

August 11, 2024

THE GLORIOUS NATURE AND ROLE OF THE CHURCH

1 Timothy 3:14-16

*(8 of 15 in a series through 1 Timothy)*

As I've hit the back half of my forties, I've grown to appreciate something that I am not sure that I appreciated in my youth. And I don't mean Ibuprofen, lumbar support, or the glorious gift of sleeping well on any given night—though these would all certainly apply. No, what I appreciate that I wouldn't have appreciated as much in my youth is when a television show provides a recap. If Lili and I get a chance on some evening, we may sit and watch some show together at night before going to bed. But with the busyness of life, it is sometimes the case that when we sit down to watch, it's been a while since we last watched an episode. So I love it when you start up the episode and it offers a recap—a brief reminder of what's come before and some things that are going to play a big role in what comes next.

One night I accidentally pushed the button to skip the recap, and I thought, "Oh well. Who cares? I don't need it." And then immediately when the episode started, I started asking questions like, "Now why was he in prison again? Where did that girl come from? Did we skip an episode?" And so I just restarted the episode, making sure to watch the recap this time. And, man, what a gift it was to my forgetful mind!

Well, when we look at our text this morning, Paul writes in such a way that it forces the reader of this letter to look back and give himself a bit of a recap. As Paul writes, it's as if he stops in the middle of the letter and says, "Let me orient you as to why I've written what I have so far." You can see it in verses 14-15 as he writes, "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."

Paul had hoped to deliver the information we're reading in this letter to Timothy in person. But, fearing he might be delayed and knowing the urgency of Timothy's situation with the church in Ephesus (false teachers arising, etc.), he decided to go ahead and write a letter that he'd send to Timothy prior to his arrival. And, of course, we're grateful he did. Had he been able to speak to Timothy in person and thus never write this letter, we'd be deprived of this letter that is so helpful in understanding the nature, structure, and role of the church.

But more importantly than Paul's intent to visit is what he says right after that. He tells Timothy, as I've already noted, that he's written all that he's written to this point so that Timothy might "know how one ought to behave in the household of God." And this leads Paul to expand a bit about the nature of the church and the message we're proclaiming.

As he does so, it forces us to look back briefly, making sure that we remember what he has written before pertaining to how one behaves in the household of God (i.e. the church). Therefore, what I want to do this morning as we walk through these verses is give us a quick

recap of what we've seen to this point, consider the nature of what the church is and is to be in society, and then consider the truth that we guard and proclaim. Let's start by looking at a recap and the nature of the church as we note that what we do as a church and how we do it are of crucial importance.

### **What we do as a church and how we do it are of crucial importance**

We've noted that Paul told Timothy that he'd written what he'd written so that Timothy (and through Timothy, the church) might "know how one ought to behave in the household of God" (v. 15). So what had Paul written? Well, let's remind ourselves with a brief recap.

You'll remember that chapter 1 stressed the importance of the church guarding and proclaiming the gospel and gospel-rooted doctrine, as the false teachers were teaching otherwise. But it was really with chapter 2 that Paul began to stress necessary behavior in the church's gatherings. That's where he gave instructions on taking time to offer prayers, especially for our governing authorities, so that we might live in peace and be able to more easily share the gospel. And he'd noted that, within that, as men pray, they need to make sure they're lifting holy hands, not being characterized by anger and being argumentative, and the women need not make their greatest priority their physical adornment but rather adorning themselves with good works.

Next, Paul had given limitations on activities that a woman could do in the church. He noted that he did not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man in the church because the creation order was intentionally established so that men lead in the church—something Satan had sought to undo in the garden. And this had led us into chapter 3 where Paul gave qualifications for those men who would serve as elders and deacons.

Now, in one sense, these things might not be thrilling for us to talk about. As I've noted about some other passages, texts like 1 Timothy 2 and 3 aren't typically someone's favorite biblical text or life verse. Moreover, it may feel a bit, well, less than exciting to study these things that we've looked at over the past few weeks. But Paul reminds us that the things we've talked about over the last few weeks (that I've just done a recap on) aren't minor issues. These things Paul has instructed Timothy to do and teach others to do as well are God-given instructions for how the gathered church is to function. The way he's told us to do things are crucial. The offices are God-given offices, the limitations are God-given limitations, and the character demanded in these things are God-given requirements. Again, to use the words of Paul, he's written these things in order that we "may know how one ought to behave in the household of God."

And one reason it's helpful is because there could be a temptation for us to alter this text in a desire to adjust to the times. I've been reading a book recently on American history, and in it the author notes that some people in our day like to speak of the constitution of the United States as a "living document." And what they mean is that it is a document that adapts and grows and changes with the times. But the problem with that is that an article of governance that adapts, grows, and changes is not a document that can be a steady and reliable guide to govern a people.

After all, it's constantly adapting and changing. Rather, it will become a document that is shaped by the desires of those in power.

Well, some want to see the Bible that way as well, suggesting that it's a book that grows, adapts, and is shaped with the times. They might take Paul's prohibitions on women teaching or exercising authority over a man in the church and say that it is an outdated idea that fit more the situation and time in the first century. But now we've moved past any role distinctions and need to adjust Paul's teaching accordingly. They might say the same about only men serving in the office of pastors or the demand for sexual faithfulness. And with these arguments, there could be a push to move away from the clear teaching of the biblical text, forcing it to adapt to where culture is at large.

And so Paul's reminder is helpful. He tells us that he didn't write these things as a mere suggestion or something that can happily fall to the wayside eventually, like scaffolding on a building. He wrote these things so that we might know how one ought to behave in the household of God. He wrote these things, that is, in order that we might obey to them to a T. He wrote them because what we do as a church are how we do it are of crucial importance for us.

And one reminder as to why that is the case is found in Paul's description of the church as the "household of God." In other words, Paul picks up the imagery of the church as God's household. We are his children, and each of us has roles to carry out as members of his household. But equally as important as the metaphor of the church as a household is Paul's note that it's *God's* household, which is a reminder that God (not us) gets to dictate what goes on in his household, how it's ordered and structured, and what it does. He's not handed these things over to us so that we might do as we will. He's given instructions (as we've seen in chapters 2-3), and he expects such orders to be followed.

Moreover, Paul reminds us that the church is the church "of the living God," which is a reminder that God is our living judge to whom we will give an account. So let's strive as a church to make sure we're not trying to get the biblical text to adapt to our culture or our desires but making sure that we're aligning ourselves with the biblical text. Let's always be the ones adapting and conforming our lives to the unchanging Word of God, not the other way around. The church is the Lord's church. He gets to call the shots as to how it's arranged and how we should behave as his people. Our task is to make sure we obey. And speaking of obedience, this leads us to another point, namely, that we are to be the pillar and buttress of truth in our world.

### **We are to be the pillar and buttress of truth in our world**

As Paul describes the church, he not only labels us as the church of the living God and the household of God but also as "a pillar and buttress of the truth" (v. 15). A pillar and a buttress are parts of a building that are supportive. They hold up other parts of the structure and allow those parts to be elevated because of the support under them. Paul is telling us that the church has this role as well. We're to uphold, support, and proclaim the truth in our day.

Now, we know that this is sadly untrue of churches all over our world. As I've mentioned, if you go to many places in our world and want to see the evils of our day promoted, look to many of the church buildings. They'll be the ones flying the rainbow flag or promoting the mutilation of our children in the name of "gender-affirming care" and on and on. In other words, many churches function like a wind vane, seeing which way the winds of culture are blowing, pointing that way themselves, and even getting out in front of where the culture is moving.

But Paul is telling us here that the church is to function in precisely the opposite way. Those in the culture should be able to see all the winds of lies and falsehood blowing like crazy our culture, and then look to the church and see a bulwark, an immovable structure that is upholding, supporting, and proclaiming the truth in the midst of lies and chaos.

And I want to note that I don't think the first two points we've made are unrelated. Here's what I mean. One of the things that keeps the church as a pillar and buttress of the truth instead of an institution that is blown around by the winds of wherever culture is going, is our obedience to Paul's commands in 1 Timothy 2:1-3:13. In other words, if we gather as a church and do what the Bible says we should do, how the Bible says we should do it, there are some safeguards in that. If we appoint men as elders who fit the qualifications Paul lays out in 3:1-7 and who will give themselves to teaching and preaching the Word of God faithfully, overseeing the church, and praying for its members, there is a better chance than not that we'll remain a pillar and buttress of the truth. If instead of the elders being constantly pulled away by the physical needs of the church, we appoint deacons who meet the qualifications of 3:8-13 and allow them to oversee and ensure that the needs of ministry in the church are fulfilled, then we are putting things in place to help make sure that Cornerstone Community Church is a pillar and buttress of truth in our society.

But if we ever begin to think that we're wiser than God and should give ourselves to a number of extra-biblical things in our service, ignore the mandated things Scripture says we should give ourselves to, fail to appoint qualified elders, fail as elders to give ourselves to teaching and preaching God's Word, or fail to appoint qualified deacons and let the urgency of every physical need distract us, then do not be surprised if the day comes that we are a lighthouse for falsehood and eventually close our doors. That's what Paul is reminding us of in verses 14-15. He's given us instructions in this letter that may feel boring and mundane, tedious and unnecessary, but he's helping us understand how we should behave as a church so that we might continue to be a pillar and buttress of truth in this world. So let's keep giving ourselves to obeying God's Word, taking our cues from Scripture instead of the culture (or even our perceived needs in the culture), and standing fast as a pillar and buttress of truth in the midst of a society that is losing any connection to the truth.

But this raises a question, doesn't it? If we're to be a pillar and buttress of the truth, what is the truth we're to uphold and proclaim? Well, Paul answers that question in verse 16 where he shows us that the truth we uphold and proclaim is the person, work, and glory of Christ.

**The truth we uphold and proclaim is the person, work, and glory of Christ**

In verse 16, we're shown the truth that the church upholds and proclaims, as Paul writes, "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."

What this is, it seems, is something like an early creed or confession of the church. And if you're unfamiliar with that language, a creed is a brief summary of what the Bible teaches we should believe, and it should be representative of what all Christians at all times and in all places believe. That's what seems to be happening here. I don't know if Paul wrote it himself originally or if he's quoting what was already known and used in the church. But you'll see that it's a summary of the person, work, and glory of Christ. In other words, it tells us who Jesus is, what he did, and that he's exalted. Let's walk through it line by line.

First, Paul begins by noting that what we confess is great, and that may be a kind of in-your-face statement for the unbelievers in Ephesus where Timothy is pastoring. You may remember that when Paul came to Ephesus in Acts 19, the people there kept chanting, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" It was a declaration of the greatness of the false god they worshiped. Now, Paul is saying *great* is the truth we confess—the mystery of godliness. We confess a truth that is not only true but one that leads to transformed lives, to godliness.

And it centers around Jesus, which is why the next statement begins with "He." Paul is talking about Jesus. He says, "He was manifested in the flesh," which is a reminder to us of the incarnation. God the Son assumed a fully human nature so that the one who was always God become man. He is the God-man. That's who Jesus is. Then, when Paul says that he was vindicated by the Spirit, he's referencing the resurrection.

We know this for two reasons. One, Paul credits the Spirit's activity in the resurrection of Jesus in Romans 1:4 where he tells us that he was raised in power according to the Spirit of holiness. And, two, the New Testament writers recognize Jesus' resurrection as his vindication or justification. When Paul uses the word "vindicated," he means that Jesus was justified or declared righteous. Let me explain why Jesus needed to be justified or declared righteous.

When Jesus died on the cross, it looked like he was a condemned sinner, guilty of blasphemy. He was charged with blasphemy by the Jews. He was hanged on a tree, a sign of condemnation. And he died. If you were a neutral onlooker, it would be reasonable to conclude that Jesus was a sinfully guilty man and that God had judged him. He died under divine condemnation, hanging on a tree, so that we might know that all of his claims were nonsense. You'd have thought that the Sanhedrin's ruling must have been right. I mean, after all, if he were really the righteous Son of God, he'd keep himself from dying, right? But he most certainly did die on that Friday.

But then on that Easter Sunday morning, you'd see that you were wrong. God overturned the verdict of the Sanhedrin. The Father made clear that Jesus is his righteous Son. He was vindicated as he walked out of the tomb as the righteous and living one. He had indeed died condemned. He had even died on that Friday, bearing the wrath of God. But he was condemned

for us. He bore the penalty for our sins. He had none. He really was righteous. And God raised him up on that Easter Sunday morning, declaring his righteousness for all to see.

And his resurrection wasn't some secret. It was "seen by angels," Paul mentions, probably noting that it's not only men and women who saw him, but he was raised before the entire cosmos. Then, his followers went out and "proclaimed among the nations" that Jesus had died for sinners and was raised. And people "believed on [him] in the world," so that they were forgiven of their sins, given eternal life, and became followers of Christ. Finally, just as he was "taken up in glory," so there he now reigns, waiting for the day when he will come to judge his enemies and save his people fully and finally, forever.

That's what we confess. That is the truth of the gospel that transforms people from sinners to those who live godly lives. It is great. And it must never be compromised. We uphold and proclaim this truth as God's household, his church, and the pillar and buttress of the truth.

Paul isn't putting on the church some kind of order that just fits his preferences. He's letting us know how God wants his household ordered and what our role is as the church of the living God. Therefore, let's make sure that we faithfully obey what God says we must do so that we faithfully remain a pillar of this great and glorious truth until our reigning Lord comes to take us home. And let's trust that he'll give us the grace to do this, even as we come to the table. Amen.