

1 Timothy 3:14-16 A Sermon

Scott Lindsay

We are continuing this week with our study of Paul's First letter to Timothy, picking up at vs 14 of chapter 3 and working through to verse 16 of that same chapter. As we have seen repeatedly, Paul's over-riding theme in this book has been *to encourage Timothy* and to do so, specifically, by writing a letter designed to *promote the good order and functioning of the church*. Now, if you weren't here for the introductory sermon on this book, you may ask: Where do we get such an idea from? And the answer is - we got it from the letter itself. Indeed, it is the verses before us this morning which form the basis for our conclusions about the theme of this letter. And so part of what we will do this morning is to look again at Paul's statement of purpose.

But there is more to be found here than just the theme to this letter. We also see here a provocative definition of what the church is as well as a summary of the truths that define what is to be the very center of that church. And so we will spend some time exploring these realities as well - realities, I might add, which also serve Paul's purpose of promoting order and function since, after all, a church which is clear on its *identity* will have a far greater likelihood of being well-ordered than a church which is terminally vague and which has no earthly idea who it is, or what it ought to be doing. And so we have in these few verses a very rich section of Scripture and thus we must ask God to help us, once again, to make the most of this time as we explore His Word.

Let's pray....

Father in Heaven, **please Honor** Yourself now by condescending, once again, to interpret Your Word to our hearts in a way which **surpasses any human ability to convey truth and please use Your word as** a surgeon uses a scalpel to continue your gracious work in our hearts and to sculpt us so that we become more like Your Son.... In Jesus' name...

(Read 1 Timothy 3:14-16)

The first thing I want you to notice here is Paul's personal situation as reflected in his statement of purpose when he writes, "I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household".

Now, we know from comparing other letters in the New Testament and from the chronology of Paul's life in the book of Acts that 1 Timothy was written by a *mature* Paul. As such, the reference to his being "delayed", along with the words about "hoping to come soon" are almost certainly a reflection of the fact that Paul is aware of the

tenuous nature of his existence. This is a man who realizes that, in all probability, his death was not far away. And not just his death, but the death of all the founding apostles was looming before the whole church at this early stage of its history. After Paul, Peter, James and the others had passed away, that was it. There was not going to be any continuation of the apostolic office. Contrary to the teaching of some, there was/is no such thing as an "apostolic succession." If there had been then surely Paul would have said something about it. *Surely*, something as important as that would have at least rated a *mention* by the Apostle Paul or by any of the other apostles at some stage. But there's not a word about it, nor is there *anything* to suggest it in any of the New Testament epistles.

Instead, what you find in the New Testament are not statements about the continuation of the *apostolic office* but *other kinds of statements* about the *continuation of something else - the apostolic doctrine*. As an illustration of this, consider the kinds of things Paul says in this letter alone -

- 1:3 Paul talks about charging certain persons *not to teach any different doctrine*. Why does Paul not want them to teach any *different* doctrine? Because he wants them to hold on to the doctrine which *he passed on to them*.
- 1:10 Paul runs through a list of things which he says are "contrary to sound doctrine". Now you can only make a statement about things being *contrary* to sound doctrine if there exists somewhere a thing called "sound doctrine". Where do we find such sound doctrine? It is to be found in the Scripture and in the things that God has given to Paul to pass on to them.
- 3:9 Paul talks about deacons holding to the deep truths of the faith - a statement which implies the existence of some previously explained and embraced doctrinal standards.
- 4:1 ff In this section Paul talks about people "departing" from the faith and "deceitful spirits" and "teachings of demons" , etc - all of these being statements that assume and imply a received body of accepted truth over against which any sort of departure would be considered "deceitful" and would be seen as "the teaching of demons".
- 4:6 Paul talks here about Timothy being "trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that he has followed". Again, *that* there is a certain body of truth that Timothy has received from Paul is painfully obvious here.

I could go on and on. But the point is that if there is any kind of "succession" to be found in the New Testament - it is not a succession of persons in some sort of un-ending chain of humanity that can be traced back to one of the founding apostles. There is not a shred of biblical evidence for that. Rather, the only "succession" that the New

Testament knows anything about is a *succession* of truth that has been given to us through God's prophets and apostles, which has been handed on from them to their disciples, which has been reduced to writing and preserved forever in Scripture.

So, when Paul says, "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..." - when Paul says that kind of thing he is saying, in effect, "Look, in case I don't get there, I'm sending these instructions along, *in place of me...*" Right? Paul is preparing them for the time when he will NOT be there anymore - either now or sometime soon. Paul's expectation is that they will regard his *instructions* with the same authority that they would grant to *him*, had he been there in person. Paul's words, then, are not mere *suggestion*, but *bear the imprimatur of full apostolic authority*. They are a sure guide for our faith and practice and cannot be abandoned or jettisoned without suffering great consequences.

The second thing I want you to notice here are the three descriptions of the church that Paul uses in verse 15, referring to it as: 1) God's household, 2) the church of the living God and 3) the pillar and foundation of the truth.

Now the New Testament supplies us with a number of ways of thinking about the nature and purpose of the church. In the past we have looked at *some* of these descriptions, seeing that the church is:

- ...the place for forgiven sinners ...God's new nation
- ...the people of God
- ...doers of good
- ...the fellowship of the Spirit

So, we've looked at these kinds of things before. Here we see some additional words used to describe the church - words which both *overlap* with some things we have already seen and which also *add to* what we have already seen. Let's think about each of these descriptions separately, for a moment.

The first image Paul uses here is that of a *household*, saying that the church is "the household of God". If you have been paying attention, you will have noticed how in this letter, and in others, Paul has consistently described God's people as a family, referring to the men and women in the church as *brothers and sisters*. Further he has shown a consistent *parental* concern for them, sometimes calling them *his children*. Later on in this letter he will say that young men should learn to speak to older Christian men *as if they were their fathers*. He will say that older Christian women should be *treated as your own mother*. He speaks about those who work among the people of God as being *stewards* - a steward, as you know, being someone who was placed in charge of certain household responsibilities. And, as we have seen in previous messages, Paul draws some strong parallels between managing a household and managing a church in his description of elders' qualifications. And all of these things are because of this idea, you see, that the church IS God's household. And we are FAMILY. And one of the things that *makes us* a family is this common possession of the Holy Spirit, who unites around the truth of the Gospel.

This is something that I think provides us with some vital inroads into our culture. As the church, as God's family, we are a community that lives in the midst of a society that often *wants* community but does not really understand it, nor does it know how to go about achieving it in any sort of lasting way. But as Christians we *do* know something about this. We know that the only way that sinful people can hope for real community is through embracing the truth of the Gospel and living in relationship to the real God - the God who is.

Now, our culture may not accept or understand this connection between truth and community but they can recognize community when they see it. And so, as believers we need to take seriously the task of being God's family - not only because of who we are in the Body of Christ - but also because of the job we have been given to do - bringing the Gospel to *this generation* - a generation that is skeptical about truth but which values relationships before all else.

As we live out the Gospel in our manner of relating to one another, God can and does use those things to draw people to Himself. And as they move in closer, to get a better look, we have the opportunity to share with them the Gospel which makes us the family that we are.

So, the first phrase Paul uses to describe the church is to call it the *household* of the faith. The second phrase used here is "the church of the living God". That is, we are not the church of a dead, lifeless idol. We are not a church which, ultimately, is simply worshiping something created out of our own imaginations. We are not a church that is just leaning upon some cosmic psychological crutch which has no foundation in reality. We are not a church born of mass delusion. We are the church of *the God who is there* - as Francis Schaeffer once wrote - a living, real, personal, powerful God.

Now this idea certainly *overlaps* with the previous statement about the church being the household of God, but I think it is worth highlighting here because it seems to me that sometimes we forget *who owns whom*. Sometimes we forget that we are *God's possessions* and act as if *He is our possession*. We forget that this is *his church* and that he can do with it what *he pleases* - and he doesn't have to ask for either our approval or our permission. Even further, as much as we hate to admit it, the fact remains that God is not required to explain himself to us, nor is He required to let us in on why He does all the things that he does. Still further, He has every right to say what we - the people which form His church - may and may not do. Churches do not exist so that we can fashion them in our own image. They do not exist so that we can simply make of them whatever we will. Sometimes we need a strong reminder that we *are His possession* and that this is the church of *the living God*.

The third image here is contained in the expression, "the pillar and foundation of the truth" - another image which goes well with, and overlaps with, the previous statement about the church being God's household. Using more "architectural language" Paul likens the church to something which is used to support another thing - a pillar or column that supports the super-structure placed on top of it. Every time I read something like this, I can't help but think of the old movies about the Old Testament judge - Sampson - and how there is always this great closing scene where Sampson

places his hands on these two pillars and how God gave him strength to topple them and - as a result - the whole structure of this great building collapses in on him, killing him along with thousands of Philistines.

The church is something like those pillars in the Sampson story. It is a pillar which holds up something, and preserves something, which keeps something from disintegrating and crashing into a heap. What does the church uphold? - *the truth*. And notice that truth is not what the church IS, truth is what the church UPHOLDS. In other words, we do *not* believe that we are the truth, right? We do not believe that the truth is *in us*, at least not in any *generative* sense. No, we believe that truth is something that has *come to us* - from outside of us - it is something that has been given to us to guard and preserve and protect and proclaim and uphold. It is something that has been disclosed to us in the Scriptures and *personally* in the life and ministry of Jesus - who is the centerpiece of God's Word.

Paul did not want the Ephesian believers to forget this for a moment. And neither can we, thousands of years later, forget these things. Because the instant that we stop upholding the truth, the moment we abandon the truth or change the truth or become ashamed of the truth such that we hide it - or certain aspects of it - the moment any of that happens we cease to be the church of the living God - we are no longer "pillaring" truth but, instead, are merely *playing with it*.

As one writer has pointed out, a man named J Gresham Machen tried to make this point on numerous occasions in the 1940's and 50's - a time when LIBERALISM was raging in the mainline denominational churches (and still is in many places today). What so called "liberal Christian thinkers" were doing, and which grieved Machen so much, was gutting the church of any ultimate sense of truth, refusing to believe in the authority of Scripture and denying some of the most fundamental verities of the Christian faith. And what Machen kept saying to all these people, and to any who would listen, was that *there is no such thing as "liberal Christianity"*.

There is Christianity and then there is that which *masquerades as* such. But when a person abandons the historical truths of the Gospel and the authority of the Scriptures, they have *departed* from the Christian faith and they have *forfeited* the right to claim that label for themselves. A church or denomination that no longer "pillars" the truth ceases at that point to be a church and becomes, instead, merely another quasi-religious organization.

The church is the pillar and foundation of the truth and we have no right or authority to change it to suit our purposes or preferences. Which is why Paul, in a number of places, uses the language of *holding on* when he talks about our position as regards God's truth. Truth is something that must be *held on to* - we have to keep ourselves in check so that we do not abandon it, or leave certain bits of it behind. Why? Because that is the temptation that is placed before us all the time - to leave truth behind.

And what a subtle temptation this can be. It's not like there are people out there in our churches who are going around saying things like, "Let's just walk away from the Bible"

or "Let's just leave it all behind". No, that's far too obvious. But what IS happening and what DOES get said is, "Let's just leave *this part* behind. We've gotten past all of this. Our culture is very different today. And besides, I know what Scripture says about such and such, but look how well it is working over here. Surely, it wouldn't be working if it wasn't meant to be?" And so we argue from IS to OUGHT - which is completely backward. But that's how truth gets left behind. A little bit here. A little bit there.

Now, in our own day, in addition to what has already been said, perhaps one of the biggest attacks on truth that goes on both within and outside of Christian circles centers upon this concept of *tolerance* which is touted so loudly, by so many voices. As Don Carson puts it, we now live in a day and age where the only HERESY is the belief that there is heresy. The only person that will not be tolerated is the one that says that tolerating everything is wrong.

And we have to be careful about the ways in which this Gospel of Tolerance worms its way into our thinking. You see, it used to be the case that when people talked about "tolerance" they were referring to people. It used to be the case that being tolerant simply meant that you allowed people to have - and make known - views that were different than your own. You didn't have to agree with them. And they didn't have to agree with you. Further, it was assumed that you could freely debate the issues with them and argue one view over the other. It was assumed that you had the right to persuade them of their error and they of you. That's how tolerance used to be understood. And it worked fine for centuries.

But that's all changed now. Now when people talk about "tolerance" they are referring not to *people* but to *ideas*. Now it is the case that in order to be considered "tolerant" you have to put up with other people's ideas - you're not allowed to question them, you can't argue with them, you can't assume that your ideas are any better than anyone else's, and you *certainly* can't tell people that they are wrong. It is this sort of environment that has bred "political correctness" outside the church and baptized versions of that *within* the church - a type of "spiritual correctness" which is a sort of "Well, maybe they're right after all ... who am I to judge" kind of approach to everything. As if we don't have any means of thinking about things. As if the Scriptures do not say anything definite.

But if we are going to be *the church* - the real church - then we have to pillar the truth, we have to hold on to truth - all of it, even the parts we don't personally like, even the parts that seem so out of step with our particular culture, even the parts that contradict our own experience. We cannot let go of it, we cannot change it, we must not abandon it, and we cannot tolerate untruth, when it rears its ugly head.

Well, as soon as Paul finishes with these several descriptions of the church, he launches into verse 16 which, at first, may seem a bit awkward and even abrupt but which I believe is actually quite integral to what has preceded it in verses 14 and 15....

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.

Now, the awkwardness of this verse, in relation to what has just preceded it, is centered mostly on the word "godliness" which sort of "crashes the party" a little bit and seems to intrude into the verse un-announced and in a somewhat un-expected fashion. Paul does not, on the surface at least, seem to have been discussing the specific topic of godliness - and yet here he is now talking about the "mystery of godliness". So what's going on?

Well, for starters, while Paul has not explicitly used the word "godliness" in the verses before now, he has been talking a lot about how people ought to "conduct themselves" and has addressed the subject of the manner of one's living in various ways - talking about prayer, talking about clothing and appearances, talking about worship, talking about qualifications for elders and deacons - all of these can be seen within the general framework of a person's conduct and manner of living. So the idea of godliness is certainly not foreign to the text, even if the word is a little novel at this point.

But before we say anymore on how this all relates, let's take a minute to think about what is going on here in vs 16. When you look at these sentences in the Greek, you find a lot of similarity in their structure and arrangement - so much so that it appears that they come to us here as an intact unit - almost like an early creed or summary of the Christian faith which Paul is either echoing or else has put together himself for the church's benefit. At any rate, what you see in these short, almost poetic summaries, is an overview of Jesus' life and ministry. And, while many trees have died as scholars have attempted to fathom the depths of these words, the most likely understanding of them is that what we have here is six phrases - three sets of two - which are contrasting different aspects of Jesus life and work.

As John Stott has described it, in the first two phrases we see the *revelation* of Christ - in both its earthly and heavenly aspects. We see the fact that he *appeared in a body* - speaking of the incarnation, and the fact that he was *vindicated by the Spirit* - speaking of the way that in both his life and in his death we see the outworking of the Holy Spirit who verified and confirmed the divinity that accompanied his humanity.

In the second set of phrases we see the *witnesses of Christ* - and especially the resurrected Christ. Once again we see here both the earthly and heavenly aspects of this. He was *"seen by the angels"* - a phrase which most theologians have understood, in context, as a reference to his ascension to the right hand of the Father after his resurrection. But it is not only the heavens which are witnesses to the resurrected Christ, but the earth too as he was and is *proclaimed among the nations* - and so through the preaching of the Gospel the resurrected Lord is believed on and embraced by those in whom the Spirit works.

In the third set of phrases we see the *reception of Christ* - *i.e.*, we see what was the result or impact of the revelation and proclamation of Christ - again in both its earthly and heavenly aspects. From an earthly standpoint - he was *believed on in the world* and

from a heavenly standpoint he has been *taken up in glory* - i.e., being honored and given the highest place of all in the heavenly places. In short, what we have in these brief, pithy summaries is an overview of the Gospel.

So, let me try and pull some of these things together. Paul in these verses has described the church as the "pillar and foundation of the truth" As we have seen already, this refers to the church's central function of preserving and protecting and passing on the truth it has received. With these short summaries in vs 16 Paul is making it clear what the "guts" of this truth they have received is: *the truth of the Gospel, centered upon the significance of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.*

One commentator puts it like this, "in chapter 3, verses 1-13, you get instructions about elders and deacons. Paul takes those instructions and views them in the context of the wider church in verse 14 and 15, which they are to serve. Paul then goes on, in verse 16, to view the body of Christ in the light of the Gospel which it, as a whole, is meant to be serving. In other words, Paul is locating the proximate purpose (order in the church) within the context of the wider, more global purpose - to pillar or uphold the truth of the Gospel.

The embrace of and living out of the truth of the Gospel is what lies at the heart of true "godliness" or "God-like-ness" and is what, when kept in the center, will produce people who DO conduct themselves well within the household of the faith.

You think about that. (Apologies to Steve Brown)

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