

MUSCLE CAR CHURCH

1TIMOTHY 3:14-15

Several years ago I spoke at a church in Northern California. The next morning one of the youth pastors drove me to the Sacramento Airport.

We had plenty of time before my flight, and he asked if I'd like a cup of coffee. *I always do.* So we exited the freeway and pulled into a McDonalds.

When the young man ordered his coffee the clerk charged him \$1.29.

I placed the same order... but the clerk said, "*Sir, that'll be \$.79.*" I said, "*\$.79?*" I pointed to the youth pastor. "*He placed the exact same order and you charged him \$1.29?*" She said, "*Yes, but you get the senior discount.*"

For the first time it hit me, people are viewing me as a senior citizen!

And this McDonalds' clerk was no teenager. A teenybopper considers anybody over 30 ready for the retirement home... but this gal was a 20-something young lady. She was mature enough to read people...

At first, her assessment caught me off-guard... *then I bristled up!* I even tried to correct her. I told her firmly, "*Look, I'm not a senior and I don't want a discount. I'm paying the same price everybody else pays!*" I slapped a buck-29 down on the counter. I wasn't giving in to customer profiling...

Yet despite my reluctance, no one can escape reality... *I'd been sized up...* In the perfectly good eyes of another adult I looked *elderly!*

And that was a few years ago. I'm sure it's more evident today.

I'm 52 years young... My oldest son is 3 years south of 30... I've got a daughter who teaches High School. They call my little girl, "*Mrs. Keller.*" It seems like just yesterday I *attended* High School... *Where did the time go?*

In the last year I've had a kid graduate from college – another graduate from High School. Then the HS grad goes off to college - and last Saturday the college grad got married! *Kathy and I are now official free birds!*

And the real mystery is how I can look so old while my lovely wife keeps drinking from the fountain of youth! *Hey, nobody has been offering Kath a senior discount!* People keep mistaking her for her 25 year old daughter.

And here's what really blows my mind...

I've now been the **pastor of a church** for 30 years – three decades. I was a pastor when Jimmy Carter was president... *And that's no peanuts!*

Walter Cronkite was still hosting the evening news when I became a pastor... I was a pastor before John Lennon got shot... Since I became a pastor the population of planet Earth has increased by 2.2 billion people...

I'm just saying I've been a pastor now for a very long time.

Recently it dawned on me that I've been a pastor for about as long as the Apostle Paul was a pastor when he wrote his first letter to Timothy...

Thirty years elapsed between Paul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, and his letter to Timothy from a prison cell in Rome.

Paul was an angry rabbi who hated Christians, until Jesus knocked him off his high horse with a blinding light. Suddenly, he realized he'd been wrong – Jesus was alive! *Paul had no other choice but to follow Jesus!*

And Paul followed hard. He followed Jesus around the world three times sowing the seeds of the Gospel. Paul won continents to Christ. One man shook up the Roman Empire. Everywhere he went he inflamed enemies and won converts - until the men who feared him threw Paul in prison.

And from a jail cell - *30 years after his start* - Paul put pen to parchment.

Like a spiritual volcano, He erupted with thoughts and wisdom. He spilt his heart onto a sheepskin he would mail to his young protégé, Timothy.

Paul bubbled over with lessons he'd learned from 30 years of ministry.

By worldly measures he was a poor man, but Paul was in possession of a spiritual treasure chest of experiences he now feels the need to share.

And I feel a little bit like Paul... not that I'll be adding any books to the Bible. That no longer happens, and if it did, I wouldn't be an author.

Nor have I suffered or sacrificed like Paul. Few miracles dot my resume. I've yet to win continents. Very few kings and emperors fear my influence.

Yet like Paul, I've logged 30 years doing what God called me to do. And over the course of those years I too have learned a few valuable lessons.

On October 10, 2010 our church will celebrate 30 years of God's faithfulness. It's cool... *10/10/10 equals 30*. We're planning a special day.

But over the next few months I want to share with you some of what 30 years of ministry has taught me. And there's no better launching pad than Paul's first letter to Timothy. Each week we'll break down Paul's words to Timothy - and where appropriate, I'll share a lesson that I've learned.

In fact, we're going to tackle this letter from several different angles...

Today, we'll strike at its heart. We'll probe its theme verses, 3:14-15. This passage serves as the trunk from which the rest of the book sprouts.

After a close examination of the tree trunk we'll comb the limbs and leaves. We'll take a couple of weeks to survey the book – all six chapters.

Then we'll take a few more weeks, and pull out different threads that run throughout the book... We'll try to fully explore Paul's letter to Timothy...

Our text this morning is 3:14-15. It's the crux of the entire letter.

Paul communicates to Timothy... "These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth."

Here's the theme of 1Timothy. *Like the life Kathy and I have lived for the last 30 years* - it's all about the church. It's about growing the church, and building the church, and feeding the church, and caring for the church.

Verse 16 says God has entrusted "the mysteries of godliness" to His church! This makes the church a really big deal! And since Timothy is a church leader it's vital he know how to conduct himself in God's household.

The church... any church... even this church... is like an automobile. When a car drives by all you see is a car... until you pop the hood...

Get into its mechanics and you realize a car is a lot of different systems, each operating separately, yet working together to keep the car running at optimum performance. There's *the brake system, cooling system, ignition*

system, electrical system, steering system, drive train system, etc, etc...

If any of these systems break the whole car will grind to a halt.

And the same is true with a church. You think... *a church is a church is a church... until you pop the hood!* Scrutinize its mechanics and you'll find that a church is made up of vital functions, and principles, and interactions.

Different systems operate in a church... there's a system of authority and accountability. There's a way to teach sound doctrine and expose false teaching. Church life includes order, membership, and relationships.

There's a system for *handing out benevolence, and showing grace.* The church interfaces with the world as a *witness, and to God as a worshipper.*

Pop the hood on the church and you see what can keep us humming *and* what can cause us to sputter. A lot is involved in a successful church.

This is what we plan to do in the weeks to come. *We're popping the hood on the church.* We'll be conducting a course in **church mechanics**.

And I want you to understand the strategic importance of this series – not only for our church, but for other churches. We never know where the CDs and podcasts end up. I hope you'll pray for me and these messages.

I'm trusting God to use them to re-tether *His people* to *His church*.

I think we've finally reached the point where we can sound the alarm without appearing alarmist. There is indeed a crisis in today's Christianity.

Too many believers have quit on the local church.

Misinformation, or negative experiences, or techno-substitutes, or a myriad of distractions, or just plain neglect has warped our perspective.

The Christian church is now irrelevant to many Christians.

This past week Sandra Parish and WSB radio ran a feature on the millennial generation's abandonment of Christianity, and what the church is doing to reach them... The report quoted some recent research...

Among American adults ages 18-29, 65% rarely or never attend church. Teenagers who went to church in High School drop-out at a rate of 70%.

And this isn't just a trend among young adults. I read that 52% of Americans, 157 million people, claim to belong to a Protestant church.

Yet on any given Sunday only 28% of those Protestants attended.

Between 1990 and 2004 the US population expanded by 18%. In the same timeframe church attendance declined 3%. Thom Rainer writes, "[The population in the](#)

United States is exploding... But the church is losing ground. We are in a steep state of decline. The American church is dying.”

Today, in post-Christian Europe – except for funerals - only 5% of the population ever darkens the door of a church. *Is America far behind?*

I have no statistics to prove it, but over my 30 years as a pastor I've seen these same disturbing trends. I grew up in church and as a kid I remember if you attended church three times a week – Sunday morning, evening, and Wednesday night – you were considered a faithful member.

Granted, that might've been too much. You can OD on church. If you're always at church you'll neglect your family, and your witness in the world.

But when I started pastoring the shift was already evident. In 1980 you were faithful if you attended church once a week. In the 90s if you made it twice a month you supported your church. By 2000 you were a faithful member if you came once a month. Today if you make it Christmas and Easter, and toss a twenty in the offering, you think you've done your duty.

I drove past a church marquee this past week announcing that today, September 12, is “[National Back to Church Sunday](#).” When I got home I googled it, and it's true... there's a website that's generated 1.5 million

invitations encouraging Americans to come back to church. I hope it helps.

But here's how my mind works... what's happened in the culture and among Christians that's caused the need for such a campaign?

Why has the church fallen on hard times? Is the church itself to blame?

Have we stayed faithful to God? Are we a healthy church? Here's the big question... *Do Christians truly grasp the strategic role of the Church?*

Today, Americans are up-in-arms because an Islamic mosque is to be built half-a-block from NY City's Ground Zero. If Christians were really concerned about the spread of Islam, rather spend money and effort into blocking the mosque, we'd use the same resources to support our churches.

Islam is filling a spiritual void in the inner city. Immigrants cling to foreign religion because they've yet to be shown a compelling witness for Jesus.

Ultimately, a strong Christian church is what will stem the tide of Islam.

There's a spiritual battle raging in the world today, and God's only army is the church. *Neglect the church and you abandon the fight!*

Everything Paul is going to say to Timothy about how to lead and conduct himself in the church hinges on these two verses in chapter 3...

Earlier in the chapter Paul insists on leaders with top-shelf character.

In chapter 4 Timothy is commanded to diligently follow good doctrine - and model integrity “in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity!”

In chapter 5 Paul goes out of his way to make sure the church’s widows are treated fairly. *Aren’t there bigger fish to fry? - Bigger battles to fight?*

Throughout the book, Timothy is emboldened to oppose heretics and heresies? In 6:12 Paul goes militaristic, “Fight the good fight of faith...”

Why the urgency in these matters?

Isn’t this just church? A few folks sitting in padded chairs - meeting a couple of times a week at best – *and then just to talk, and sing, and pray...*

No one manufactures goods and services – or buys and sells – or enacts laws – or entertains – or produces revenue – or trains for physical activity... So why does Paul write to Timothy as if church is *life and death*?

Because it is! According to Paul’s words to Timothy, the glory of God and the mystery of godliness have been entrusted to the Church. Our passage teaches us the church is unlike anything in heaven, or on Earth.

The church might look like a Ford Escort, but pop the hood and there’s a monster 426 cubic inch hemi, with 425 hp, that’ll do 0-60 in 5.8 seconds.

There's power under the hood. *The church is a spiritual muscle car.*

The church has the engine of 1970 Barracuda, but because most of us have never popped the hood we putter around like we're driving a Geo.

Look at how Paul describes the church...

He tells us *who we are...* and *what we are...* and *why we are...*

Who we are - we're *the house of God*. **What** we are - we're *the church of the living God*. **Why** we are - we're *the pillar and ground of the truth*.

Notice first, Paul tells us we're **“the house of God.”**

Most translations render it **“the household of God.”** At the time of Paul and Timothy churches didn't meet in temples, or chapels, or cathedrals - but in households. Christian places of worship didn't exist in pagan Rome.

The New Century Version translates the phrase, **“the family of God.”**

This is who we are - we're **God's family**. When we come together we're coming home. In 1 Timothy 5:1 Paul tells Timothy, **“Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, with all purity.”** In other words, the church is one big, happy family! We need to act like an extended family.

And everybody is somebody in a family! Every family has its weird uncle and crazy cousin – *no matter* – they’re still invited to the family reunion.

It’s been said, “Families are like fudge – mostly sweet, with a few nuts.”

Here’s a truth, you don’t have to be perfect to be in a family. You can have your strangeness, and still be loved. You can cop an attitude, and we’ll love you through it... *Beware of churches where everybody is perfect.*

Plastic makes perfect... but plastic isn’t real, authentic, or genuine.

The church is God’s family. And the family of God is no more like the Huxtables than the family that lives in your house. Family life gets messy. *We grow - we fail. We’re up - we fall.* Yet in the good times and bad times a family is still family. A church sticks together because we’re God’s family.

Understand a church is a family *not a business*. There is a business-side to the church. Money has to be reported and managed properly. But when a church functions like a business it’s headed down the wrong track.

For example, in a business the customer is always right. It’s all about pleasing the consumer. Go to Burger King and you can “*have it your way!*”

But in a church the customer is always evil. He or she is a sinner. And you don’t need it *your way* – you need to repent and submit to God’s way.

In the church the person we aim to please is God – not the customer.

Walk into a business, and people are there to wait on you. You're encouraged to shop for what suits your needs - or be entertained.

You're there to be served – *not serve...*

Shop at *The Gap* and nobody is going to ask you to grab a broom or a vacuum, and help tidy up. You don't even have to put away the clothes you try on... Greeters at *Wal-Mart* will never ask you for a donation... The *Home Depot* doesn't challenge you to help them carry out their mission...

In a business you're not saddled with responsibilities.

But not so in a family! As a family member you're not just a *consumer* you're a *contributor*. In a family everyone knows **with privilege comes responsibility**. You've got chores to do. And notice **chore rhymes with bore**.

Chores are not designed to be fun, and exciting, and a fulfillment of your hidden potential. You mow the grass because it needs to be done. You pay your rent because it comes due. You show up for dinner if you want to eat.

And this is how it works in the church... Jesus served us, so we should serve one another... You tithe your money because the tithe belongs to God - *not you...* You come to Bible Study because you need to eat, and it's just rude for me to cook you a meal, and you not bother to show up!

This is what it's like to be part of a family... *but when you're lonely and wounded – and need some love - you don't visit the discount superstore. You run home. You seek out your family. And the church is God's family!*

If you're shopping around for a church you're going about it all wrong.

You pray and ask God to **call you** to a church family – to reveal to you where He wants you to be involved - *even if a few of your needs go unmet.*

You shed the consumer mentality. For better or for worse, in sickness and in health - you stay committed to the family. And in the end being a part of a family is far more rewarding than being a member at Costco.

This is **who** we are... *God's family* – but listen to **what** we are... we're **“the church of the living God.”** Notice Paul differentiates the Christian God as *“the living God”* in contrast to the world's other so-called gods.

Other gods are idols. They don't exist. They're powerless, dead gods.

Muslims make pilgrimage to Muhammad's grave. It's located in Medina, Saudi Arabia... Buddha's tooth lies in a temple in Sri Lanka - the rest of his body was cremated... Confucius is buried in a large Chinese cemetery...

Jesus also had a tomb – it was in a garden north of Jerusalem. But the tomb of Jesus was just *“a time share.”* He borrowed it for the weekend. Today, His tomb is

empty. Jesus is the one and only *“living God.”* And since we too are alive in Christ; then we are *“the church of the living God.”*

When you repent of your sin, and trust your life to Jesus, God sends His Spirit to inflate yours... *with love, life, power, pardon, presence, peace...*

Suddenly, you're born again. You're alive with the life of the risen Lord.

I almost hesitated earlier in referring to the church as a car. It's a flawed analogy. The church isn't a machine. It's alive – it's an animate object.

I guess you could call it a *“Love Bug.”* A car that's actually alive.

As a church we're more than an *organization* – we're a living *organism*.

You join an organization by signing a card, or taking an oath. It's something you do. But this is not what it takes to join the family of God.

You're *born into a family*. Something happens to you. God acts. Doctor God takes two paddles – *repent* and *believe* - and shocks you back to life.

If you were raised in a Southern church you need to pay attention.

You can walk the aisle a thousand times, and respond to a thousand altar calls... You can be a charter member

of the First Church... and pay your dues... and sport a certificate... *and still fry on the grill in hell!*

You can be religious - belong to a religious group - and be dead in sin.

The true church is alive. It inhales and exhales the breath of God. It has a pulse. Put a stethoscope to its chest and you'll hear God's heartbeat.

The Greek term translated "Church" is "**Ekklesia.**" It refers to "**a called-out group.**" The Church is an assembly of people who were called out of the world - called to new life in Christ - *and called to live that life together.*

This is why the Church is not a building, or club, or theatre, or an event on Sundays. It consists of people that have been *awakened* or "**quicken**" by God's Spirit. A Christian is alive to God, and alive to one another.

AW Tozer once observed, "**One-hundred religious persons knit into a unity by careful organization do not constitute a church any more than eleven dead men make a football team. The first requisite is life.**"

The church is a beautiful community of believers, made alive by God's Spirit – infused with new life, new loves, new power, and new passions.

Paul tells us **who we are** - *God's family*. **What we are** – *alive in Christ*. Now he tells us **why we are** - we're "**the pillar and ground of the truth.**"

Understand the church is not a *blog* where you type in your opinion; then wait for people to post their reaction...

The church isn't a talk show, where the pastor stirs the pot; then people who agree with him chime in...

The church is far more important and strategic. It's "**the pillar and ground of the truth.**" Where else can folks go to discover God's truth?

Certainly not the media, or public schools, or government – the Church alone is what holds together the last vestiges of our Christian worldview.

Paul gives us imagery - God's truth is a house. Live in the truth and it'll provide you warmth, and shelter, and protection. Abide in God's truth and you'll find opportunities for relationship, and happiness, and peace.

But it's the church that supports this house of truth. The church is the footer on which God's truth sits. It's the posts holding up the *roof* of God's *truth*. The church is the environment where God's truth is best understood.

You can't accurately interpret God's truth outside of the church. Biblical doctrines are best understood in the context of practical relationships.

Scripture was never intended to be dissected by theologians sitting alone in an ivory tower. It's to be interpreted by born again believers living together in meaningful relationships – slugging it out in a hostile world.

Once, a lonely elderly lady bought a parrot to keep her company. She figured if she had a pet parrot she'd

always have someone to talk to - but after bringing the bird home from the store, she couldn't get it to speak.

She went back to the pet store, and complained to the owner.

He said, "Does the parrot have a mirror in his cage? Parrots love mirrors." She bought a mirror, put it in the cage, but he still wouldn't talk.

The next day she complained to the store owner. This time he asked, "Does your parrot have a ladder? Parrots love ladders. And a happy parrot is a talkative parrot." She tried a ladder, but still not a peep from the parrot.

On her third visit the owner suggested, "Try a swing. Parrots love swings. Get him swinging, and he'll talk up a storm." She bought a swing.

Two days later the woman returned to the pet store. The owner asked her about her parrot. He was shocked to here that the bird had died.

He asked the woman, "Did your parrot ever say a word?"

She replied, "Yes, just before he died, in a very soft, faint, weak whisper, my parrot asked me, '*Don't they sell any food at that pet store?*'"

Here's a parody of the popular trends in today's church. Leaders think they'll bring people back to church with *mirrors*, and *ladders*, and *swings*.

Look into the mirror of introspection. Self-help and pop psychology has replaced Scripture... Ladders and rung-

by-rung how-to formulas have replaced faith... Swinging entertainment has replaced spiritual substance...

People are like the parrot. They're exploring their inner self – or climbing the rungs of a man-made system – or swinging on an emotional roller coaster – all the while they're dying for lack of food... *the truth of Scripture*.

Why does the church exist? We are "*the pillar and ground of the truth*." We are God's one watering hole in a desert of dryness.

Here's how our modern society thinks...

We like the superstores and mega-malls more than the mom and pops. Even our churches are supposed to be mega-churches and have a whole smorgasbord of activities. We're impressed with bigger and better.

We like efficiency and predictability - even in religion. Rather than the uncertainty and messiness of following... we can still be in control...

And as long as we're surrounded by noise – lots of noise and voices - we don't have to bother by that nagging truth that gets under our skin...

Yet up against that backdrop the church stands out...

In a corporate society the church offers us an opportunity at family and real relationship. It teaches us the value of commitment...

In an automated world the church gives us a taste of life, God's life. And it's real life that every human craves....

And then the church pierces the information overload with the clarion call of God's truth...

I love what Martyn Lloyd-Jones said years ago, "It's when the Church is absolutely different from the world, that she invariably attracts it..."

Perhaps that's the real key to a successful "*Back to Church Sunday*."

Over the next few months we'll be popping the hood on the church, and learning more of why the church is the most important entity on Earth.

I hope you'll allow God's Spirit and God's Word to deepen your understanding of the church - heighten your appreciation of the church - and intensify your commitment to the church... *In Jesus name! Amen...*