”*
- “We hear coyotes at night and it is difficult to know where it is coming from.” This attack on the church can come from outside and inside.
- “The dogs respond to a perceived threat first vocally.” Elders must teach the Word in season and out of season.
- “There are challenges to farming here and one of them is just protecting our livestock from predators.” Protecting the flock is a major challenge and responsibility for elders as well.
- “They are working dogs and the sheep will follow them anywhere.” Teaching the Word of God is hard work and people follow what they hear.
- “We have fifteen guardian dogs and we are yet to have a loss.” A plurality of elders is needed and we need to work hard not to lose a soul.
- “These dogs are the solution.” Elders are necessary to the work of the church.
- “They have an instinct to guard and protect livestock.” Protecting the church needs to be the instinct of the elder as well. Elders must be alert.

These things bring to mind what Paul said to the elders of Ephesus in our passage last week. As he said his final good-bye to these elders, Paul gave them these instructions in Acts 20:28-31. *“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore, be alert.”*

Like Great Pyrenees Livestock Guarding Dogs, it is the role of an elder to guard the church. An elder guards the church by guarding the truth. As we have been talking about elders and leadership in the local church, we have naturally turned to what are known as the “Pastoral Epistles.” The letters of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, are letters

written to “shepherds” of the church. In fact, Paul states rather clearly in 1 Timothy 3:14 -15 that the reason he wrote his first letter to Timothy was so that Timothy would know how to conduct himself in the church. He said to Timothy, *“I am writing these things to you so that . . . you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God.”* He said this right after he gave the qualification for elders and deacons.

John Stott wrote a commentary on these three Pastoral Epistles and the title he gave to this book is *Guarding the Truth*. In the introduction to this book, Stott observed that Paul’s “overriding preoccupation throughout all three Pastoral Letters is with the truth, that it may be faithfully guarded and handed on.”² One of the most important functions of an elder is to guard the truth. This shouldn’t surprise us considering that the only “ability” an elder must possess is that he must be able to teach.

Why is “guarding the truth” so important? Jesus said it well when he said in John 8:31-32, *“If you abide in my word, you are my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”* A few verses later, the truth is identified for us. In verse 36, Jesus said, *“So if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed!”* When we are talking about “guarding the truth” we are not just talking about a philosophical truth or simply a set of ideas that need to be embraced. Rather, the truth is Jesus. Leon Morris says it this way, “It is a saving truth. It is the truth that saves people from the darkness of sin, not that which saves them from the darkness of error.”³ By saying that, Morris is not denying that the truth of Jesus brings with it true knowledge and philosophical “truth.” But there is so much more to it than that. It is a truth that liberates us. It is a truth that saves us. It is a truth that delivers us from sin and death. It is the truth wrapped up in the person and work of Jesus. This is what the elders must carefully guard in the local church. We mentioned it last week, “souls are at stake” with the ministry of the church and the oversight of elders. This is why the series is called “Shepherds and Souls.” Therefore, one of the major responsibilities of the elder is the “guard the truth.”

This morning I want to pull a sample from each of the three Pastoral Epistles to demonstrate how important it is for elders to guard the truth in a local church setting. What I observed in these passages is that when Paul calls the elders to guard the truth, very quickly and clearly he defines the truth to be Jesus. Elders must keep their focus and the focus of the church on Jesus. When you put these three passages together, here is what I discover about the ministry of “guarding the truth.”

- Guarding the truth is proclaiming Jesus
- Guarding the truth is equipping others to proclaim Jesus
- Guarding the truth is living the truth of Jesus

Proclaiming Jesus

Our first passage this morning is 1 Timothy 3:14-16. This passage begins with three descriptive statements about the church. In verse 15 Paul calls the church "*the household of God . . . the church of the living God and a pillar and buttress of the truth.*" Each of these descriptive expressions tell us something different about the church.

When Paul says that the church is "*the household of God*" he is basically saying that the church is family. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. Through the work of Jesus, we are adopted into the family of God and we are invited to call God our Father. Then he calls the church *the church of the living God*. The word "church" can also mean "assembly." So what Paul is saying here is that the living God dwells among the assembly of God's people, the church. My favorite definition for the church is that "the church is the presence of God on earth." God dwells among us and it is my prayer that when people come in contact with "this assembly" that they would leave saying what the "unbeliever" said in 1 Corinthians 14:25, "*he will declare that God is really among you.*" I had a man come to me at the door last week and he said, "whenever I come here, I sense God is here." I don't know what it is that makes him sense that to be the case, but that is my prayer. We are "an assembly of the living God." God is in our midst.

But then Paul adds that the church is "*a pillar and buttress of the truth.*" These two terms, "*pillar*" and "*buttress*" are architectural and building terms. A "*buttress*" is something that lends stability to a building. It provides support and braces it so that it can stand. So Paul is saying that the church is a "*buttress of the truth.*" Do you realize what Paul is saying about the church here? Paul is elevating the role of the church. God has a high view and purpose for the church. There are all kinds of reactions to the church in this secular culture. Some have a strong negative reaction against the church. Perhaps the more prevailing attitude about the church in our secular culture is one of indifference. I find the attitude of indifference to be more difficult to overcome than a strong reaction against the church. When there is a strong reaction against the church usually it means that they were looking for something in the church and didn't find it. But the feeling of indifference means that the church is of little consequence. But what is the prevailing thought of those within the church? How elevated is the church in your mind and in your heart? Paul says here that the church is a "*buttress of the truth.*" In other words, the church is the foundation of truth in this world. It is not the academy. It is not the intellectual and talking heads on television. It is the church!

In other passages, Paul says that the church is built on "*the foundation of the apostles and*

prophets" with Jesus as the cornerstone. When he refers to *the apostles and the prophets* he is alluding to their teachings and to their writings that we have in the Bible. So on one hand, Paul is saying that the truth is the foundation of the church. But in our passage this morning, he is saying that the church is the foundation or the "*buttress*" of truth. Which one is it? Stott says it is both. He says, "The church and the truth need each other. The church depends on the truth for its existence; the truth depends on the church for its defense and proclamation."⁴

That is the point in calling the church "*a pillar*" of the truth. Keep in mind that when Paul writes this letter to the people of Ephesus, they are well acquainted with the magnificent temple of Diana, located right there in the heart of the city of Ephesus. It was considered one of the seven wonders of the world and it boasted 100 pillars which lifted up the massive marble roof for all to see. The church is the "*pillar*" of truth. What a lofty picture Paul paints for us of the church. The church is a *buttress* of truth. It houses and defends the truth. And it is a *pillar* of truth. It lifts up and proclaims the truth for the world to see. I am afraid we have far too small of a view of the church. We need to recapture the conviction that the church is at the center of the unfolding plan of God to restore this broken world to his grace and his love.

But what is that truth that the church defends? What is that truth that the church proclaims. If the church is the *buttress* of truth, what is that truth that the church supports and holds up in this unstable world? As a pillar of truth, what does the church lift up for all to see? Look what Paul says in verse 16,

*He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world, taken up in glory.*

It doesn't take much to figure out who Paul is talking about here. It is Jesus. Jesus is human and divine—flesh and Spirit. Jesus and the work of the cross is attested to by angels and by his witnesses who have been proclaiming this message for 2000 years to all the nations. This Jesus has been received by those on earth (including you and me) and he has been received by heaven. This is the glorious work of the church. It is to defend and to proclaim the truth of Jesus.

Because of the glorious role of the church in God's unfolding plan of redemption, the elders of the church must guard this truth. The elders of this local church must ensure that WEFC always keeps the main thing the main thing! May the defense and the proclamation of Jesus always be the driving passion of WEFC. This is why God has planted us here at 511 Maple Street. We are a "*buttress and pillar of the truth*."

Equipping Others

Our second passage is 2 Timothy 1 and 2. In 2 Timothy 1:14, Paul instructs Timothy to “guard the good deposit entrusted to you.” It is pretty clear from the context that this “deposit” is none other than the Word of God. In verse 13 Paul says that they are to take “the pattern of the sound words” that they heard from Paul and they are to “guard” it. They are to keep safe the teaching of God’s Word. It is something that the leaders of the church are entrusted with and are called to. Kelly, in his commentary, says that they are “to preserve God’s word from distortion and corruption.”⁵

When Paul lists “able to teach” as one of the qualifications for elder, I really think it is the ministry of “guarding the truth” that is at the center of this qualification. It doesn’t mean that only an elder can teach. Nor do I think it means that only a man can teach. What it means is that the elders must ensure that what is being taught is in accordance with sound doctrine. That is one of their primary jobs. It is how they guard the flock. At our monthly “shepherding meeting” this past month we were studying the issue of the role of elders in the church. One of the men made the following observations. He said, “while Eve was the one who was deceived, it was Adam who failed to guard the truth.” It was to Adam that God said that they should not eat of that tree. When Eve brought the fruit from the forbidden tree to Adam, Adam should have protected them by following the Word of God. Consequently, the fall of man does not rest at the foot of Eve, but it is in Adam that sin is passed down to us. An elder must guard this good deposit of faith that is passed down to us in the Scriptures.

One of the ways an elder does that is to take what has been passed down to us in the Holy Scriptures and to ensure that it is being passed on to others. Paul says in 1 Timothy 2:1-2, “*You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.*” This guarding of the truth is not just for the present church, it is also for the future church. It is through this ministry that the church endures from generation to generation. The teaching ministry of the church is one of the most important ministries that the elder oversees.

Our vision at WEFC is to “be a church of disciple-makers, multiplying disciples, community groups, leaders and churches.” In order to do that we need to train others so that they can teach others. I think this morning of Matt Jensen, pastoring a church in Oregon. I think of Jason Brannan, pastoring a church in Chicago. I think of Brian Garcia, pastoring a church in Wisconsin. I think of John Corrigan, working with

university students in Buffalo. I think of Josh and Mandi Watrous and Rachel (Miller) Dorsett serving at His Mansion. I think of Steve Durgin, Matt Schuberth and Daniel Leffingwell, preparing for vocational ministry. All of these young men and women are from this church and are in the process of taking what has been deposited in them and are passing it on to a group of people in a different corner of God's kingdom. Would that we would be an ongoing incubator for raising up a next generation of church leaders. That is what the guarding ministry of the Word of God leads to.

We are doing that here as well. We are training others to preach. Pastor Mike is working with an adult class on Sunday morning and each week he is meeting with a different person, training them to teach the class. I love that Pastor Ryan took the Jr. and Sr. High students this year through the doctrinal statement of the EFCA. We heard this morning from our children and how they are learning the story-line of the Scriptures and are learning the "ten commandments" and "the beatitudes." Each Sunday Morning in our worship service we recite a question from the catechism so that we can reinforce this deposit that has been given to us in the Scriptures. In other words, the deposit of God's Word is being transferred to the next generation and God is preparing a whole new generation of leaders. This is the ministry that the elders must carefully guard as a trust given to them by God. One of the best ways to detect a counterfeit is to be so familiar with the truth you can readily see the difference.

What is the focus of that trust? I am really struck by what Paul says in 2 Timothy 2:8, "*Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel.*" I remember the first time this phrase caught my attention. I wondered to myself why Paul would need to remind the leaders to "remember Jesus" and to remember that "Jesus rose from the dead." How can you forget that truth? And yet, how easy it is to get sidetracked and to forget what is of first importance—Jesus! Paul even says it that way in 1 Corinthians 15 when he says, "*I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.*" This is the message that the elders must diligently guard. It is Jesus Christ crucified—buried—and risen from the dead for the forgiveness of our sins. This is the "deposit" that is entrusted to us and needs to be passed on so that others are able to pass it on. If we do not offer this world Jesus, we have nothing else to offer.

Live It

Finally, I am struck by the instruction Paul gives to Titus in Titus 2:1. He says to Titus,

“teach what accords with sound doctrine.” He didn’t just say, “teach sound doctrine.” When I think of doctrine, I think of statements of truth that need to be affirmed and believed. For example, I need to believe in the doctrine of the Trinity or in the doctrine of the sinful nature of man and his need for a Savior—namely Jesus. That is part of what needs to be taught. But what is it that *“accords with sound doctrine?”* Do you know what it is? It is sound living. In other words, as an elder seeks to guard the truth, he also needs to demonstrate and teach what a life looks like that embraces the gospel of Christ. There is a life that flows out of the gospel and so the ministry of guarding the truth does not just show up with what you say you believe. It shows up in how we live. Paul says starting in Titus 2:11, *“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age . . . to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.”*

I read an article recently that asked the question: Is your church a gospel-centered church? Be careful here because the question is not whether or not we are a gospel-affirming church or a gospel-proclaiming church. That is the kind of church that relegates the gospel to evangelism. In other words, it is the unbeliever who needs the gospel. But a gospel-centered church is a church that preaches the gospel to people who already believe. Why would we need to do that? It is because it is the gospel that empowers and shapes the way we live. That is exactly what Paul is saying to Titus. It is the gospel that is *“training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in the present age.”*

A lot of times we communicate to people that they are saved by grace through faith but then they need to live out their faith by works. But I need Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit to live out my faith. In other words, I am moved to forgive because of the gospel—I have been forgiven. I am moved to be hospitable because of the gospel—I have been welcomed. I am generous with my money because of the gospel—God has been generous to me. I am not given to despair because of the gospel—I have an eternal hope that is kept in heaven for me. I am a champion for racial reconciliation because of the gospel—in Jesus God has formed a people from every nation into one body, the church. I can even get behind our vision for church planting because of the gospel—we have a truth worth preaching. Do you see it?

Elders must ensure that our church is gospel-centered in all that we do. This summer we are going to be doing a series on the book of James. It begins on June 17. The book of James can easily morph into a “book of works.” It is filled with lessons of “what do to”

and “how to live.” Doesn’t James say that without works our faith is dead? I have been working on this series with our preaching cohort. Collectively, we have decided to call this series, “The Gospel According to James.” The reason we did that is that we don’t want lose sight of the fact that it is the gospel that shapes our works. We never want to become a legalistic church. Nor do we ever want to become a church that fails to call God’s people to obedience. How do we walk that fine line? We do so by becoming a “gospel-centered” church that anchors all we do in the gospel. That is part of what it looks like for an elder to “guard the truth.”

The great preacher, Spurgeon, said it this way, “Keep to the gospel, then, more and more. Give the people Christ and nothing but Christ. Satisfy them, even though some should say that you nauseate them, with the gospel . . . By the roadside, in the little room, in the theater—anywhere, everywhere, let us preach Christ.”⁶ Tony Merida adds to this by saying, “In large worship centers to underground churches, from cities to farmlands, from the urban poor to the suburban rich, from hard places to holiday places, let us keep what is of first importance the main thing in our lives, ministries and churches.”⁷ This is the job of an elder in the church. May all we do flow from the gospel as we live what we believe.

Conclusion

Thinking back to the video at the beginning of the service, I can’t help but recall how the Great Pyrenees Livestock Guardian dogs stood among the sheep. I was struck also by the constant vigilance and sense of being alert to their surroundings. That is an elder. As he stands among the people and remains vigilant, he responds to the call to guard the truth. That truth is the timeless message of Jesus.

The church is the *butress and pillar of truth* and so we proclaim Jesus. As elders are entrusted with the sacred writings of Scripture, we faithfully pass them on to another generation so that the church endures from one generation to the next. Finally, this is a truth that shapes us. We guard it by being an example of a life shaped by the love and grace of God. Therefore, as Christ gave himself, we give ourselves and we become zealous for good works.

May God raise up elders here at WEFC who guard the word of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

¹Link to Video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36Cv-gh2NeQ>

²John Stott *Guarding the Truth* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996) 10

³Leon Morris *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 405

⁴Stott, 106

⁵J. N. D. Kelly *The Pastoral Epistles* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1960) 167

⁶Charles Spurgeon *An All-Around Ministry: Addresses to Ministers and Students* (Ichthus Publications: 2014)

⁷Tony Merida, “Your Church May Not be a Gospel-Centered As You Think”

www.thegospelcoalition.org April 10, 2018

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COMMUNITY GROUPS

○ Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Share with the group something you are looking forward to this summer.
2. Share with the group one way the group has been a blessing to your life.
3. Reflecting on this series, share what you are learning about elders and church leadership.

○ Diving Into The Word

4. Read 1 Timothy 3:14-16. What do you learn about the church in these verses? What does it mean that the church is “a buttress and pillar of truth?”
5. Read 2 Timothy 1:13-14 and 2:1-2. What do you learn about the ministry of the Word from this passage? What does it look like to “guard the truth?”
6. Read Titus 2:1and 11-15. How does the gospel “train us” for godliness? How does the gospel shape the way we live?
7. Read 1 Timothy 3:16, 2 Timothy 2:8-10 and Titus 2:11-15. What do you learn about Jesus from these passages? Why do you think the focus of the church needs to be on Jesus?

○ Taking It Home

8. How does this sermon and discussion move you to pray for the church?
9. Discuss as a group what you want to do this summer with regards to meeting together? Do you intend to continue meeting?