

Guardians of the Truth, Part 2

1 Timothy 3:14-16

We're going to look at some of the clearest statements on the purpose of the church. The most succinct statement on the purpose of the church in all the New Testament, Jesus said, in Matthew 16:18, He said "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Praise God for that! But sometimes, when you look around, it can be hard to find that unconquerable church under the dark shadow of this evangelical industrial complex. But make no mistake, it's there.

"Nevertheless," 2 Timothy 2:19, "God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal, 'The Lord knows those who are his,' and 'Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.'" That's us, beloved. That's you. That's me. God knows us, and he keeps us, even carrying us through some very confusing times. He protects us in the refuge of a local church that knows its place and knows its purpose in the world.

Take a look at it there, 1 Timothy 3:14. Paul says to Timothy, "I hope to come to you soon, but I'm writing these things to you so that if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness. He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory."

That, whether you recognize it or not, that is a crucial text. Absolutely vital because it spells out clearly and explicitly the nature of the church. It spells out its role in the world and the method by which it carries out its purpose. That's where we pick it up in verse 14. "I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth."

Now the purpose clause isn't as clear here in the ESV, but it's there in verse 15, "I write," and it's the word, so that or the word, in order that, showing purpose, "in order that you may

know how one ought to behave in the church.” One of the priorities of church leadership is to put order and structure into place. Order and structure, creates an environment within the church that allows Christians to carry out the purpose of the church, which we’re going to get into in a moment.

An orderly, structured environment allows Christians to receive clear biblical instruction, so that Christians then can be transformed increasingly by the Spirit through the Word that’s directed to their minds. That’s what our weekly assembly is all about. That’s why we get together, so we can preach and teach so the community of saints, all of you, will live in conformity to the message of the Gospel.

The church must be a body of people that lives consistently with the Gospel it preaches. So Paul’s aim here, as you can see, is for godly conduct in the church, which is consistent with the church’s nature. Notice the nature, how Paul describes the church, three phrases. The church is, one, “the household of God”; two, it is “the church of the living God”; and three, it is “the pillar and support of the truth.” Those first two terms, household and church, they’re terms of identity. And the final

phrase, the pillar and support of the truth, that refers to the church's role.

Okay, let's start with the first two terms there, household and church. First of all, the church is God's household. It's God's household. That means we're members of God's household, his family. God is the master of the house; we are related to him as slaves by the purchase of redemption. We're also related to the master of the household as sons. Sons, children by the loving act of adoption. In a word, we belong to God's household because of his amazing grace. We don't want to act in any way that brings shame or dishonor on the master of the house. We don't want to act in any way that dishonors our loving Father by adoption. We want to conduct ourselves in ways that bring honor and glory to the household of God.

Second, Paul calls the church, "the church of the living God." The church of the living God. The word, church, is *ekklesia* in the Greek. It's a word that originally referred to a public assembly, just a regular, general word. It could refer to a civic assembly, a political assembly, a religious assembly, even an unruly assembly, like a, like a mob, the mob that

attacked in Ephesus. That was called a church, an assembly, *ekklesia*.

So the church here, is a gathered assembly of people together in a corporate body. It has living, breathing people in it who gather together in a particular place. It's a local assembly, that's church. Churches emphasis here is on gathering together, an assembling together in a particular location. So when the early Christians thought about church, they thought about local church. They needed to learn about the universality of all Christians bound together in Christ, but local church was their immediate point of contact. That universal church still had practical, concrete reality in the local assemblies, the local church.

Now in contrast to the pagans, who also gathered together in local assemblies at the temples of their gods, Christians, they gathered together to worship the living God, not a dead idol. As worshipers of a living God, Christians, then, are to show to the world the life and vitality of their God among them, that flows through them and out of them. The living God is known by life. He's known by the fruits and the evidences of the

divine life that flows through his people, through his children, and is manifest to the world. So the church is God's household. It's the assembly of the living God and it's probably that imagery of an assembly worshiping a living God and the contrast to the many assemblies that worshiped dead idols that, that imagery that prompted Paul's next description of the church.

Here's the second point in our outline. First point was about the nature of the church, the church is God's gathered family, a local assembly of God's redeemed. The second point is about the role of the church. The role of the church. The church is God's treasury. The church is God's treasury. This household, this assembly of the living God, is also a temple that holds a precious treasure. It's like a vault, a treasury guarding an immense storehouse of wealth. That last phrase there in verse 15, "the pillar and support of the truth," that would call to the Ephesian mind the pillars of the famous Temple of Diana.

And what's important about Paul's metaphor isn't necessarily the structure, the beauty of the structure, the importance is about what's inside. The assembly of the living God, that is us, is the pillar and the support, it's the temple

of the truth. The truth is what's important. Used in that way, with that definite article, the truth, it's talking about a specific truth.

*The truth*, refers to the entire body of doctrine revealed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ; everything expounded and unpacked by the New Testament prophets and Apostles; its eternal, saving truth. God placed that truth inside local gatherings of believers, these little assemblies dotted all over the world. Let that sink in for a moment. God has deposited the truth of his saving Gospel in our midst. You know what that means? We are the guardians of the truth. We guard the treasure that's been entrusted to us. That's why Paul ends his first letter to Timothy with this impassioned appeal, 1 Timothy 6:20, "O, Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you!"

Pretty amazing, isn't it, that God would entrust this immense treasure of eternal, infallible truth to us, weak fallible human beings. The local church is the pillar and support of the truth. Each individual believer is a custodian of the truth, a guardian of the truth. Such a weighty and an awesome responsibility! And let me tell you this, beloved, it's

worth investing your entire life and energy and resources into. That's what you were made for.

The question is how do we guard the truth? How do we keep this deposit safe and sound, protecting it, guarding it, preserving what God has entrusted to us? Well, here's the paradox of this text, we give it away. That's how we guard it, we give it away. Take a look at verse 16, here's point three: the method. The method, the church is God's testimony. The church is God's testimony. Verse 16 says, "Great, indeed, we confess is the mystery of godliness. He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory."

This appears, this text appears to be an early church confession, like a summary of Gospel truth. Translations differ a bit in how they render that opening phrase. The ESV says, "Great, indeed, we confess is the mystery of godliness." New American Standard says, "By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness." And the King James Version says, "Without controversy, great is the mystery of godliness." You have to



read the King James in an English accent. Even a poor one will do.

The word that all those translations are struggling to translate is *homologoumenos*. And you're thinking, I'd struggle, too. How do you, I can't even pronounce that! It's an adverb that you could translate in several different ways, confessedly, undeniably, or most certainly. But at the root of the word, the basic verb is, to confess, *homologeō*, to confess. This adverb is a fascinating word because it does contain the concepts of certainty and universality.

On the one hand, this early church confession is absolutely certain, it is undeniable, it is beyond any controversy or disputation. On the other hand, the early church, or this early confession is a common confession, that is, it's universally held by all churches. This confession is the universal, certain, undisputed truth held, guarded, preserved, and maintained by every true Christian church. Deny just one of those points, you've slipped from certainty, and you've fallen away from the true church.

Denying the truth, this truth is the path to apostasy. But again, don't miss the emphasis on the root of the word, which is confession. What is confessed is something that is spoken. It's, it's something to which we testify. It is something we profess and we proclaim. It's verbal. It's loud. It's spoken. The content of this confession is the content of all our preaching, all our teaching, all our evangelism, all our discipleship. We confess these truths, agreeing with God as to their truthfulness and trustworthiness, and we speak them out loud for the world to hear.

And the amazing paradox in this powerful passage is this, we guard the truth by giving it away. We preserve the truth by proclaiming it. We protect the truth by confessing the truth. And in that way the church is God's living and abiding testimony to this ungodly world. We're responsible for proclaiming, upholding, and defending the Scripture, which is the revealed Word of God. We do that by faithful preaching. As John Calvin put it, quote, "This commendation relates to the ministry of the Word, for if that be removed, the truth of God will fall to the

ground. Silence in the church is the banishment and crushing of the truth.” End quote.

Beloved, it's the height of irony that evangelical churches, churches which are supposed to be characterized, as their name implies, by the evangel, by Gospel proclamation, it's the height of irony that these evangelical churches have silenced the truth by failing to proclaim it. As they become dulled by entertainment, as they become distracted with the next big thing being marketed to them by the evangelical industrial complex, the Christian witness has fallen silent. And if it's proclaimed, it's falling on deaf ears. An aggressive modernity is attempting to banish the truth, and the sexual revolution seeks to crush it.

The task of evangelical churches is to proclaim it, registering, by so doing, registering their protest. Local churches that truly belong in God's family, that hold the wealth of God's treasury, they need to renew their commitment to guard that treasure by being bold and courageous as God's testimony to this ungodly age. We are the pillar and support of the truth by

preaching, teaching, proclaiming, evangelizing, discipling through the truth constantly.

What is the truth we proclaim? What is it? Paul calls it here, verse 16, he calls it, "the mystery of godliness." Godliness is the word *eusebeias*. *Eusebeias*, it generally refers to our conduct, our behavior, and the root of the word *eusebeias* is the root *seb*. *Seb*, it had the sense of worship and reverence in it. This is nothing less than the fear of God at the root of this word. It's this reverential attitude toward God that seeks to please him in everything. One writer said, he called it, this word, "the practical awareness of God in every aspect of life."

Okay, so, why is it called, the mystery of godliness? Is it mysterious? No. In the Bible, a mystery is something that was once hidden in generations past, but now it's been revealed, it's been unpacked, it's been unfolded. And there's a sense in which all New Testament truth is a mystery in that sense. God sovereignly hid New Testament truth from the world, but then he revealed it starting in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. There's something about true godliness that was unknown until Christ came.

Godliness was a mystery once hidden, now revealed fully in Jesus Christ. And that's why the mystery of godliness here, that's unpacked in this passage, it's not a matter of, what, it's a matter of whom. The, what statements, refer to the whom. The propositions refer to a person. Paul sets this early church confession in three poetic stanzas. Each line is structured the same way grammatically, so that there's a rhythmic, song-like quality when you read it out loud. Why do you think he structured it that way? Easy to memorize, right? Maybe even easy to set to music. Maybe sing it together. Verse 16, "He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up on glory." That right there, the mystery of godliness. Each of the three couplets, there, as you can see, flows back and forth between the earthly and temporal realm to that which is spiritual and eternal.

So we start with, look at the first phrase there, we start with the incarnation, that's the temporal realm and then flow to the vindication of Christ, that's the spiritual realm. We move from the, we move from the angelic realm, and then we flow to

the nations, so the spiritual to the temporal and then back again, it says. We consider the *kosmos*, the world, temporal. We flow again into glory, that's the spiritual. So temporal to spiritual, spiritual to temporal, temporal to spiritual.

Not only that, these three stanzas provide a series of three contrasts. Look at the first contrast, there, it has to do with the person and work of Christ in his incarnation. "He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit." Jesus was revealed; he was manifest in weak, unimpressive flesh, flesh and blood. As it says in says in Isaiah 53:2, "He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him." And yet Jesus was vindicated by the power of the Holy Spirit in his life and ministry. The Spirit was there as a witness at his baptism. He empowered him for miracles and works of power during his ministry. He was the power for his resurrection and his ascension into heaven.

Look at the second contrast, it has to do with salvation. The contrast there is between angels and men. "He was seen by angels, but," he was, "proclaimed among the nations." Holy angels observed all the major events of Jesus' life. As we've

seen in our study of Luke, the angel Gabriel announced Jesus' birth. The angels worshiped him in view of the shepherds at his birth. Angels ministered to him after his temptations, and in his agony at Gethsemane. Angels were present with him at his resurrection and yet, there is no salvation for angels. Holy angels, even though "they long to look into the things of salvation," 1 Peter 1:12, those things don't pertain to them. And salvation isn't offered to fallen angels at all. They're without hope.

Only men can experience salvation, which is why it says, "He was proclaimed among the nations." Human beings of all nations, not just the Jews, and not just those who saw all the events as the angels did. People of all nations can hear the proclamation of the Gospel, this good news of the salvation of Jesus Christ. Again, that's why it's so crucial that we continue to do our part by proclaiming this message among the nations. That is the role of the local church. That's what we do. That's the local church's responsibility.

So there's a contrast, here, having to do with the incarnation, a contrast regarding salvation, third contrast has

to do with redemption. Look at it, there, "He was believed on in the world and taken up in glory." Simply put, the immediate redemption that we find through faith in Jesus Christ, while we're still here on this earth, in this world, that redemption is going to find fulfillment and culmination in a full and final redemption one day. And because Jesus Christ was taken up in glory, you know what, we're going to follow him there.

That's the hope of salvation we proclaim from this treasure, of which we're guardians. As Paul said in Romans 8:23, "We ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit," we, "groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies, for in this hope we were saved." Since Jesus "was believed on in the world, taken up in glory," all who believe in him and live a godly life of repentance from sins will follow him to glory.

Beloved, that is the purpose of this local church in this world. We're God's family, we're God's treasury, we're God's testimony. We are guardians of the truth, and we guard it by giving it away. Membership involvement in the local church, listen, it's worth investing your life into. It's worth spending



your life on. It's worth investing your energies and your resources and your gifts and your talents into. As Jesus said, "On this rock." What is the rock? The rock is the truth that Peter confessed. It's his good confession that Jesus "is the Christ, the Son of the living God."

We've seen this rock of truth in a more glorious light this morning, unpacking it out of these phrases. And Jesus promised, "On this rock I will build my church." Do you believe that? And he said, "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it." It doesn't matter what revolution is going on out there. The gates of hell will not prevail against this truth. What a wonderful promise from our Lord!

Listen, in these confusing times, it's time for our church and all faithful churches to return its purpose: to guard the truth that has been entrusted to us. We need to turn away from all the spirit of modernity in all of its forms, so we can be can be a pillar and foundation of the truth, and you know what? We're going to guard that truth by giving it away. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we're so grateful for the truth of your Word, how it illuminates, how it helps us to understand, and how it focuses us on our purpose. Help us to be free from distraction. Helps us not to be dulled by the world around us. But help us to give ourselves completely and wholly to this Gospel, to this truth you deposited in this local church. Let us be faithful to proclaim that Word. Help us to be faithful, like James said, to be doers and not merely hearers who delude ourselves, but to be doers of the Word. In Jesus' name, amen.