

June 13, 2010

If it ain't broke...?

Philippians 1:1-11

Good morning. Take your bible out with me and for the first time in forever, don't turn to Titus. Instead turn to Philippians chapter 1 and put your finger there – we'll get there in just a moment.

For those of you who are guests or haven't been here recently, last Sunday we finished a long study of the letter of Titus which turned out to be a compact blueprint from God for establishing His church. In other words – it was all about what God wants His church to be and be about. And in the end, the blueprint that came clear – like any blueprint – boiled down to the foundation, the structure, and the furnishings that make a church God's church rather than something God never wanted it to be.

You say wait a minute – I thought that's what church was – the church of God – you saying there can be a church that isn't God's church? Well absolutely. Obviously the title 'church' is used by cults and religions that have nothing to do with what is being described in the New Testament. But even among those who claim to be in the vein of the what we mean when we as Christians say 'church,' there is a wide spectrum of definition and ideas. That's why the blueprint God gives us in Titus and that is expounded on in so many place in the Word of God must be understood. We can call whatever we want to a 'church' – but for God to agree, the definition gets much narrower – the blueprint gets much more defined.

So in a wide sense, every one who truly believes in Jesus Christ as God in the flesh who lived a perfect life as man and gave Himself on the cross as the atoning and only acceptable sacrifice to pay for our sins – to appease the holy wrath of God the Father – to provide a righteousness that is transferred to those who believe by faith not by their own works – who then came back from the grave to establish final and complete victory not just over sin, but over death itself and is now by faith through the regeneration and indwelling of the Holy Spirit the only way to forgiveness, life, salvation, and eternity in heaven – if that's you, no matter who or where you are then all of us together are the church. And in that wide sense – then yes – the church is always God's church.

But in all but just a very few uses of the word "church" in the Bible, God is referring not to all believers, but to the corporate life of together by groups of us in a local setting and specifically to us in that local setting when we gather together in worship. And in that sense, there is a greatly varying degree of those that qualify as God's church. Even in Scripture we see all kinds. The majority of the New Testament is composed of letters sent to these local assemblies or to the ministers who exercised spiritual leadership among them. Jesus Himself wrote seven letters to different local congregations in Revelation 2 and 3.

And **as you read the New Testament, the fit of CHURCHES to God's blueprint varies widely:**

Some churches are worldly – mere infants in Christ that are not ready for solid food like we see in **1 Corinthians 3:1-2**.

Others are susceptible to a false gospel which is no gospel at all like in **Galatians 1:6-7**.

Some congregations have been placed in hostile spiritual territory yet they remain true to Christ as Jesus describes in **Revelation 2:13**.

Yet others in that same chapter have lost their first love and need to repent quickly (**Revelation 2:4-5**).

Some stand as models to believers everywhere because of their strong faith in God like we see Paul saying **1 Thessalonians 1:7-8**.

While still others are so complacent and lukewarm that Jesus wants to vomit them out of His mouth back in **Revelation 3** again.

God wants ALL of them moving toward and living in His intent and plan for HIS church. So as the Apostle Paul dealt with so many of these churches – all in differing stages of development – when he was part of one that was getting it – that was fitting – it was like a breath of fresh air. It was encouraging – renewing – empowering in the mission God gave him of expanding God's Kingdom. And that's what we find where I had your open your Bibles to – in Philippians chapter 1.

This was the first letter that we studied verse by verse through 6 years ago, so without going into detail, remember that Paul is writing to the church at Philippi and he is writing from prison in Rome. He is writing because a guy named Epaphroditus has come from the church in Philippi to bring a gift of money and support to Paul – so he writes not only to acknowledge the gift but as a particularly tender letter to a group of Christians who were especially close to Paul's heart – a church that was getting it – that required very little in doctrinal

error correction rather than simple encouragement to press on. I want us to look at the opening verses and I'll tell you why in a minute.

Philippians 1:1-8.

Guys there are only a few things that really get me going – that reveal an extreme bias in me – so much so that it can make others uncomfortable. Obviously the wonderfulness of my wife as a doctor, a chef, a wife, and a friend. As you've too often heard – the Aggies and the value of Texas A&M among the other so-called 'universities' in Texas. The awesomeness and horridness of certain foods – cheese being the food of Satan of course.

But God brought us to this passage in Philippians today so you can know that you are in that group. I thank my God every time I think of this church. In all my prayers for you I always pray – even in the hard times – with joy as my starting point towards you – because, as Paul wrote – of your partnership in the gospel since my first day with you until now. And it is right for me as your pastor to feel this way about you – because you are in *my* heart. And whether in difficult or in good times – all of you share in God's grace with me. And so God continues to fill me with the affection of Christ Jesus for you. Because I too am confident that God has begun a good work in you that He will continue to carry on to completion.

So much of our time together on Sunday mornings ends with particularly challenging questions or reminders or applications of what we know are weaknesses or sins or failures or just the “more” in our lives that God's Word calls us to address and change and trust and live. And after another year of such applications specifically aimed at us together – aimed at us as a church - in Titus – particularly with last Sunday aimed at potentially large scale changes in structure to fit God's blueprint – I believe God today wants you to be encouraged together. **It is much easier to see the NEGATIVE than the POSITIVE – to pick on the missing pieces than to appreciate the ones that are there. But doing BOTH are necessary. And Fairway has much to praise God for.**

We've seen that what makes a church great – the starting point of the church – is that it is God's. It belongs to Him. We belong to Him. The church is His to lead. And you people get that. Jesus Christ is exalted here. He is exalted in our worship – it is becoming more and more obvious and more and more contagious not just among us but among those who visit here that worship is our response to who God is and what He has done. It is not about singing empty songs or rote words or ritual acts or memorized prayers – it is about God. And you get it. I watch you sing – I listen to you pray – I watch you listen and you are exalting Jesus Christ.

This is God's church and you get that. You want to follow Him. It is obvious in the lack of personal power struggles at Fairway. There is no deacons vs the pastor or staff vs volunteers or generation vs generation power struggles. We are all God's and we follow as He leads through whom He leads. In the past 4 or 5 years as God's vision for Fairway was expressed – that we exist to be moving people to and doing life in Christ one step at a time – even when those steps last year became concrete – worshipping Jesus – learning truth – building community so that we can reach your world – you have listened, you have discussed, you have prayed, and you have followed. As God does the difficult moving of staff from church to church multiple times over the past 15 years and as recently as last Sunday, you've done the same – you trust and follow God whose church we are.

We saw in Titus a re-affirmation of what we've seen so many times in scripture that it is one of the steps to life in Christ that we emphasize together – to learn truth because God's Word is the foundation of the church that is His. More and more of you are getting that. You hunger for the Word. Since I began preaching expositively – going through verse by verse studies of books of the Bible rather than topically or just on felt-need lists and surface issues, you have grown to want the Word. So much so that if I were to change that style of preaching significantly you wouldn't like it – you hunger for God's truth. In fact that is one of the most common laments from our military as they move to other places. They have learned to hunger for God's Word here and it hurts to not be able to find it quickly.

This year for the first time we are doing the REAP method in reading through God's Word together and there are more of you than ever before trying to daily be in the Word of God – yet without legalism – we have the freedom to fail and fall behind and to pick up again just for the sake of growing in God's truth.

Partly as an outgrowth of that desire for depth and understanding of what God is teaching us, we began our LINKs ministry after trying and failing in every possible type of small group ministry out there and now there are more youth, college, singles, couples, families in LINKs than ever before with more starting and joining all the

time. And though all of them are growing in God's truth together, some of you have created LINKs that are smaller and closed to give you a chance to go deeper with a certain group and others of you have made LINKs that are constantly growing and adding as you give more and more people chances to connect in real relationships. Both are things we must continue doing. Which also was part of God's blueprint for the church that is His – the blueprint for the family and people within – the building of community by developing relationships and serving one another.

And that is happening more and deeper relationships are springing up all over the church family for those who are seeking them. Relationships of prayer and trust and ministry – relationships that will risk even accountability and confrontation in love – real concern for one another in the midst of life.

Faithfulness to corporate worship is growing toward the majority rather than the minority – people are beginning to be able to notice when you're gone because we've grown to miss you when you aren't here. As well as faithfulness to obedience in giving is spreading more and more as you share amongst yourselves how God is moving in your finances. Last year in the midst of the economic downturn, those you put on the budget planning team walked a fine line of practical faith in planning and then asking for your commitment to give to support what was asked even when things were tight everywhere and making ends meet was going to be risky for so many and yet here we are mid-June at over 100% of budget.

Furthermore that grasp of playing your part – of the interdependence that was so important in God's blueprint in Titus is showing up not only in the giving of finances but of life. Moms are meeting together to minister to each other in bible study and prayer. Parents are forming their own basically day cares to take care of each others' kids. Families that have been homeschooling forever are mentoring those that are just starting. Meals are being provided for new moms, sick families, military spouses when their spouse is deployed or gone. A group of men has banded together to serve our senior adults any way they are asked. For the first time in a long time our deacons are seeking to serve and encourage and meet needs on an individual basis as well as serving the church as a whole however they can. Some of our youth are volunteering to do free babysitting for single parents. More and more of our military are getting involved sooner than later and connecting in the church family and it is showing up because as they move on they are calling back to use us as references for places of service in their next churches. And as that inclusion grows, more of you on the base are bringing more like you with you. And all of that is happening without programs – we don't do that stuff by programs – it happens when you live out what God does in your heart and that's what you're doing.

And it isn't just in here. For the first time since I've been here the grass roots desire to be on mission in Wichita Falls is spreading on its own. People who are getting the truth of the Word – getting connected in community – serving one another – are seeing that the natural outflow of that is to reach out and minister outside as well. LINK groups are serving together in schools and at Faith Mission and the food bank. Individuals who serve in things like hospice or race for the cure or any number of things are seeing their church family as a source of comrades in arms. More and more are wanting to find ways to include others in what they want to do in service. So much so that we have taken down the map bulletin boards in the hallway and are using that space as a connection point for opportunities for service that you are already going to do and you want others to join you as well as education about large scale mission and prayer around the world.

Church part of my responsibility according to God's blueprint in Titus is to encourage you and **God wants you to know today that He has begun a good work in YOU for His glory and praise.**

Now when you combine that with what God showed us last week – when you take a minute to let God encourage us about all that He is doing and has been doing and yet you hear last week that God's blueprint for the church that will be His requires us to take a hard look at our structure as a church and be open to significant changes in both our corporate idea and our personal possibilities and responsibilities – then what may come up from our gut is a long time fallback for most of us – if it ain't broke, don't fix it. Why mess with a good thing? If all this is happening or starting to, just let it go and don't risk messing it up!

Well let's think about that. Every advancement in the way people live has come about because someone saw what could be and was no longer willing to accept what is. This is true of virtually all the inventions that have impacted human civilization. The men and women responsible for those breakthroughs imagined something that was not yet visible to the human eye. Not all of these people were geniuses, but they all had vision. They refused to yield to the idea that there was no better way to do things and pressed on toward something better

even though the process often required years of hard work and many failures along the way. Consequently – countless people in succeeding generations have reaped the benefits.

The starting point for this advancement was people who did not settle for the status quo – even when the status quo was good – but believed things could be even better. This fact is just as true in the spiritual realm. Every revival in church history has been started by pastors and believers who knew from Scripture that God had something better for His people. All the great missionary movements have been spawned by people desperate to see God's Kingdom expanded to *new* regions. In fact every time people really pray, we are believing that God by His divine power can change *what is* into *something better*.

And that takes us back into Philippians. **Even though Paul loved this church – even though they were doing well** – even though he was bragging on them in so many ways – even though he loved what they were – look at what comes next in verse 9. **He still prays for them to CHANGE as God leads them.** And this is what he prays. Look at it with me:

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, - that as you continue to learn more of God's truth – as you continue to grow in the depths of God's Word – your love for God that causes a love for His Word that causes a love for each other that causes a love for the lost would abound more and more.

So that you may be able to discern what is best – not just what is good – not just what you've always done – not just what is working now – but what is best. The implication that follows is that by knowing what is best you then pursue and live in what is best so that – he says – you may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ. That by living in that process – growing in knowledge – growing in love – pursuing what is best – you will be filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ-- to the glory and praise of God.

See it isn't a matter of fixing what is broken. It isn't a matter of messing up a good thing. It is recognizing that even in the midst of the good – even in the awareness of what God has been doing – even in the celebration of what and who we love – even in all we just talked about – growth and discipline and further obedience are NEEDED STILL – there are still glaring holes even in the midst of what is working and what is working must continue to be pursued and improved – and most importantly – it means that when God shows us something more He has for His church – something further on – different – we do all we can – we risk whatever it takes to follow.

We didn't get to where we are by being happy with the status quo – and we won't get to where God wants us next by doing so either – even when the status quo is good!

So when God shows us – like He has begin in Titus – **something He wants for His church – implicit in that knowledge is the challenge to FOLLOW and OBEY.** So when I ask you to be praying and studying and to be present as we look deeper at the issue of the structure of the church that is God's – when I challenge you to be prepared to reevaluate your personal perspective and even the possibility of following or doing or being something you've never considered – it is not because where we are is bad or wrong – it isn't because we need to stop what we are doing immediately - it is because this is God's church and we are God's people and God's will is always best.

And as much as you let me tell you today how much I love you – how proud I am of you – how excited I am about you – and how much I want even more for you – God's heart for you as His church is even greater.

And like I said last week – your church will be not what you want it to be but what you are being. So here is what is so important for me as your pastor and you as a church: **when God reveals His will in Scripture we to do whatever it takes to LINE UP with it.** And here's where that gets personal. That is not just true for me as a pastor or us as the church. **That truth for His church should also define our PERSONAL response to all He says.** God must be exalted not just in here (sanctuary) but in here (my heart). That's what life in Christ one step at a time is all about.