

## Part 1: A Healthy Church

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On May 12<sup>th</sup>, 1968 this church gathered together to worship for the first time as First Evangelical Church.

However, this church existed long prior to 1968 as part of the EUB Denomination [Evangelical United Brethren]. But in the late 60's the EUB voted to merge with another denomination, one with less theological clarity. Merging would require the church as a whole to surrender the truthfulness and authority of scripture. It would lessen the clear role of the church to call lost sinners back to Jesus. And would seem to promote, at least in leadership, individuals who held to universalism: the doctrine which believes that all people will be saved regardless of their faith in Jesus Christ.

A large number of members, just like you had to make a decision. Would they surrender their doctrine and their mission in order to keep their church building, their pastor and their community? Or would they stand firm on the clear truths of scripture and God's mission for the church and risk losing everything?

Through the lives of ordinary men and women, God worked in this city. Our frontrunners realized something so simple, so biblical, and yet so revolutionary: that the church of God is nothing if it is not a place for pure and right worship and clear and passionate mission.

Sovereign Hope Church exists today because Bible believing men and women were willing to lose buildings, budgets and friends in order to gain Christ. We were formed out of a brave and costly commitment to fierce biblical truth and relentless passion for the lost.

When I was in seminary I remember reading a report on the Mennonite Church. At one point the church had been a thriving gospel centered community, but over the years it had eroded to nothing more than a cultural commodity. One church historian looked into the decline of the church and he traced how the church had faded over the course of three generations. He said that Generation One was preoccupied with the gospel. It was the center piece of everything and the passion of everyone. Generation two then assumed the gospel. It was so much a part of the culture that it began to be implicit instead explicit in the life of the church. This assumption inside of Generation Two lead to the terrible conclusion where in Generation Three the gospel was abandoned.

Preoccupation with the gospel, assumption of the gospel and abandonment of the gospel. Three generations and the culture was lost. In fact if you poke around on sociological and historical posts online you will notice that most cultural and familial influences are forgotten between the second and third generation.

By God's grace our church has faithfully endured for two generations, and moving into our third we want to be vigilant in the preservation of the gospel by assuring we never assume it. This is why we have launched the 50/50 Legacy. Back in May, John and I preached the initial vision of this legacy, but we had been talking about this 50<sup>th</sup> year since as early as 2015. This has been something which was already

influencing our church in many ways, but now we are making it explicit so as to better build our influence out into the future.

When we think about the church we want to be for the next 50 years, the 50/50 Legacy emphasizes three goals: we want to be a healthy church, we want to be a Missoula church, and we want to be a sending church. In short we want to do everything possible to make sure that God is glorified in the lives and ministry of our church, and that Christ is magnified by the mission of this church in our city and across the globe: God glorified in the church, Christ magnified in the city.

We are going to really look at what we mean when we talk about being a healthy church today, and in the following weeks we are going to look at the other two goals but I want to give us a quick overview of where we are going today. First we are going to quickly define what a church is. Then secondly we are going to look at three traits of a healthy church. Those will be Worship, Care and Mission.

But first I'm going to define for us what I mean when I say the church. Because there is the capital "C" church. This big "C" church is what is often called the invisible or the universal church. It is collective whole of anyone who is saved by Jesus Christ at all times.

This is the church which is referred to in **Ephesians 1:22** [Christ is not a head over "a" church he is head over "the church"] and **Colossians 1:18**. This is the church we see Jesus make a promise to a few weeks ago in Matthew 16 where he says, "On this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not overtake it."

This one church is the goal of all things, when God establishes his kingdom we will all gather as one church in one place in the immediate presence and authority of God. But this is not as of right now the only church. We know this because right before Jesus establishes his new capital "C" church in the book of Revelation, look at what he says: **Rev. 22:16**. Jesus sent for his churches, plural.

These churches are what we are going to be talking about today. They are the local churches which Jesus expects his big C church to be a part of until he gathers all his churches together in eternity. And I'm going to tell you why this distinction is important in a moment, but first I'm going to define the local church.

When it comes to a biblical view of the church, the church is not any random group of people who associate with one another around any facet of life. In scripture there are generally five attributes which make a church. I'm not going to show the scriptures for each of these right now because I really want to look at the specifics of a healthy church here, but in the back at the info desk is a handout which walks through the biblical support of these five features.

But in short the church is five things: First, a **group of believers**, that is people saved by faith in Jesus Christ. Second, a group which **gathers regularly together**. Spiritually the church is made by conversion, but physically it is made by gathering. Third, it has **local authority**. Meaning churches have elders and deacons who serve the body in different roles and authorities. Fourth, the church **practices worship and the sacraments**; meaning we sing, we preach God's word, we live out the implications of that word, and we administer baptism and the Lord's Supper. And fifth and finally, it does so as **part of God's mission**. God's goal is to two fold, to add people to the church, and to conform the church to look more like Christ. The local church exists to serve those two missions of God.

A local church is: **A group of believers who regularly gather together under local authority to practice worship and the sacraments as part of God's mission.**

Why is this definition and distinction important?

Because for the last 11 months, our staff and elders have been assessing and reassessing everything we do in light of this biblical picture of the church. Sometimes at painstaking rates, we have soberly and honestly inspected and examined every aspect of our church. Because we want to take the biblical vision of a local church, and the passion that God has given us as our own church, and try to work seamlessly towards that end. This is part of the reason why we have been late in getting out our fall ministry calendar. We've been wanting to solidify and build around the strengths which God has already given us.

The mission of this church is to together proclaim the glory of God through the gospel of Jesus Christ and holiness in the Spirit. But how do we do that? Where are we strong, and how do we feature that? Where are we weak, and how do we use the gospel to change that?

This series was intended to be a surgical presentation of where and what God is calling us to so that we might together fight for the witness of the gospel. This is why the distinction between the big "C" church and the small "c" church is important. God has promised to preserve and endure to the end the big "C" church. But he has not promised to endure to the end any specific small "c" church.

We know this because the same God who called Paul to be a missionary to the Gentiles was the same God who as part of his plan allowed Paul to die in a Gentile prison. All that to say longevity is not the measure of success in the Kingdom of God, faithfulness is. As a church we may not endure for another 50 years. We cannot control our own destiny. But we can control how faithful we are to be the church God desires us to be.

And if it happens that in 20 years, 50 years, 80 years, our church is no longer able to meet, we pray that it is not because of our lack of faithfulness. And if we've been faithful we can say with Paul, "We have fought the good fight, we have finished the race, we have kept the faith."

But to have that perspective we must be a healthy and faithful church. So what does this mean for us to be a healthy church? What is God asking us to give our lives to? Well let's examine Paul's goals for the church in Colossae and apply those to us today. Look with me at **Colossians 1:24-29**.

I love this passage because here we get to see the raw heart of Paul for the churches. Paul is a man who God called and appointed to basically jump start the church in the Western world, and this passage shows the clear goals Paul has for his churches.

The first goal Paul shows for a healthy church is: **Healthy churches worship God through the gospel.**

Look back with me and notice the center point for all of Paul's desires: **Colossians 1:25-27**. Paul's goal for the church was that the church would encounter the long awaited promise of God in the gospel and be forever captivated by this truth.

This is what worship is. Worship is the fitting response to something seen as worthy. Paul's clear emphasis here is that the object of greatest worth, the catalyst for everything else which follows is a

clear understanding of God's revelation of salvation in Jesus Christ. The gospel creates enduring worship.

Right now my DVR is at home recording the Titans vs. the Dolphins. I've been a Titans fan since their inception, and for the first time this year they changed their uniforms. The announcement was made by the organization a year ago which meant for the past year they teased us with the presentation of these uniforms.

They put out teasers of the color schemes, close up shots of specific parts of the uniforms. They even posted reactions shots of the players seeing them. And the fan base as a whole (who admittedly haven't had much to get excited about) was soaked in anxious anticipation. All of this culminated in a huge party in downtown Nashville where 20,000 people filled the streets. They had a bunch of former Titans there. Florida Georgia Line was going to play.

I watched it online, but I had a friend who was actually there tell me about it. The program started that night and they drew out the presentation of the jerseys for almost an hour. And then the big moment came. Current players came out clad in their new uniforms. And the crowd collectively went: "Ok, that's cool. When is Florida Georgia Line playing?"

There was all this build up for the main event, and then when it happened, people were already looking for what was next. They saw, it was cool, but it wasn't captivating. Maybe that's been your experience with the gospel.

But if you look at Paul's language in this text, there is nothing more opposite to our response to the gospel. He calls it "The mystery of God once hidden," "the riches of his glory," the hope of all of God's radiant and weighty beauty is "Christ in you."

The goal of the church is not to invent content which stirs the emotions and captivates culturally diverse demographics. The goal of the church is to celebrate the event which captivates God himself: Jesus Christ and his work to save sinners.

At Sovereign Hope we want to make worshippers of God. We want people who see God as fittingly beautiful and respond to him with right worship. But in order to do that, we like Paul are committed to making the gospel fully known. If you're hoping that at some point we stop talking about the gospel and move on to something more practical, that is only a sign that you do not yet see the practical beauty of the gospel.

Tim Keller says, **"You should never go to God because he's useful. Go to God because he's beautiful. And yet there's nothing more useful than finding God beautiful."** Our hope is that we find the beauty of the gospel to be the most useful part of our ministry.

What does it mean for you as part of Sovereign Hope? It means that we are going to build our church around this proclamation and we want you to build your lives around it. It means we want you to worship God and be captivated by him, but that we want that worship to be through the gospel not anything else. Worship is only fitting, life changing and enduring when it understands the gospel rightly. Our greatest problem was our separation from God, so the greatest deliverance from that should be our greatest preoccupation in all things. Healthy churches worship God through the gospel.

Second: **Healthy churches care for one another with the gospel.** Look with me at **Colossians 1:28-29**.

Did you notice that for Paul, proclamation of the gospel wasn't the end? He doubles down on the center piece of his ministry, "Him we proclaim." But then he gives two other ways in which the gospel shows up in his churches: with teachings in all wisdom, and with warnings.

Healthy churches care for each other by warning each other and teaching each other how to apply the gospel so that we may be present mature in Christ. Did you notice Paul's repetition in that text: **Colossians 1:28-29**. Warning everyone, teaching everyone, presenting everyone mature in Christ.

The point that Paul is stressing here is that there is no part of gospel-understanding which is left for those who are "really eager." Paul is repeating different ways of gospel education but the scope and end are the same. Proclaim, warn and teach. Who? Everyone. Why? So that everyone might be made mature. The ongoing care of the church is consistent efforts to apply to gospel in all of life.

Paul in the previous verses stresses the importance of believing the gospel, but in this verses he stresses the importance of gospel believers to savor the gospel. Do not grow weary of applying it to your lives. To put it simply: do not remain unchanged by it.

Change is a very polarizing issue. Some people love change. Others resist change at all costs. But I have noticed as a whole that in most American churches we have a paradigm where we can expect to be saved by the gospel without being changed by the gospel. But God's word says that you cannot be saved without also being changed. Look with me at: **2 Corinthians 3:18, Romans 12:2**.

We cannot escape change biblically yet we hear ideas of growing in holiness and evangelism, or putting off sin and we think, "That's for people who are really serious about this." Why do we say this? Because we know that with change comes a cost. A cost of increased responsibility. A cost of effort. A cost of perceived comfort. And a cost of pursuing and doing whatever you want to do at your own leisure.

If I may inject some Disney here, the modern church thinks too much like Peter Pan and not enough like Pinocchio. If you're at all familiar with the backstory of these two fairy tales, you know that both of them have completely different perspectives on change.

Peter Pan is the boy who never grew up. He is the emblem of Neverland, a place where mermaids swim and pirates play. And a place where if you're lucky you might escape to as well. There is no responsibility there, no need for change, and no agenda outside your own.

The problem is that those who live in Neverland forget about the real world. The author describes the ways in which the children would quiz themselves to see if they remember the color of eyes their mothers had, or the character of their father. They go to Neverland to stay the same but they fail to realize that Neverland is only make-believe. And the more they try to affirm make-believe as their reality, the more they separate themselves what true reality.

Peter thought that staying the same and avoiding growth would bring him joy, but in the end it left Peter imprisoned in a never ending cycle of want.

Contrast this to Pinocchio. He was a puppet who wanted so badly to have the dynamic life of a real boy. He wanted to be free from his static existence. And the whole book tracks Pinocchio's attempt to earn the right to be made a real boy.

In the end of the book it finally happens, but I want to read to you the scene and I want you to notice the difference in perspective: "Pinocchio ran to the mirror. He hardly recognized himself. The bright face of a tall boy looked at him with wide-awake blue eyes, dark brown hair and happy, smiling lips. Surrounded by so much splendor, the Marionette hardly knew what he was doing. He rubbed his eyes two or three times, wondering if he were still asleep or awake and decided he must be awake. The boy said [to his father], "I wonder where the old Pinocchio of wood has hidden himself?" "There he is," answered Geppetto. And he pointed to a large Marionette leaning against a chair, head turned to one side, arms hanging limp, and legs twisted under him. After a long, long look, Pinocchio said to himself with great content: "How ridiculous I was as a Marionette! And how happy I am, now that I have become a real boy!"

"How ridiculous, we were once sinners, but now we have been made new." New life is better than Neverland. People who seek to find maturity and joy in things which are not the gospel will always wrestle with meaninglessness and joylessness because in searching for Neverland they will never find it. But those who seek to mine the depths of the gospel and to be changed by it we will get all the benefits of Neverland but it won't be make-believe. It will be our reality as we are conformed more and more into the image of Christ.

This is what we looked at last week. This is what it means to have a shepherd's heart. To present each other mature in Christ means that we need each other to proclaim the gospel to us, to help us in the wisdom of the gospel, and to warn us with the promise of the gospel. Most ultimately the church cares for one another by helping each other be changed by the gospel and present more mature in Christ.

So what does this mean for you? Two things: First, what Paul is describing in this text is nothing more than what we call discipleship. We want to create opportunities where in smaller settings we can provide space for us to teach, warn and proclaim the gospel to each other so that we may all grow in maturity.

Many of you are already doing that, but the staff and elders are really thinking through how we can make this process more clear and accessible for our church.

Second, we feel like our church needs care in terms of its relationships. Most issues we encounter in our body have to do with problems in relationships or parenting. We realize that's because we haven't explicitly taken time to equip our body with the gospel in these areas. Starting in a few weeks we will start a series called, "Gospel Focused Relationships and Families."

This series will help us see how our relationship with God shapes our singleness, our marriages, and our parenting. If we are committed to being a healthy church, it means being able to use our time together on Sundays to really drill into specific areas of gospel application. We want to model as a church the care we want you to apply to each other.

The cost of caring for one another with the gospel is the cost which will most significantly define our church in the long run. Together we must learn to work the gospel deeply into each other's hearts so that we may be mature in faith.

Healthy churches worship through the gospel, cares with the gospel, and lastly: **Healthy churches minister in all places for the mission of the gospel.**

Look with me at what Paul says about the church later in **Colossians 3:16-17**.

This is an important point here. Paul starts by appealing to what the gathered church does, we teach one another, we correct one another, we encourage one another, and to what end? To the end that everything we do we do in the name of Jesus Christ.

In other words what we do with the gospel in the church is what we do with the gospel as the church. In church we proclaim, we teach, we help each other. But as the church in our city we proclaim, we teach and we help others.

This is what it means to glorify God in the church and magnify Christ in the city. As we proclaim and grow together in here, we get to proclaim and grow together out there.

In the same way a healthy church must worship through the gospel, and be changed by the gospel, so too must a healthy church pick up the mission of the gospel. This was Jesus' very command to his disciples in the end of Matthew: **Matthew 28:19-20**.

What does this mean for you? It means that we do not want to be openly Christian in our church, and visibly absent in our community. We may not have influence, but we will always have a witness. For where the gospel is believed and proclaimed, there lies the power for eternal change.

As we grow and care for one another with the gospel, we will become more comfortable and competent in sharing the gospel. To help support that, we are thinking through ways in which we can provide opportunities for our church to see ourselves as part of God's missions to win souls to himself.

This includes specifically addressing how we view our places of employment, or work in general, and the neighborhoods in which we live. If Colossians 3:17 is true, that everything we do can be done in the name of Jesus, then we want to start letting that name be heard wherever we are.

In one sense the goals of the 50/50 Legacy aren't novel. They are biblically basic. But if we want to be a Missoula Church, seeking the good of our city, and if we want to be a Sending Church, helping spread the gospel across the region and our globe, then we must be a healthy church.

How can we provide gospel-reflecting care to our city if we are not caring for one another with the gospel in our church? How are we to plant churches in Missoula and in missionary contexts if we are not sending ourselves out into our neighborhoods?

Being part of a church should change everything because being saved by Jesus changes everything. **1 Peter 2:9-10**. We are the called out ones who call out to those who have not yet seen.

We are the called out ones who call out to each other to look again at the beauty of God.

We are the called out ones, called to be faithful to God in all places for his glory and for his good.

I want to conclude with a challenge from a pastor named Charles Spurgeon. In speaking on the church as the army of God he says:

**“Will each one here say to himself: "An army, a company of warriors, am I one of them? Am I a soldier? I have entered the church; I make a profession; but am I really a soldier? Do I fight? Do I endure hardness? Am I a mere carpet-knight, a mere lie-a-bed soldier, one of those who are pleased to put on regimentals in order to adorn myself with a profession without ever going to the war?"**

**"Am I a soldier of the cross—a follower of the Lamb?"**

**Pass the question round, my dear brethren and sisters: Are you soldiers who engage in actual fighting for Jesus, under his banner? Do you rally round it? Do you know the standard? Do you love it? Could you die in defense of it? Is the person of Jesus dearest of all things to you? Do you value the doctrine of the atoning substitution? Do you feel your own energy and power awakened in the defense of that, and for the love of that? Let not one go away without making the searching question."**

We as a church must answer that question. We sit here 50 years in without an idea of where our permanent building will be. But whatever happens, the elders agree that we do not want to be here because our body had met the needs we have for buildings and budgets. We want it to be because we have met the desire of God for his glory. May it be so.