

Living in God's Church Today

The Mystery of Godliness

1 Timothy 3:14-16

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Scripture

In the third chapter of his First Letter to Timothy, Paul set down the qualifications for church officers. He described the qualifications for overseers, also known as elders, in verses 1-7 and then the qualifications for deacons in verses 8-13. Paul then turned his attention to the church in which those officers serve. “For,” as commentator John Stott notes, “the nature of the ministry is determined by the nature of the church.”¹

Let us read 1 Timothy 3:14-16:

¹⁴ I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. (1 Timothy 3:14-16)

Introduction

If I were to ask you to define “church,” you may or may not have difficulty defining it, depending on your background and experience. Some people may say that it is where religious people gather to worship God. Others may say that it is an organization that tries to do good in the community. And still

¹ John R. W. Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 102.

others may say that it is a building in which people meet. In his article on “The Nature of the Church,” Dr. J. I. Packer writes as follows:

The Church of God, “that wonderful and sacred mystery” (Aquinas), is a subject that stands at the very heart of the Bible. For the Church is the object of the redemption which the Bible proclaims. It was to save the Church that the Son of God became man, and died (Eph. 5:25): God purchased his Church at the cost of Christ’s blood (Acts 20:28). It is through the Church that God makes known his redeeming wisdom to the hosts of heaven (Eph. 3:10). It is within the Church that the individual Christian finds the ministries of grace, the means of growth, and his primary sphere for service (Eph. 4:11–16). We cannot properly understand the purpose of God, nor the method of grace, nor the kingdom of Christ, nor the work of the Holy Spirit, nor the meaning of world history, without studying the doctrine of the Church.²

Today we are going to examine the nature of the Church. This is not by any means an exhaustive examination. We are going to look at just three descriptive expressions that Paul gave for the Church in 1 Timothy 3:14-16, each of which illustrates a different aspect of it.

Lesson

1 Timothy 3:14-16 shows us the nature of the church.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. The Church Is God’s Household (3:14-15a)
2. The Church Consists of People Called Out from the

² James I. Packer, “Basic Christian Doctrines: 36: The Nature of the Church,” *Christianity Today* (Washington, D.C.: Christianity Today, 1962), 886.

Unbelieving World (3:15b)

3. The Church Exists to Uphold and Proclaim God's Truth (3:15c-16)

I. The Church Is God's Household (3:14-15a)

The first truth we learn about the nature of the church is that the church is God's household.

Paul planted the church in Ephesus during the three years he served there (Acts 20:31). He trained a core of leaders to serve the church after he left (Acts 20:17ff). False teachers arose after he left, just as he had foreseen (Acts 20:29-30). After Paul's release from his first Roman imprisonment, he returned to Ephesus and dealt with two prominent false teachers (1 Timothy 1:20). Then he left Timothy to deal with the rest of the false teachers and to set the church in order, while he set out for Macedonia (1:3). Shortly after his departure, he wrote this letter to Timothy, to confirm in writing what he had said to him in person. Timothy was to correct the false teachers and build up the Ephesian church. That is why Paul wrote in verses 14-15a, **"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."**

It is likely that what Paul had written in his First Letter to Timothy was what he had taught the congregation in person. But it was good for the people to see it again in writing so that they would be assured that Timothy was not acting on his own but under the leadership and authority of Paul.

These verses express Paul's purpose in writing his letter to Timothy. He wanted to instruct Timothy on proper conduct in the church. Paul used three expressions in verse 15, and we shall look at each of these in turn. First, he mentioned **"the**

household of God.” The church is not a building. It is the people of God who are members of God’s family. John Stott helpfully summarizes what **“the household of God”** means:

By new birth of the Spirit we become members of the family of God, related to him as our Father and to all fellow believers as our sisters and brothers. Although Paul does not here draw out the implications of our being God’s household or family, he does elsewhere. He emphasizes that as God’s children we have an equal dignity before him, irrespective of age, sex, race or culture; and that as sisters and brothers we are called to love, forbear and support one another, enjoying in fact the rich “one another-ness” or reciprocity of the Christian fellowship.³

So, the first truth we learn about the nature of the church is that the church is God’s household.

II. **The Church Consists of People Called Out from the Unbelieving World (3:15b)**

The second truth we learn about the nature of the church is that the church consists of people called out from the unbelieving world.

The second expression that Paul used in verse 15b is **“the church of the living God.”** This is a fascinating expression.

The term **“the living God”** that was used fifteen times in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 5:26; Joshua 3:10; 1 Samuel 17:26; 17:36; 2 Kings 19:4; 19:16; etc.). In each instance, the term was used in contrast to the dead gods of the pagan nations surrounding the people of God. And where does this **“living**

³ John R. W. Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, 104.

God” live? Joshua answered and wrote, “...the living God is among you.” This is the foundational truth of God’s covenant promise to his people, “And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people” (Leviticus 26:12). God’s people in the Old Testament had a profound consciousness that God was alive and real and that he walked among them. He was no dead god! He was a **“living God”!**

Paul said that God’s people were **“the church of the living God.”** Now the word for **“church”** is also interesting. The Greek word for **“church”** (*ekklesia*) is a compound word made up of two words: “out of” (*ek*) and “to call” (*kaleo*). Therefore, one could say that **“church”** refers to “the called-out ones.” But “called out” from where? They are called out of the unbelieving world.

What Paul wrote to the Thessalonian church is a wonderful description of what he meant when he wrote to Timothy. Paul said of the Thessalonian believers that they had “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thessalonians 1:9). The living God calls people to himself out of the unbelieving world so that they can worship and serve him.

So, the first truth we learn about the nature of the church is that the church is God’s household. Second, the church consists of people called out from the unbelieving world.

III. The Church Exists to Uphold and Proclaim God’s Truth (3:15b-16)

And the third truth we learn about the nature of the church is that the church exists to uphold and proclaim God’s truth.

Paul wrote in verse 15c that the church is **“a pillar and buttress of the truth.”** Paul’s imagery may have referred to

the magnificent temple of Diana (also known as Artemis) that was in Ephesus (and was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world). William Barclay gives the following description of it: “One of its features was its pillars. It contained one hundred and twenty-seven pillars, every one of them the gift of a king. All were made of marble, and some were studded with jewels and overlaid with gold.”⁴ Each pillar stood over fifty feet high and acted as a tribute to the king who donated it.

The word **“buttress”** appears only here in the New Testament and refers to the foundation on which a building rests. Paul’s point is that the church rests on the word of God and upholds and proclaims the truth of God’s word to the world.

Having just mentioned the church and that it is **“a pillar and buttress of the truth”** (3:15), Paul burst forth with a liturgical statement of the apostolic church, which was a creed or hymn. It was an excerpt since it lacked a principal clause. Paul wrote in verse 16, **“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.”**

Here are six lines of an early church creed or hymn that are a concise summary of the truth of the gospel. Paul began by talking about the **“mystery of godliness.”** The word **“mystery”** normally means something that is concealed. However, in the New Testament, it means something that is revealed. That is, a truth that was *concealed* in the Old Testament was now *revealed* in the New Testament.

The Greek word for **“godliness”** occurs fifteen times in the New Testament and it means “the devout practice for, and

⁴ William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 89.

appropriate beliefs about, God.” So Paul was about to explain the revelation of the gospel truths about Jesus Christ.

Paul did so in six short lines. Verse 16 was most likely part of an ancient hymn. Commentators vary over how to interpret the lines. They suggest that the verse has 3 pairs of statements or 2 stanzas of three lines each. Rather than wrestle with a structure, let me proceed by suggesting that each of these 6 lines form a concise summary of the truth of the gospel.

First, incarnation. The first line is, **“He was manifested in the flesh”** (3:16b). The *King James Version* states that “God was manifested in the flesh” but the word “God” does not appear in the Greek text. The Greek text states, “Who was manifested in flesh.” This refers to Jesus and it is a statement about his incarnation.

Jesus’ incarnation is an incredible condescension by God to send his Son to remedy our sin problem. Jesus came as the second Adam. He had to live as a man and face all the temptations that the first Adam faced. We know the first Adam failed and fell into sin, thereby condemning all his progeny to a life of sin and misery. But Jesus never broke God’s law and was not able to be penalized for sin. And yet he did experience the penalty for sin. But that was for our sin and not for his sin. He became our substitute. He paid the penalty for our sin. And by our faith in him, we can receive pardon and forgiveness. That is why Jesus had to become a man.

Second, vindication. Paul wrote in verse 16c, **“vindicated by the Spirit.”** The Greek word for **“vindicated”** (*edikaiothe*) means “to be or become shown to be right by providing justification or proof.” It is likely a reference to the Holy Spirit who vindicated Jesus first by his mighty works, such as Jesus’ power over sin, nature, sickness, and even death. Then, the Holy Spirit supremely vindicated Jesus by his resurrection from the dead.

Third, observation. Paul wrote in verse 16d, **“seen by angels.”** Angels, both elect and fallen, observed Jesus’ incarnate life. Angels testified to his victory over death at his resurrection. Angels also saw Jesus’ ascension into heaven. Jesus now sits at the right hand of the Father and continues his rule over all the angels. Interestingly, the Greek word for **“angels”** (*angelos*) means “messenger” and it could refer to those disciples who were witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection and then went on to proclaim the good news of his resurrection. These **“angels”** were messengers who had seen the risen Christ and they were the ones who heralded the good news to the nations.

Fourth proclamation. Paul wrote in verse 16e, **“proclaimed among the nations.”** After his resurrection and ascension, the good news of the gospel about Jesus was proclaimed to all people. The Greek word for **“proclaimed”** (*ekeruxthe*) means “to be or become known publicly and loudly (as of important news announced by a herald).” And the Greek word for **“nations”** (*ethnesin*) means “a large group of people based on various cultural, physical, or geographical ties.” In some instances, the word is translated as “Gentiles,” that is, “an ethnic group or nation not allied with and trusting in the God of Israel.” So the gospel went from the Jews to the Gentiles. In other words, the gospel is for all people.

There are 197 countries in the world, of which 195 are members of the United Nations and 2 (the Holy See and Palestine) have observer status. Each country has at least some believers in it. However, if one defines a people group as those having various cultural, physical, and geographical ties, then according to Joshua Project, there are approximately 17,446 unique people groups in the world with 7,400+ of them considered unreached (over 41% of the world’s population!). The vast majority (85%) of these least reached groups exist in the

10/40 window and less than 10% of missionary work is done among these people. So, there is still a lot of work to be done to proclaim the good news of the gospel to all people.

Fifth, acceptance. Paul wrote in verse 16f, **“believed on in the world.”** As a result of the proclamation of the good news of the gospel to the various people groups (nations), the response is that individuals from those nations believed the proclamation.

Lifeway Research published an article in January 2022 titled, “7 Encouraging Trends of Global Christianity in 2022.” Christianity continues to grow around the world at a rate of 1.17%. That means that by 2050, over 3.33 billion people will identify as Christian. Interestingly, there are fewer atheists around the world today (147 million) than in 1970 (165 million), according to the 2022 Status of Global Christianity report. One very encouraging trend is that the percentage of non-Christians who know a Christian is climbing. In 1900, only 5.4% of non-Christians could identify a Christian they knew. Today, that number is 18.3%. By 2050, 1 in 5 non-Christians (20%) will know a Christian and have the opportunity to hear the gospel and believe in Jesus.

And sixth, glorification. Paul wrote in verse 16g, **“taken up in glory.”** After Jesus’ resurrection, he spent forty days with his disciples helping them to understand his life, death, and resurrection. What a wonderful season of training that must have been! Then when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” And when he had said these

things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:6-11). Jesus was taken up to heaven in a glorious manner. And he is now in heaven in glory, waiting for the Father to send him back to earth to gather his church. So, Paul’s statement **“taken up in glory”** refers to his ascension and exaltation, and it shows that the Father was fully pleased with all that Jesus had accomplished on earth.

Believers have a wonderful hope of seeing the glorified Jesus again. We will spend all eternity with him, beholding his glory and praising him for who he is and all that he has done for our salvation.

So, the first truth we learn about the nature of the church is that the church is God’s household. Second, the church consists of people called out from the unbelieving world. And third, the church exists to uphold and proclaim God’s truth.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the topic of the church in 1 Timothy 3:14-16, let us participate actively in the life and ministry of the church.

The first way to participate actively in the church is by becoming a member of God’s family. Turn to Jesus in faith and repentance.

And then the second way to participate in the church is by using the gifts God has given you to serve him and his people. Let me encourage you to do so today. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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