

## Real Faith

1 Peter 1:1-12

What's the difference between *going to* church and *being* the church? That's the question we're going to be thinking about for the next month, as we take a short break from our Matthew series to consider the year ahead and what it means for us as Westgate to *be* the church.

If we listen to ourselves when we speak of the church today, we speak of it predominantly as something we *go to*. "Did you go to church this week?" "Hey kids—get ready for bed, we're going to church in the morning." We speak of it as a place, a building, an event. Of course most of us will readily admit that the church is *not* the building; it's the people. And yet our everyday language betrays us. And it's more than mere semantics.

Speaking of the church *predominantly* as something we go to reveals that for many of us, "church" is an isolated and static reality. We *go to* church to worship God, or fellowship with his people, or learn and grow in our faith. Which are all good things, but they become associated with a certain place and certain times and events, which means they are often *disassociated* with the rest of life. They become isolated. Disconnected. Marginalized. Fellowship, worship, holiness, those are *church* things. They may well be cherished things, but they are church things. It's something we go *there* and do, or go *there* and receive, but they don't necessarily impact or interface with the rest of life.

And after a while it's easy to begin to think that it doesn't really matter what I'm doing or how I'm living Monday–Saturday, as long as I *go to* church on Sunday. Check in. Do my God thing. Get my spiritual fix, and then back to real life. Our lives become compartmentalized. But if it doesn't affect or have anything to do with what I spend most of my time doing and thinking about, why do it? Why *go*? It's a question that recent generations have been asking and having a hard time finding an answer for.

And it's not that we don't want the things that church is supposed to offer. Real community, meaningful purpose, genuine faith. Spirituality is not on the decline in our post-Christian culture; it's on the rise—but not necessarily associated with church. We long for real community, real faith, real worship, real mission—but it has become harder and harder for many (including Christians) to find those things *at* church—this thing we go to.

But it also means that for those who value church, we tend to hang everything we possibly can on the Sunday morning event. It's like having multiple hooks on the wall by your front door, but hanging every coat, every backpack, briefcase, purse, and diaper bag on a single hook. When we take everything we long for in relationship with God, and everything we feel called to do on behalf of God, and we hang it on this one time, in this one place, this one event we call "going to church," we not only set ourselves up for disappointment when the peg breaks, we also find ourselves getting rather territorial about that one hook.

If my opportunity to meet personally with God is contingent on what happens during this service on Sunday morning, then unless the music and preaching style is exactly what moves me personally, then you are depriving me of my experience of meeting with God. And I'll fight over that. But if reaching people for Christ means getting them to church, then our greatest need is to make this the kind of building and service and programs and events they want to come back to again and again. Otherwise we're undercutting the advance of the gospel, and we'll fight over that too. But if we're not careful, we'll allow the culture to change the church instead of the church changing the culture, and so we must be deeply suspicious of any changes to the status quo. Protect the hook at all costs.

But all this is not real church. This is not God's vision for his church. It's not what the Bible says our experience of church should look and feel like. Real church is not what you go to; it's *who you are*. It is the people of God in whom Christ dwells in order to display his glory. It's a family of missionary servants empowered by God's Spirit to make disciples for Christ. Or to use the language of our vision, it is a gospel-centered community living each day on mission for Christ.

When we begin to see the church as who we are, rather than what we go to, we see it as an *integrated, dynamic, and relational* reality, not static and isolated. Not just a single hook, but something that encompasses the whole wall. We don't neglect our weekly gathering, but neither are fellowship, discipleship, and evangelism dependent on getting people to a building. It's more dynamic and integrated than that. And when we gather for worship it's not just about *me* connecting to God, it's about *us* connecting to God *as a Body* and building one another up in Christ. It's relational not just vertically, but horizontally—with one another. But whether we are gathered in one place or scattered throughout cities and neighborhoods, we are still the people of God in Christ, called to make much of God, to share life together as family, and to lay down our lives to make Christ known wherever we are.

We need a better conception of church. We need a *biblical* conception. 1 Peter is going to help us see that. And as we'll see in our passage this morning, real church begins with real faith. God-centered, gospel-saturated, salvation-forming, biblically shaped faith.

## **Real Faith**

What does it mean to be the church rather than just going to it? As Peter opens his letter and begins to answer that question for us, notice how he doesn't jump straight into talking about what we're supposed to do. In fact, he doesn't give a command or instruction until v. 13. He begins rather by celebrating what God has *already* done, *is* doing, and *will* do to make us his redeemed people—our response to which is *faith*. He mentions it four times in these verses.

But what does real faith look like? What kind of faith does God call us to as his people? There are four marks of real faith in these verses. The first one is God-centered faith.

### *1. Real Faith is God-Centered Faith*

Everything Peter says about the people of God in this book flows out of who our Triune God is and what he has done. We see this right away in his opening greeting. Verse 1:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father,

in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you. (1:1-2)

Peter is writing to Christian communities who have been scattered and dispersed among several Roman colonies in Asia Minor, most likely having been exiled from Rome.<sup>1</sup> But he addresses them here as “*elect* exiles,” rejected by the world, but chosen by God to be his people. As v. 2 describes it, they were chosen “according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.” They didn’t initiate the process of becoming God’s people; God did. He knew them ahead of time—not just what they would do, but he knew his people personally, before the beginning of time, and he saves them according to his divine plan. God is the author of salvation.

Second, he chose them “in the sanctification” or “by the consecrating work of the Spirit.” It is the Spirit of God who sets us apart for God according to his plan, who applies God’s saving work to our lives. And third, we are chosen “for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood.” The picture of sprinkling with blood is what the priests did on the altar to ratify the covenant in the Old Testament (cf. Exod. 24). God chose his church that they might be his new covenant people, redeemed and consecrated by the blood of Christ for obedient service to him. The church exists by God and for God.

We see the centrality of God in v. 3 as Peter continues. Again, rather than jumping into instructions about what we should do, he starts off with a song—a hymn of praise to God for what he has done, will do, and is doing. Verse 3:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to *his* great mercy, *he* has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who *by God’s power* are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1:3-5)

The church exists by God and for God. It is “not a human invention or institution; it was birthed from God’s Word,”<sup>2</sup> “not of perishable seed, but imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God” (1:23). Our response is faith. A *God-centered* faith—a faith that recognizes God’s worthiness, that exalts God’s name, that serves God’s purposes for God’s glory.

Of course the temptation we face daily is to make faith and church about us. To nurture a man-centered faith instead of a God-centered one. To trust in God because of what we hope he will do for us, or what we want him to give to us. And to go to church mainly because of what we get out of it, but not so much to honor and love God.

This kind of a man-centered view of church and faith has its roots clear back in the fall of humanity, when we decided we would do a better job running the world than God. But it’s quite comfortable in our consumer- and therapy-driven culture today, where everything is all about me. As David Wells describes, we have come to think of God “as a cheerleader who only wants our success. He is a booster, an inspiring coach, a source of endless prosperity for us. He would

<sup>1</sup> See Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 2005), 28-44, 61.

<sup>2</sup> Eric Geiger, Matt Chandler, and Josh Patterson, *Creature of the Word: The Jesus-Centered Church* (B&H Publishing Group, 2012). Kindle Edition.

never interfere with us in our pursuit of the good life (by which we mean the pursuit of the good things in life). We see him as a never-ending fountain of these blessings. He is our Concierge.”<sup>3</sup>

As one pastor from an extremely large church in Texas recently tweeted, “Get ready. Things are shifting in your favor. Don’t talk yourself out of it. Believe that this is your year for acceleration.”<sup>4</sup> You’ve got to believe. In fact, if you don’t have all these things, it’s simply because you’re not believing enough. We turn faith into a work, and we make it a means of personal gain. And going to church becomes not much more than another way we try to manipulate God to give us that gain.

Here’s a litmus test for how man-centered our faith may have become. Think about your prayer life. (This is a painful test for me personally.) How often do you pray? When we fail to pray, it shows us who we’re really depending on for life. Not God, but me. As Jared Wilson has said, when we don’t pray, we’re basically saying, “I’ve got this.” We forget that have nothing apart from God.

Here’s another question: when you pray, what do you pray for? Is most of your prayer asking God to do things for you, or give things to you? There’s nothing wrong with asking God for things, or lamenting over what’s wrong in this world. But how much of your prayer life is simply delighting in God because he’s God? Or seeking his will, his plan? His forgiveness and grace? How do our prayers compare to some of the prayers in the psalms of the epistles? Those are very God-centered prayers. Ours can be pretty man-centered, because our faith can be pretty man-centered faith.

But real faith is not captivated with me or what this world can give me; it’s captivated with God. With the bigness of God, the holiness, the majesty, glory, mercy, and love of God. A God who consumes all of life; not just what we do on Sunday. Real faith is *God-centered* faith. The church must be a people enthralled with God.

## 2. Real Faith is Gospel-Saturated Faith

A God-centered faith is necessarily a gospel-saturated faith, because God’s saving work has been accomplished through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. That’s what we mean by the word “gospel”—it’s the good news of what God has done to establish his kingdom and deal with our sin through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And these verses are dripping with the news of the gospel.

Look again at v. 2 with me. It is through the *blood* of Christ, shed on the cross, that God is forming his new covenant people. As Peter says later in v. 18, “you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1:18-19).

And look with me again at v. 3. It is through the *resurrection* of Jesus from the dead that God causes us to be born again to receive new life. We who were dead in our transgressions and sin, God has made alive together with Christ, raising us from the dead, giving us new birth (cf. Eph.

<sup>3</sup> David Wells, *God in the Whirlwind: How the Holy-love of God Reorients Our World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 23.

<sup>4</sup> @JoelOsteen, Jan. 1, 2014. Available at: <https://twitter.com/JoelOsteen/status/418415255975628800>.

2:1, 5). And we partake of that new life not by works, but by faith (cf. Eph. 2:8-10). Real faith is gospel-saturated faith.

Our default as fallen human beings is to approach our relationship with God (or with anyone for that matter) on the basis of performance. We try to obey him so that we'll be accepted by him. We go to church to look good for God, to gain his approval so that he will give us his blessing.

But that's not real faith, and it's not the real gospel. The gospel is not advice on how to live; it is news of what God has done. It is the glorious message that though every single one of us, left to ourselves, is completely deserving of God's holy judgment for our sin and rebellion against him, God in his grace sent his Son to take our sin on himself on the cross, to pay our penalty in full, taking the full weight of God's holy anger against our sin, in our place, and to rise from the dead on the third day to give new life, second birth to all who believe. It's on the basis of his grace that we are born again, adopted into God's family, given an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. And it's on the basis of his grace that we grow and walk with God in daily obedience (whether gathered as one Body or scattered among towns and neighborhoods). We never outgrow our need for the gospel of God's grace. As Tim Keller often says, we don't obey God in order to be accepted; we obey God because we have been accepted by his grace. Grace frees us from sin and fuels our obedience.

Here's another test to what extent a performance-based approach to God has slipped into our hearts. Think again of your prayer life. When you ask God for something, or to do something for you, *why* do you think he should answer that prayer? Is it because you went to church this week? Or spent extra time in the Word? Helped out your neighbor? If it's because you've done something for him, you're revealing a performance-based approach to God and his favor.

Or maybe you don't think God should answer your prayer at all. Because you haven't been doing a good job lately. You've been grouchy and barking at your kids. You've spent no time in the Word. You find yourself giving in to temptation again and again. There's no reason why God should bless you because your life is such a mess. But here again, you're revealing a performance-based view of God and his favor.

Why should God answer our prayers? Not because we're good enough, but because we're his children through faith in Christ. We already have all the approval we need through our union with Christ. And whether his answer is yes, or no, or something else, we know that whatever it is, he is working all things for his glory and for our good.

Real faith is gospel-saturated faith. The church must be a people utterly dependent on and wonderfully obsessed with the gospel.

### *3. Real Faith is Salvation-Forming Faith*

If our faith is in God and his gospel, then we will never be the same. Faith in God affects us. If you say you have faith, but that faith hasn't changed you in any way, then I'm not sure it's God and his gospel that you're trusting. Real faith is saving faith. And this salvation is a past, present, and future reality. We see all three of those in our passage.

Again, in v. 3 we see that there is a very real sense in which God's people *have already been saved*. "According to his great mercy, *he has caused us to be born again* to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." As I mentioned earlier, to be born again is to die to sin and self, and to receive new and eternal life through the Holy Spirit who comes to dwell within the Christian. You *have been saved* by faith, past tense.

But you will *yet be saved* by faith as well. There is a future aspect to our salvation. Verse 4: We have been born again to a living hope, "to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, *kept in heaven for you*, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation *ready to be revealed in the last time*" (1:4-5). Though God's people are already saved from the penalty of sin, they are not yet saved from sin's presence. We have not yet received the perfect inheritance from God that is being kept in heaven for us—to be God's people in God's place, enjoying his presence and blessing forever. We have not yet received our glorious resurrection body in the likeness of Jesus' new body (cf. Phil. 3:20-21). There is a future aspect to our salvation, so we are born again to a living *hope*.

But not only is our salvation past and future, it is also a present reality. We are currently *being saved* by faith. And that's what vv. 6-9 talk about:

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials,<sup>7</sup> so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup> Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory,<sup>9</sup> obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Here's where the rubber meets the road for us today. To be the church is to be a people in process. We're not a perfect people; we are a people who are *being saved*. Being changed to look and live more and more like our Lord Jesus Christ. And that process of transformation or spiritual growth is one that is often marked by trial and suffering as we live out our days in a fallen world.

One of the reasons I wanted to look at 1 Peter for this short series is because there are a lot of similarities between the situation in the churches Peter was writing to, and what we might call the post-Christian context of New England today. When Peter addresses his letter in v. 1 "To those who are elect *exiles*," he's writing to Christians who were likely exiled out of Rome,<sup>5</sup> but he's describing their situation with the language and imagery of ancient Israel's exile, when they were dispersed from their homeland and living as foreigners and resident aliens in Babylon. To call them "exiles" or "sojourners and exiles" (as in 2:11), he's not talking about the kind of sojourn where you're just passing through this world on our way to heaven; he's talking about the "relationship between the Christian and the unbelieving society."<sup>6</sup> Like Israel during their exile, the faith and lifestyle of the churches Peter is writing were in conflict with the dominant culture. They were chosen by God to be his people and be a light to the world around them (c.f. 2:12). Yet they were often rejected by the world, whom ch. 4 tells us maligned and ridiculed them when they didn't jump into the same flood of debauchery as the Gentiles—"living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness," and the like (4:3-4). They were a people living out their faith

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<sup>5</sup> See Jobes, 28-44, 61.

<sup>6</sup> Jobes, 62.

in the margins of society. And so Peter talks a lot in this book about the suffering and oppression of God's people.

We are living in an increasingly similar world today. Despite the history of this region, Christianity has by and large been pushed from the center to the margins. To uphold something so basic as the Bible's teaching on marriage and sexuality is to invite mockery, scorn, even discrimination. Our federal government is now trying to force Christian institutions and Christian business owners to break their religious convictions and pay for abortion-causing drugs for their employees. Or take something as simple as your child's sports schedule. I don't think that by scheduling sporting events on Sunday mornings our towns and schools are part of some secret plot to get rid of Christianity. I do think it is another indication that Christianity is no longer the dominant cultural influence, and that participating in some of the most basic parts of society is going to become increasingly difficult for faithful Christians.

Like the churches in 1 Peter, we are foreigners, exiles, resident aliens in a culture where Christianity has moved from the center to the margins. But that doesn't mean we disengage, and find a safe corner from which to condemn the world. Nor does it mean we disconnect our faith from the rest of life—live one way here and another way there (which is easy to do if church is just something you go to). Real church is neither isolated from the world nor compromised by the world. It's engaged in every sphere of life to bring the life-changing message to gospel to bear on all people. Loving neighbors or colleagues or classmates who may not love you in return. "Always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame" (3:15-16).

And even when we do find ourselves opposed or facing severe trials, it's these very trials that God often uses to shape and refine us into the people he wants us to be. Like putting gold through fire, so that any impurities in the metal can be burned off, so God tests and purifies our faith through trials, which ultimately results in the commendation of our Father when Jesus returns. Like an artist delighting in his creation, so the Father will look at us in the end, when we finally bear the perfect image of his Son, and give "praise, glory, and honor" to his refined children, who reflect his glory back to him.

For this reason, rather than complaining about our trials and suffering, Peter tells us we can rejoice in them. We know that suffering as a Christian is not a waste. It's not evidence that God is losing; quite the contrary, it is the means by which he is changing us and making his name known. "Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls" (1:8-9).

We have been saved' we will be saved; we are being saved through faith.

#### *4. Real Faith is Biblically-Shaped Faith*

As Peter rejoices in God's saving work in vv. 3-9, he then shows how that saving work is anchored in God's Word, revealed long ago by his prophets in the Scriptures, which all pointed to Christ. This is what we see in vv. 10-12:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully,<sup>11</sup> inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories.<sup>12</sup> It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look. (1:10-12)

Real faith is biblically-shaped faith. It is a faith that accords to Scripture, God's written Word.

God's vision for the church did not come out of nowhere. Neither is his vision for the church subject to revision or change. It is the result of his eternal plan of salvation as revealed in the Scriptures and the Spirit-empowered preaching of that Word.

One of the first things we must do if we want to develop a man-centered faith, or a performance-based relationship with God, or a faith that is powerless to change us, is to ignore or marginalize God's Word. And you can do that in all sorts of ways.

You can do it by never spending time in it personally or as a congregation. You might read books or have sermons and classes that may be full of helpful principles for life, but void of God's Word. You can do it by opening the Word but mishandling it. Not paying attention to context; making it say something it's not really saying. Gathering around you a number of teachers to say what your itching ears want to hear (2 Tim. 4:3). And you can do it by pouring over the Word, analyzing every detail, teaching and faithfully explaining what it means, but never putting it into practice.

Real faith means taking God at his Word, and by his grace, in the power of his Spirit, joyfully obeying his Word. The church must be a people of the Word. It's not up to us to rewrite the script. As David Wells reminds us, God "is not there at our convenience, or simply for our healing, or simply as the Divine Teller handing out stuff from his big bank. No, we are here for his service. We are here to know him as he is and not as we want him to be. The local church is the place where we should be learning about this, and God's Word is the means by which we can do so."<sup>7</sup>

Real church is not what we go to; it's who we are. A people formed by God and marked by faith—God-centered, gospel-saturated, salvation-forming, biblically-shaped faith. May we never lose sight of that foundation.

### *Discussion Questions*

1. In your mind, what difference does it make to think of the church predominantly as something we go to, rather than something we are?
2. Where do you find yourselves tempted to make faith and church more about you than about God? What do you think helps guard against this?

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<sup>7</sup> Wells, 32-33.

3. How do we guard against relating to God (or each other) on the basis of performance instead of grace? What difference does it make anyway?
4. How does 1 Peter help you think about suffering that we encounter in life, particularly suffering for being a follower of Christ?
5. What role does the Word of God play personally in your life? How do you seek nourishment in the Word? In what ways can we help each other grow in this?