

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 12, 2015**

**THE ESSENTIALS OF OUR FAITH (10):
WE BELIEVE IN THE CHURCH**

Matthew 16:13-18

I want to resume our examination of *The Essentials of Our Faith* in the EPC by talking about the church today. Though it is not included in your bulletin, I want to read to you what it says about the church in the *Essentials*.

The true Church is composed of all persons who through saving faith in Jesus Christ and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit are united together in the body of Christ. The Church finds her visible yet imperfect expression in local congregations where the Word of God is preached in its purity and the sacraments are administered in their integrity, where scriptural discipline is practiced, and where loving fellowship is maintained. For her perfecting she awaits the return of her Lord.

CALLED OUT

The New Testament Greek word for “church” – *ekklesia* – occurs more than 100 times in the New Testament. But it is used by Jesus only twice in the Gospels: in Matthew 16:18, which we just read, where Jesus says to Peter, “On this rock I will build my church”; and in Matthew 18:17, where Jesus gives instructions to His disciples on how to deal with sin, offense, or unresolved conflict in the fellowship of believers.

The word *ekklesia*, as you may know, means “called out.” By this word, we understand the church to be the “called out” people of God, the “called out assembly” of men and women, girls and boys, from every race, language, nation, and socio-economic status who embrace, believe in, and follow Jesus Christ as the one and only Savior of sinners and Lord of all. We understand the church to consist of all those in every age whom God has graciously and sovereignly called out from the world to be His people. Why? To what ends?

- To worship Him in spirit and in truth.
- To glorify God in all we do and to enjoy Him forever.
- To bear witness to the truth and power of the gospel and the wonder of His saving love.
- To be salt and light in a dark and decaying world.
- To be, as I have shared with you before, an outpost of heaven in a fallen world, a mission outpost placed in the world by God to bear faithful witness to the gospel of His grace in Jesus Christ and to model what life is like in the kingdom of God (adapted from Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor*, 110).
- To serve God’s purposes in this and every generation.

Called out and set apart from the world at-large *by* God.

Called out and set apart *for* God.

Called out *by* God to belong to Him.

Called out *by* God to be *in* the world but not *of* the world.

In the world but distinct *from* the world.

Called out *from* the world and then sent back *into* the world to live, love, serve, preach, teach, bless, and heal in the name of Jesus.

Called out and commissioned to be God's missionaries on the mission fields where we live, work, and go to school; on such mission fields as Haiti, France, Mexico, Kentucky, Brooklyn, Dagestan; and to the ends of the earth.

That is what it means to be the *ekklesia* of God.

JESUS: "I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH"

The words of Jesus I most want to focus on this morning are five words He spoke to Peter in Matthew 16:18, following Peter's great confession of Jesus in verse 16 as the true Christ (Messiah) and the Son of the living God. I don't want to get into disputes over what the word "rock" signifies in verse 18 – whether the rock is to be understood as Jesus Himself and His saving work for us, or Peter's confession of faith, or, in some sense, Peter himself as the first leader of the church in Jerusalem. What I want to focus on are these five words spoken by Jesus: "I will build my church" (16:18).

In these five words, Jesus reminds us, in case any of us have forgotten or misunderstood, whose church it is. The church belongs to Jesus. And it always will. He is the architect, designer, and builder of the church. It is Jesus who is building the church. And the church He is building belongs to Him.

He – not any person, pastor, priest, bishop, pope or denomination – is the true head of the church. The Church with a big "C" belongs to Him. So does every congregation of believers, every local church with a small "c", everywhere in the world, from the tiniest *ekklesia* meeting out in the middle of nowhere to the largest megachurch you have ever seen. It is the Lord Jesus Christ – His person and work, who He is and what He did for us in His saving work on the cross – who gives life and hope and unity and purpose to the church. When we forget that the church belongs to Jesus (not to us, not to you and not to me) and that it exists for Him (not for us, not for you, and not for me), trouble is sure to follow. A spiritual virus attacks the body of Christ and compromises the health, well-being, vitality, and witness of the church. This is true in both the micro sense and the macro sense – in the life of a particular church family and in the witness of the larger church in the world.

If we try to squeeze Jesus into the world's mold in order to gain the world's approval for any reason, not least by approving of something that is clearly contrary to the teachings of Jesus and the Bible as a whole, and advocating for its approval in both church and culture, the church loses its distinctiveness, sabotages its own witness, and grieves the heart of God.

Or, if we fall into the "holier than thou" trap of self-righteousness, if we look down on others we judge to be morally or spiritually inferior to us, if we think ourselves to be morally or spiritually superior to others by virtue of our faithful church attendance, our participation in some mission trip, or teaching Sunday school or some other ministry – you name it, unless we repent, we are not going to like what God has to say to us when we stand before His throne of judgment.

Another thing: If the church is known mainly for what we are against and not what we are for; if we are known first and foremost for our opposition to same-sex "marriage" or abortion or some other social cause (things to which we are opposed with good reason) and not for the gospel of God's saving love for the world in Christ, not for the way we love God and the way we love one another and the way we love others, including those who disagree with us and even hate us, and not for our commitment to communicate the truth of God's Word with love; then we have missed the point for which God has placed His church in the world.

The church has no shortage of critics in the world today. There are plenty of valid reasons to criticize the church, not that every criticism of the church is deserved, or every complaint about the church valid. We know the church, both big "C" and little "c", is far from perfect. It is full of flaws ... because it is full of flawed people. If you are looking for a perfect church, I'm afraid you will have to look for it somewhere else. You won't find it here at Faith. The truth, of course, is that there is no such thing as a perfect church here on earth. There never will be, until Jesus returns.

Does this mean there is some kind of flaw in the design or plans Jesus drew up for the church? Not at all. Though it will be one day, when construction is complete, the church Jesus is building is not perfect yet, because it is composed entirely of imperfect people. Jesus uses only imperfect people in building His church here on earth, because imperfect people – people like us – are the only kind of people there are. The only people available for Jesus to use are sinners like you and me. By the grace of God, we are redeemed sinners. But sinners nonetheless. The Holy Spirit is not finished with His sanctifying work in us yet.

So, it is simply stupid to expect the church – any church – to be perfect. It is foolishness to expect church people to always say and do the right thing in exactly the right way at the right time, to treat every person in every situation in a loving way without offending anyone. It is both arrogant and a royal waste of time and energy to try to give others the impression that your walk with God as a Christian is perfect. It is not. And it is a grave mistake to expect moral and spiritual perfection of yourself.

Keep in mind that not everyone who comes to church is part of the true Church (big "C"). Not every church member is truly a follower of Christ. Not everyone who is part of the visible church belongs to the true church. That is the point of Jesus' parable in Matthew 13

about the wheat and the weeds (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43). And, for one reason or another, not every true follower of Christ is a member of a particular small “c” church family.

There is something wrong with every church, and lots of things wrong with the church in the world as a whole. Mostly, what’s wrong with the church is us. We are the problem. The flaws are in us. Nevertheless, Jesus is building His church. And He will finish what He has begun.

In an interview not too long before his death a couple years ago, author Dallas Willard was asked this question about the state of the church in the world: “When you look at how off track the church is, do you ever just throw up your hands in despair?”

Willard smiled and said: “Never.”

“But how can you not?” asked the interviewer.

“Because,” said Willard, “I know Christ is the head of His church, and He knows what He is doing.

The church does often seem to be off track, ineffective, lacking in power and passion, doesn’t it? If you ever find yourself disappointed, let down, or embarrassed by the church, big “C” or little “c” – and who hasn’t? – please don’t give up on the church. Jesus has not. Jesus will not. So why should we?

FOUR DISTINGUISHING MARKS

In our *EPC Essentials*, four distinguishing marks of the church are identified: 1) the preaching of the Word of God in its purity; 2) the proper administration of the sacraments (baptism and the Lord’s supper); 3) the exercise of church discipline in accord with the Scriptures; and 4) love for one another in the fellowship of believers. All four are important. We take all four seriously here at Faith. We desire to be faithful to God and His Word in all these things. We know it is especially in the way we treat one another, in the way we *love* one another, and the love we show to others outside the church, that people will see and know that we really are followers of Jesus and members of His family, His *ekklesia*, the church.

The church Jesus is building is to be a place of grace. And everybody needs grace.

The church Jesus is building in every community, including our community here in Kingstowne, ought to be “the most loving place in town.” Because everybody needs to know they are loved. And God. Is. Love.

The church Jesus is building ought to be the most forgiving place in town. Because everybody needs forgiveness. And everybody needs to learn to forgive. If we don’t, if we won’t, we shut ourselves off from the flow of God’s mercy and grace in our lives.

The church Jesus is building is meant to glorify and magnify God the Father, to exalt Jesus Christ the Son as Savior and Lord, and to be continuously filled with the Holy Spirit in order to live out our faith individually and together as a mission outpost called out by God for God to bear witness to God's saving grace in Christ and to give the world at least a glimpse of what life is like in the kingdom of God.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory and praise of God. Amen.