

Pillar and Ground of the Truth

¹⁴ These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; ¹⁵ but if I am delayed, *I write* so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. ¹⁶ And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, Justified in the Spirit, Seen by angels, Preached among the Gentiles, Believed on in the world, Received up in glory. (1 Timothy 3:14–16)

People are fascinated with secret societies, and many would like to either know what goes on there, or belong to it. But there is something exotic about belonging to an elite group, a special society, an invitation-only group.

If I told you that you are present today amongst a very unique group, a chosen and selected society, you might be tempted to chuckle. Look around, David, you might say. Everyday, normal, salt-of-the-earth, down-to-earth folks. No elite rulers here, no bluebloods, no powerbrokers here.

But you would be wrong, because gathered here today, is one local instance of the most important organisation on earth: the church. The church may look plain Jane on the outside, but its true character is far more weighty and powerful than even the secret societies that claim or aim to rule the world. But we're about to see what lies under the surface of every ordinary, even dowdy-looking church. We're about to see that there is nothing normal, or average about the church.

We come to the very centre and high point of 1 Timothy. Verse 15 is really the summary verse of the entire book: it is why it was written, its purpose statement. And verse 16 is one of the most important doctrinal statements in all of Scripture. Everything that came before these verses in chapters 1, 2 and 3 points towards them, and everything that comes after them points back to them.

Paul left Timothy in Ephesus, as we read in chapter 1:3, to strengthen and establish the fledgling church there. Paul went on to Macedonia, but he was planning to return to Ephesus and work alongside Timothy. Verse 14 tells us that Paul had hoped this would happen shortly. But he says he wrote these things so Timothy would have the reminders of what Paul had taught him, and the apostolic authority to implement them. Verse 15 is the summary: but if I am delayed, *I write* so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God,

He is not talking about Timothy's personal behaviour in the church service. The word for conduct refers to a whole manner of life, a whole way of doing things. He is saying, here is the blueprint for how the church is to be ordered, planned, shaped. He wanted Timothy to establish and form this church at Ephesus according to God's plan.

And don't miss Paul's use of the word *ought*. You ought to conduct the church the way I'm telling you to.

Put simply, there is a right way to organise the church, and there is a wrong way. There is a way church ought to be conducted, and a way it ought not to be conducted. There is right doctrine, and there is false doctrine. There is the right way to conduct public prayer as we saw in chapter 2, and a wrong way. There is a right set of roles for men and women in the church, and a wrong set of roles. There is a right kind of man to occupy the office of pastor and deacon, and the wrong sort. As we'll see in chapter 5, there is a right kind of person the church should financially support, and the wrong sort. There are sets of priorities for a pastor to pursue in chapter 4, and a wrong set. All of this is knowing how one ought to conduct oneself in church.

To impress this on Timothy, in these short, bridging verses Paul reminds Timothy of the importance and the true nature of the church, and then he reminds him of the great truths of the gospel that the

church teaches and proclaims. Timothy needed this reminder, and so do we.

I. Remember the Truth of What the Church Is

but if I am delayed, *I write* so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.

Timothy, understand what it is you are conducting, ordering, leading. It is not a harmless social get together. It is not a little appreciation society. It is not a group of people sharing a hobby, or some people with an avid interest in religion, or philosophy, or ethics. No, Paul says that what you are dealing with is something extraordinary. He gives it three titles: the house of God, the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.

House of God is not referring to the building. It is referring to the people, who corporately make up a temple, a structure in which God manifests Himself. God doesn't dwell in places made of brick and mortar. His Spirit dwells within His people, and when His people come together, we can rightly say that the house of God, the temple of God has assembled.

⁵ you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:5)

²¹ in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, ²² in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:22)

The local church, when it assembles, is more than the sum of its parts. We are individually living stones, but bring us together, and we are a house, a place, a moment, a context in which God is especially revealed. This is part of what Jesus meant when speaking of the church gathering, even though he was there referencing church discipline, but the principle is true for all occasions of corporate worship:

²⁰ For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them." (Matthew 18:20)

We can fully expect that we will experience and know God as He reveals Himself to us in His Word, and through corporate worship, and as we fellowship with each other. Do you expect that? Do you come with the expectation that once all the stones are in place, we can expect to see God with the eyes of our heart, understand Him better?

The second title he gives the church is the church of the living God. Now you may have heard the word *church* so many times you have forgotten its original meaning. A church, from the Greek *ekklesia*, and the Hebrew *kahal* and *edah*. These mean a group of people called out from the mass and called together. The called out assembly of the living God. Yes, there are plenty of religious assemblies throughout the world, thousands upon thousands of gatherings. But the church is composed of those sheep who hear the voice of the true God, the real God, the living God. They leave the fold of the world, and join His flock. Often they weren't looking for it or even trying to. But they heard His voice, they have seen with the eyes of their heart, they know the truth, and they come out from the world, and join themselves to an assembly of other like-minded believers. What else except the call of God can explain why all these people here, of such diverse backgrounds and languages, and education, and ethnicity, are all here today? It is the assembly, the gathering, the called out group of the living God.

It seems that God enjoys veiling and disguising glorious things. His glorious Son was amongst us as a man without extraordinary beauty. He looked very average. God's glorious Word is amongst us as an unassuming book, a book you can ignore or spill coffee on, or wrinkle or tear the pages. And so

it is when it comes to the household of God, the family of God, the body of Christ. It is glorious, and mighty, but it looks very average. Its members don't look like they belong on an Academy Awards red carpet evening. It is not consulted for its opinion on political problems, economic solutions, or even ethical dilemmas. The famous, the brilliant, the talented, are not often amongst its ranks. Indeed, when you go to the Sunday gathering of the church, you might be tempted to look down upon and despise some of what you see: everyday people, with everyday problems coming together, singing songs, reading the Bible, praying, listening to it being taught.

C. S. Lewis brought this out in his book *The Screwtape Letters*. There he teaches much about the Christian life through an imagined correspondence of letters from a senior demon to a junior demon, as the senior demon teaches the junior one how to thwart God's work in the life of a Christian. One of the things he talks about is to try to get the Christian to not see that the ordinariness of a church hides its true glory. He encourages him to get the Christian to despise these people and think that they are not what the Bible means by the church of the living God.

“When he goes inside, he sees the local grocer with rather an oily expression on his face bustling up to offer him one shiny little book containing a liturgy which neither of them understands, and one shabby little book containing corrupt texts of a number of religious lyrics, mostly bad, and in very small print. When he gets to his pew and looks round him he sees just that selection of his neighbours whom he has hitherto avoided. You want to lean pretty heavily on those neighbours. Make his mind flit to and fro between an expression like “the body of Christ” and the actual faces in the next pew.

...Provided that any of those neighbours sing out of tune, or have boots that squeak, or double chins, or odd clothes, the patient will quite easily believe that their religion must therefore be somehow ridiculous.”

But though your neighbours here might have funny clothes, or have quirky habits, or be socially awkward, you need to see that underneath that very ordinary surface appearance is the house of God, the church of the living God.

The third title is just as amazing. The church is the pillar and ground of the truth. Pillars support structures placed upon them. The word for ground means a support, the mainstay, the foundation. The church upholds, supports, provides a platform for the truth. What is truth? It is the explanation of reality. Truth is what corresponds to reality, what is, and truth is the communication in language of that reality. Now of all the places and sources you can go to find out what life is really about, who we really are, why we are here, what is the meaning of life, what happens to us when we die, the church is the place where you will hear the truth. Not because the church creates the truth, but because the church supports and upholds God's Word, which is truth. A church is only a church when it confesses “Thy Word is truth”, and then teaches it and preaches it.

But where do most people go for truth? These days, they go to Google. And of course, Google is simply a computer program that tries to understand what you're searching for, and decides what results will suit your person, since it has been gathering information about you every time you searched. Some people look for truth from celebrities, singers and actors. Some look for truth from the latest best-selling book, or the latest motivational speaker.

Where do you go for truth? And do you expect that it is through the church that you will receive the truth? Is the church, insofar as it faithfully teaches the Word, your primary source for truth?

So what is the core truth that the church teaches? That is what we find in verse 16.

II. Remember the Truth of What the Church Believes

And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, Justified in the Spirit, Seen by angels, Preached among the Gentiles, Believed on in the world, Received up in glory.

Mystery in the Bible doesn't mean something mysterious or unsolved. It means something that was unknown before, but has now been progressively revealed. The truth that has steadily come to light. This is the great truth of godliness, or to put it in more familiar words: the great truth of true religion, the great truth of true worship, true piety, true devotion.

Paul says, these now-revealed truths of true religion are great, without doubt, without dispute. Anyone who understands would confess that these truths are great. What are they?

Paul gives us what was very likely an early church hymn, or possibly a creed. It is made up of six statements that come in three couplets, three pairs. You'll see the end of each of those pairs contrast each other in a poetic way: *in the flesh-in the Spirit, angels-Gentiles, the world – glory*.

But what this poem or hymn or creed does is summarise the great truth which is at the heart of the church, the great message of the Gospel. In its three stanzas it tells a story of an event, followed by an expansion, concluded by exaltation. The poem does not attempt to follow a strict chronology, it is following a theme.

The subject of this event and expansion and exaltation is, as you can see, God. Now you might be using a Bible version which does not have the word *God*, but has the word *he*. Why is that? Different Bible versions have relied on different families of ancient Greek manuscripts. The KJV and NKJV rely on the vast majority of Greek manuscripts, which has the word *God*, the Greek word *Theos*. But most of the modern versions rely on a minority of older manuscripts, which has the word “who” or “he”. The Greek word for *who* is the word *hos*, which is the same last letters of *Theos*. You can see how the omission or addition of just two letters can change *hos* to *theos*, who to God.

But it doesn't really change matters. Even if you take the word “who” to be the correct reading, all you have to do is work your way back into verse 15, to see what the antecedent of *who* would be, and the first name you meet there, is God. Whichever reading you take, verse 16 is all about God.

The Event: God enfleshed, and resurrected

God was manifested in the flesh, Justified in the Spirit

The most staggering event in human history is the moment when God appeared among us as one of us. There are few statements in the Bible as overwhelmingly powerful as this: God was manifested in the flesh. Like John 1, which tells us the Word was in the beginning and the Word was with God and the Word was God and then tells us in verse 14 that the Word became flesh.

If God became a man, then all religions and philosophies must hush and focus on that moment, on that event. The Creator becoming one of us demolishes any religion claiming multiple gods or claiming some other god. If God became man, then that man is the Way, and no other Way. The church carries the mighty truth that we believe the chosen nation of Israel predicted and prophesied the coming of Messiah, and when He came, He was no ordinary man. As Isaiah 9:6 put it :“For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His

shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6)

Now if God became man, this is simply the most important event in human history, and I cannot understand people who would want to talk about anything else. Unless you settle the matter of who Jesus Christ was, you are not being honest with history. You cannot overlook him.

And we know why He came. He came to provide atonement for sin, to pay our sin debt, to be our substitute. He came the first time, not to rule, but to serve, to be the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.

But how do we know Jesus was God in the flesh? After all, He had many enemies who accused him of being a blasphemer, being a Sabbath-breaker, practicing witchcraft, being a deceiver, being a rebel. And He then died a criminal's death: crucifixion, which was reserved for traitors, murderers, and the dregs of society. Those crucified were often not given burials, their bodies simply thrown on a rotting garbage heap. At the close of Friday, April 3, 33 A. D., Jesus of Nazareth looked like a failed religious revolutionary, a guilty man.

So how can we know He was God manifest in the flesh? Well, the second phrase tells us how. Justified in the Spirit

Justified here means to be declared innocent. To be acquitted of charges against you, to be judged to be a good and righteous person. Paul tells us in Romans 1:4 that Jesus was ⁴ declared *to be* the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of Holiness, by the resurrection from the dead. (Rom. 1:4)

The Resurrection was the Holy Spirit's vindication of Jesus. When Jesus rose from the dead, it was God saying, I find no fault in Him. The wages of sin is death, but Jesus had not spent one day in the employment of sin. He does not deserve its wages. The Resurrection was vindication that Jesus is the only holy man that has ever lived. The Spirit raised Jesus and vindicated His claims to be God manifest in the flesh.

His coming and His Resurrection, if you wish – Christmas and Easter – are the two most important events that have forever changed the world. But those events then led to the next phase, seen in the next two lines.

The Expansion: God seen and preached

Seen by angels, Preached among the Gentiles

This event was not done in secret, nor did it remain a secret. It was observed by angels in heaven, and heard by all the nations of the earth: Gentiles. Once God narrows the way of eternal life to one way, faith in His Son, He simultaneously expanded the preaching of this message to the whole world, no longer just Israel, but all nations. The Christian church carries the truth that we are to make disciples of all nations, expanding the name of Christ to the furthest reaches of the world. Maybe you've encountered someone who says, "Why can't you Christians leave us alone? Just live and let live. You have your religion, we have ours, stop trying to convert everyone." The answer to that is this: "We cannot, because we believe God was manifest in the flesh. We believe He rose from the dead. These were historical, actual events in history, and we cannot act like they did not happen. They change everything, and they mean whatever Jesus said and did and commanded is the truth for all men everywhere."

The event of God manifest, God vindicated had to lead to the expansion of God seen and preached. That, in turn, leads to the third phase

The Exaltation: God believed and exalted

Believed on in the world, Received up in glory

The result of this preaching is that people all around the world, for two millennia, have believed on Jesus as God manifest. They've believed without having been eyewitnesses, but because the Spirit of God has persuaded them. The Spirit continues to vindicate Jesus by persuading people across the earth, and so He is exalted. Knees are bowing and tongues confessing that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The last phrase refers to Jesus's ascension. Again, this isn't a strict chronology, here the ascension is mentioned as the ultimate visible form of the exaltation of Christ. When Jesus ascended, He clearly had all the things of earth beneath His feet, exalted above all, and going to the place where He would rule at the right hand of the Father.

We believe that God in the flesh who died and rose again is the ruler of all, and will return to judge and reign. That means there is a deadline on this whole story: time is running out for those who reject God. You cannot be a rebel forever in God's universe.

This is the truth which the church supports and teaches and protects.

Now this makes the church, without any qualification, the most important institution on earth. This is why in our church covenant, we covenant to give it a sacred pre-eminence over all institutions of human origin. Governments, companies, institutes, universities, think-tanks, non-profits, charities, public benefit organisations, these all come a distant second to the church. Why? Because the church is the only institution that Jesus said He would build. The church is what God is busy building and protecting and strengthening. As mundane as it might look on the outside, it is truly God's embassy on earth, His gathering, His temple, His household.

Maybe today you are in danger of falling into the trap that Lewis' demon Screwtape was setting for the Christian. Look at the ordinary, humble, outward appearance of the church, and fail to see its true, spiritual character. See the simplicity and worldly weakness of God's people and fail to see the church's true power. See the inconsistency and immaturity of Christians and fail to see the church's true eternal strength. And if you do that, you will fail to conduct yourself as you ought to within it. You will not pray for it and with it. You will not serve in it. You will not faithfully attend and support it. You will not sincerely worship within it. You will not heartily fellowship amongst it. Hold the church at arm's length, and you are holding the presence of God at arm's length.

Or you can see the truth. Within that ordinary looking book is the inspired Word of God. Clothed in ordinary Jewish clothes and appearance was God manifest in the flesh. And clothed in squeaky boots, double chins, and odd clothes is the house of God, the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.