

## 1 Timothy 3:14-16

So far in chapter 3 Paul has been laying down the ground rules for the local church; in the course of his extensive comments, he has outlined specific qualifications for those in positions of leadership – elders and deacons are left in no doubt as to what is expected of them in terms of Christian character.

Knowing Paul as we do, we have nothing to fear – he’s not a bully, he’s not throwing his apostolic weight around; he wants nothing but the best for an assembly of God’s redeemed people. Yes, the standards are high, but why should we set our sights any lower? A church stands or falls by the spiritual quality of its leaders – that’s why so many of our churches are in a pitiful state today.

We have substituted the biblical criteria for appointing leaders with what we think is a more user-friendly approach; we have replaced the copious qualifications set down in this section with a hotchpotch of what we think are better ideas – so long as the person ticks most of the boxes, we think he’ll be ok. We think we’re clever when we do things our way; the reality is so very different. We need to get back to the Bible.

There’s a delightful personal touch in verse 14 where Paul tells Timothy that he can hardly wait to see him again. He lives for the day when their paths will once again cross and fellowship is renewed. That’s the joy of Christian friendship – that’s the rich depth of gospel fellowship. It’s fairly obvious that the old man Paul misses the stimulus and input of the young man Timothy. A son in the faith, that he was, but he was so much more – he never fails to bring a sparkle into Paul’s life. His face lights up the more he thinks about the day when they will embrace each other and catch up on all that’s been happening.

Many of us can easily identify with Paul and his feelings – it’s not easy when you’re out there on the frontline, it’s touch and go sometimes; it’s tough, especially when you’re pioneering a trail for Jesus in enemy territory. But that’s Paul, and he would not have it

any other way. That said, his heart beats faster as he thinks of the possibility of seeing Timothy one more time. God is good and he knows how much they need each other.

You can tell that Paul has a lot on his heart and mind when it comes to the church's conduct and confession; much of what he has written can't wait until they meet up, that's why he picked up the quill and wrote on the parchment – it has to be said that his inspirational insights on the local church are quite beautiful and breathtaking.

You will know as well as I do that some things in life can be left for a time on the back burner, whilst other issues are much more pressing and demand our immediate attention.

There is no doubting his prime reason for so doing, so we read: 'I am writing these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth' (that was verses 14 and 15).

Before we pause for a music break, let me say this: When it comes to church, there is a proper way to do things – that's what Paul is saying in as many words. Too many people glide over this verse and move on to the gilded theology of verse 16. In a sense, that is understandable; this, however, is a key verse in terms of our understanding of what church is; and it also lifts the curtain on how God sees his people. There is a connection, for how a church behaves reveals the reality of its faith.

### **MUSIC BREAK**

There are certain principles that we do well to take on board – it means that Christians, who have become part of God's global household, should live by his house rules. When Paul calls the church 'the household of God', he isn't referring to a building, he's talking about the relationship of the members of the house-hold to one another and to the Master of the house.

In other words, the church is a family, it's not a multi-national corporation; it's an international community of believers – it's

ordinary people like you and me who know the joy and thrill of sins forgiven; as brothers and sisters who have the same Father we are an integral part of a tightly-knit family. It's an eternal relationship – if we're in the family today on earth, we'll still be in the family over there in heaven.

Paul's use of the classic phrase, 'the church of the living God', reminds us of the striking uniqueness of the church – she is an assembly, a company of people called out from the world to be distinct in holiness and purpose. It's worth noting that our God is not dead, he's alive! So the church is a living entity, she is a vibrant organism, not a dead organisation. The pulsating life of God is in her and flows through her veins. This is something dynamic – God lives in us, and we live in him.

It's not my church, it's not your church, it's not another man's church, it is God's church, and his alone – that makes it eternal and exclusive; we know from the book of Acts that it is what he purchased with his own blood at Calvary. And, wonder of all wonders, you and I are part and parcel of it!

Paul refers to it as the 'pillar and foundation of the truth'. This is an awesome architectural metaphor. The word 'pillar' would have immense significance to these folks living in the big city of Ephesus; they had, in their city, the stunning temple of Diana, one of the seven wonders of the world – it contained 127 marble pillars, some of which were studded with jewels and overlaid with gold. The locals knew well how beautiful a thing a pillar could be.

It may well be that the idea of the word 'pillar' here is not so much support, as display. The church's duty is to hold up the truth in such a way that all men may see it. The buttress is the base of the building – its foundation. It keeps it standing intact. In a world where truth is relative, and where people do not wish to face the truth, the church holds it up for all to see. In a world which would happily eliminate unwelcome truth, the church supports it against all who would seek to destroy it.

These three descriptive phrases together make a compelling picture. As the church, we are family or 'household'. And, together, we are to love as brothers and sisters who share the same heredity. We are 'the church of the living God'. We come together as multiple temples of the living God, alive in dynamic, quickened community. As the church, we are 'the pillar and foundation of the truth'. The truth of God's word is the bedrock, mortar, and bricks of our lives. I agree with Warren Wiersbe when he writes: 'A church does not grow by addition, but by nutrition.' God's people need to be fed with the pure word of God, with truth unchanged and truth unchanging. In a world of fluctuating fortunes and up and down values, this is our staple diet, this is fundamental to our spiritual growth and godliness. That's where church makes a mega difference.

Vince Lombardi, the Hall of Fame coach of the Green Bay Packers football team, was notorious for his emphasis on fundamentals. His teams won championships because they could block, tackle, and execute, better than anyone else. It is said that once, frustrated by his team's poor performance, he held up a football, and said: 'Gentlemen, this is a football!'

That's what Paul has done in this section – he has taken us back to basics, he has held up a football, he has told us what church is and how we are meant to see it; furthermore, he has given us explicit guidelines on how we are to conduct ourselves within it. As I said at the top of the programme, it's a matter of you and I playing by the rules!

We'll take a break there and, when we come back, I want us to ask and answer a very important question – how do we uphold the truth?

### **MUSIC BREAK**

Before we take a look at verse 16, there's one big question that begs our attention: how do we uphold the truth? I reckon there are eight answers to that enquiry. One, we uphold the truth by believing it as in Acts 24:14; two, we uphold the truth by memorising it as in Psalm

119:11; three, we uphold the truth by meditating on it as in Joshua 1:8; four, we uphold the truth by studying it as in 2 Timothy 2:15; five, we uphold the truth by obeying it as in Luke 11:28; six, we uphold the truth by living it as in Titus 2:10; seven, we uphold the truth by defending it as in Philippians 1:16; eight, we uphold the truth by proclaiming it as in Matthew 28:19-20.

There's the challenge we all face today – the supreme mission of the church is to uphold the precious legacy of God's word. What a wonderful privilege is ours to support the truth given us by our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

That sublime truth is expressed in a marvellous way in verse 16: 'Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.'

What a superb turn of phrase – 'beyond all question' ... well, it means precisely what it says! This is not hyperbole, it's not an exaggeration – this is it, period. There are no lingering doubts, there is no room for negotiation or dispute.

What is he referring to? 'the mystery of godliness is great.' In a single statement, Paul shines the flashlight on the Lord Jesus Christ, his person and work is the master key to godly conduct. He is the one who makes living a good life possible – Paul then highlights the scope of our Lord's ministry when he gives us a Christ-saturated hymn.

It's a hymn of six lines, with three contrasting couplets – one and two, three and four, five and six. This ancient hymn tells us that Christ was both fully human and fully divine, at one and the same time. It starts with the incarnation and finishes with the ascension. It begins with the moment Christ came down to earth, it ends with the hour when Christ went up to heaven. It's a wonderful song, it's designed to thrill the heart and trigger off a raft of spontaneous praise and worship in the congregation. If the theme of our song is

the Lord Jesus, we can sing of no one better, you can't improve on that.

The first couplet succinctly describes how Christ was revealed: 'he appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit.' That is a clear reference to his birth and incarnation – the moment when God became man and pitched his tent on Planet Earth. Here is one who came to do the Father's will – one who happily left the sparkling splendour of heaven for a sin-blighted world.

One who, as the eternal Son of the eternal God, stood at the rim of the universe and dove headlong past a billion stars, through the Milky Way, and into the womb of the Virgin Mary, where he swam and grew until his birth that chilly winter's night. 'He appeared in a body' sang the early church. This was the initial revelation of Christ; 'For,' says Paul, in Colossians 2:9, 'in him all the fulness of the Deity lives in bodily form.'

The second half of the couplet takes us to the other extreme of his earthly life – it's the corresponding bookend, for it refers to his resurrection. Paul eloquently speaks of this one-off event in Romans 1:4 when he observed that Christ 'through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead.' He says something similar a few chapters later in Romans 8:11. Such love is the hallmark of the first, such power is the characteristic of the second.

The second stanza or couplet highlights the witnesses of Christ. In a sense, it contrasts the duo of witnesses – we have angels in one and earthly nations in the other. One is superhuman, whilst the other is boringly ordinary and human. One is supernatural, the other natural. Nonetheless they are a powerful combination whose impact is considerable.

The angels saw everything, they missed absolutely nothing. In a wonderful manner, they foretold his birth; at his birth, the sky was filled with angelic witnesses who sang in Luke 2:14, 'glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests.' They were present immediately after his forty days of temptation in

the wilderness; they were present in the Garden of Gethsemane; they witnessed the resurrection and sat by the empty tomb; they comforted the disheartened disciples as the Lord ascended to heaven.

And right now in heaven, the Lord is adored by vast angelic hosts who sing his praise. This same Jesus, when he returns in power and glory, will not be on his own, he'll be accompanied by angels. True enough, it's almost an understatement to say, he was 'seen by angels' – they couldn't miss seeing him. In a sense, they couldn't get enough of him, and never will!

One commentator makes the valid point that 'the angels were the least removed from him, and the Gentiles were the farthest removed.' We read he 'was preached among the nations'. The whole realm of intelligent creation saw him. There was cosmic witness to Christ on earth and in heaven. The mandate to tell the world of Jesus has never been rescinded – the commission is good for the twenty-first century. It's what men need to hear, it's what the nations need to know; the gospel, as Paul implies, is not about man, it's all about Jesus.

The third and final couplet makes a fascinating assertion with regard to the reception of Christ. We read, 'he was believed on in the world, [and] was taken up in glory.' We're looking here at two totally different arenas – earth and heaven.

Down through the ages, men and women of every culture have believed on his name, they have found in him a shelter from the storm, they have discovered he is a refuge in time of trouble – I love that, don't you! In that final day, there will be so many up in heaven that we'll not be able to number them – they're there from every corner of the universe, all trusting Jesus, all having 'believed' on his peerless name.

There once was an old church in England. A sign on the front of the building read, 'We preach Christ crucified.' After a time ivy grew up and obscured the last word. The motto now read, 'we preach Christ.' The ivy grew some more, and the motto read, 'we preach.'

Finally, ivy covered the entire sign, and the church died. Such is the fate of any church that fails to carry out its mission in the world.

The last line takes us to his glorious ascension that we read of in Acts 1. What a stirring welcome he was given as he crossed over to the other side, we have echoes of his heavenly reception in Psalm 24. The gates open wide, the king marches in, and the heavenly host burst forth in rapturous praise and worship. The sound of clapping hands resonates through the ages; he's home, where he belongs.

What a shout must have gone up! They were all there to meet him—the angels who raised their flaming swords at the gates of Eden, the angel of the apocalypse who stood with one foot on the sea and the other on the land, the archangels Michael and Gabriel. Ah, here's the point, the magnificent Christ of this old hymn makes it possible for you and me to be the kind of people he wants us to be – if it were not for him, we wouldn't be here; if it were not for him, we couldn't do church the way he intends it to be done.

That says something about grace – it says, perhaps, even more, about the gospel of Jesus Christ, the wonderful theme of this first epistle of Timothy. You see, we can merge them together and happily declare: grace is the heart of the gospel, grace is the heart of God. As the old Gaelic proverb says: 'Every tide ebbs except the tide of grace.'