

Proposition: According to 1 Timothy 3:14-16, we have three distinctives that make the church a special place to be.

- I. We have a distinct authority (14-15a).
 - A. It shows us how to know God.
 - B. It shows us how to live for God.
- II. We have a distinct identity (15b).
 - A. The church is God's household.
 - B. The church is an assembly.
 - C. The church is a pillar.
 1. Our job isn't to invent truth.
 2. It's to uphold the truth.
- III. We have a distinct message (16).
 - A. Godliness is linked to a person.
 - B. Godliness is linked to what He did.
 1. He was revealed as a man.
 2. He was vindicated by the Spirit.
 3. He was beheld by angels.
 4. He was preached among the nations.
 5. He was believed on in the world.
 6. He was taken up in glory.

Implications: Remember two things...

1. Though the church isn't perfect, it's special to God.
2. What makes it special is Christ.

Do you remember the old adage: "Liars figure, and figures lie."? There's probably an important insight there, but the following statistics still alarm me. A religious survey appeared in a newspaper a few years ago, and revealed something quite alarming. On the one hand, 84 percent of those surveyed said they believed that Jesus is divine. However, only 44 percent of the responders said they believed the church has any relevance today. That's quite a disparity.¹

I happen to believe the church is a special place to be. I think you do, too, or you wouldn't be here. But why? What would you say to a critic of the church?

What's so special about the church? We find a marvelous answer to that question in 1 Timothy 3:14-16. According to our text, we have three distinctives that make the church a special place to be.

I. We have a distinct authority (14-15a).

Listen to verses 14-15, "Although 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, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth."

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹from Ken Hemphill, *The New Church Game*, p. 27.

In my estimation these are the theme verses for the letter we call 1 Timothy. Paul wrote this epistle to one of his most trusted ministry associates, Timothy. 1 Timothy is called a *pastoral* epistle because it deals with matters of church life.

Timothy was in Ephesus. Paul was miles away in Macedonia. Apparently, the Ephesian church was struggling with some issues, as all churches do. In their case the issues were things like leaders who promoted unbiblical notions rather than the Scriptures (1:3), the neglect of prayer in worship services, confusion over the roles of men and women in the church, the need of guidelines for a benevolent ministry, and wrong attitudes towards money--to name a few.

Paul hoped to come soon to Ephesus and personally deal with these matters. But until God allowed him to make the trip, this letter would give the necessary guidance for dealing with the challenges.

A few weeks ago I spent a week in a continuing education class with about eighteen pastors. The men came from several states and pastored established churches ranging from 60 to over 7,000 in size. I benefited greatly from the iron-sharpening, and was impressed by one key lesson. Regardless of size or geographic location, every church faces challenges, even problems.

Please realize there is no such thing as a problem-free church. A good church is not a church without problems. It's a church that deals with its problems in a God-honoring way.

And here's what makes the church, even with its problems, such a special place to be. We have a distinct authority for dealing with problems. What is it? It's God's Word, the Bible. "I am writing you these instructions," Paul told Timothy.

What makes the Bible so distinct anyway? Two things...

A. It shows us how to know God. "As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word that you may grow by it (1 Pet. 2:2)." "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3:18)."

That's what happened in Timothy's life, as Paul reminded him in 2 Timothy 3:14-16, "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful..."

Where do you turn if you want to know God? To His revelation of Himself, to His Word. The Bible shows us how to know God. Secondly...

B. It shows us how to live for God. Notice the purpose clause at the end of verse 14, "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."

The Bible introduces us to the Lord, and then enables us to know how to live for Him. As such, the Bible is God's owner's manual for living.

It's not always easy to know what to do. The Ephesian church was facing some challenges. Paul said he hoped to come "shortly." It would be great to have an apostle of Christ, an eyewitness of the Risen Savior who received special revelation from Him, to help us deal with our problems, wouldn't it? But we do.

Paul states that he wrote this letter for what reason? As the KJV puts it in verse 15, "That thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God." The

"you" ("thou" in the KJV) is singular, indicating that this is a personal word for Timothy. Timothy needed to know some things so he could help the church know how to behave.

God's interested in our behavior, in how we live. In His Word, He shows us how to live in a way that will please Him.

Let's be practical. Who or what determines what kind of conduct is appropriate in the church or in our lives as individuals? Public opinion? No. God's Word does, right? Behavior is determined by God's Word, not people's ideas.

God doesn't intend His Church to operate like so many secular institutions do. For years, my father was a high school administrator. I used to watch him come home from work many evenings, and go for a long walk to unwind from the tension of decision-making in a dog-eat-dog workplace. When there's no ultimate authority, the horn that makes the most noise gets the ear. So teachers make noise. Students make noise. Parents make noise. Administrators make noise. That's how decisions are made. And if we're not careful we'll be inclined to think that that's how decisions should be made in the church.

But brothers and sisters in Christ, God has a higher standard for His Church. He's given us a distinct authority, His holy Word. That means we need to rethink the way we "do business" in the church. When we find ourselves asserting, "Well, I've got a right to express my opinion around here," we need to remember what we did with our "rights" when Christ became our Lord. We gave them to Him. We do have a "right." It's this-- We have a right to search the Scriptures, to find out what God's Word says, and to devote ourselves to making sure the church does that.

By the way, that's how you get biblical unity in a church. It'll work in a church of 50 or 5,000. When the members of a congregation say individually, "What I want doesn't matter. Let's discover what the Word of God says and then do it," then you'll see unity.

I tell couples this in pre-marriage counseling. It's the "triangle" principle. Two objects that are moving towards the same third object will in turn move closer to each other.

Beloved, that's the first distinctive that makes the church such a special place to be. We have a distinct authority. The world takes a "poll" to determine what's right, but we have God's unchanging Word. The world listens to CNN's approval ratings to make sense of issues, but we have "God's ratings," the sufficient Scriptures. A distinct authority...

II. We have a distinct identity (15b).

Who are we? God uses three images in verse 15 to communicate the distinct identity we enjoy as a church.

A. The church is God's household. We are the "house of God." It's a family term. It's not referring to the building (for the first two centuries the early church didn't even have buildings; they met in homes). The church is people. And God has chosen to make the church His special dwelling place.

In the OT, where was God's special place of dwelling? The temple. But now we are His temple. "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple (1 Cor. 3:16-17)"

What a perspective to have! The church is where God lives. Peter wrote, "As you come to him, the living Stone--rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him--you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house... (1 Pet. 2:4-5)."

B. The church is an assembly. Verse 15 continues, "God's household, which is the church of the living God." The word *church* comes from the Greek term *ekklesia* which simply means "assembly." The term was general enough to refer to political assemblies in the Greek cities (Acts 19:29, 32). But in the NT it is used about 100 times to refer to local churches, assemblies of Christians.

Churches are assemblies, but special assemblies. What brings us together is not a political agenda, nor a social agenda. But as the text says, we are an assembly "of the Living God." What brings us together is the Living God and what He has done.

Literally, the word *ekklesia* means "those called out" (*ek + kaleo*). Just think of it. The Living God has called us out of this world unto Himself. We are an assembly of people who don't belong to ourselves. We belong to the Living God.

The world worships dead idols. We belong to the Living God! Jeremiah wrote, "The Lord is the true God; He is the living God and the everlasting King (Jer. 10:10)." The psalmist announced, "My soul thirsts for God, for the Living God (Ps. 42:2)." We are an assembly of people, once dead in sin, who now belong to the Living God!

C. The church is a pillar. "The pillar and foundation of the truth," as verse 15 concludes. This imagery would have meant much to Timothy and the Ephesian congregation. Why? Because in Ephesus where they lived was the impressive temple of Diana. It had 127 pillars, each one of them the gift of a king. It was one of the seven wonders of the world (Barclay, 89). The pillars were made of marble, and some were studded with jewels and overlaid with gold. Yes, the Ephesians knew how beautiful a pillar could be.

Yet guess what? The church is a pillar. What kind of pillar? "The pillar and foundation of the truth." The pillars in Diana's temple were a testimony to the error of paganism, but we exist to be a testimony to what? The truth. God's truth. God's revealed truth as expressed in the Scriptures and summarized in the gospel.

What are we to do with the truth according to verse 15? We are both the pillar and foundation ("ground" in the KJV) of the truth. What does that mean?

Wiersbe suggests that the *pillar* aspect of the church's ministry relates to displaying the truth of the Word, much as a statue is put on a pedestal for all to see. We're called to "hold forth the Word of life" for all to see (Phil. 2:16).

Simultaneously, the church is the *foundation*, or the "bulwark" of the truth. The term refers to that which is the support of a building, the buttress. As such the church is to protect the truth and make sure it doesn't fall. There's the danger of turning from the truth (which Paul will address beginning in 4:1ff.). As Wiersbe summarizes, "Sometimes church leaders must take a militant stand against sin and apostasy. This does not make them popular, but it does please the Lord (223)."

So we have a dual task as a church.

1. *Our job isn't to invent truth.* So our aim isn't to be novel.
2. *It's to uphold the truth.* It's to guard what's been given to us. It's to support the truth which the Holy Spirit revealed through the prophets and apostles.

As a pillar, we present the truth to an onlooking world. As a bulwark, we protect the truth from an ever-present attack. Our task, then, is to uphold the truth.

You say, "How can I personally do that as a Christian? How can I uphold the truth?"² First, by believing it. You can't uphold what you don't believe. In Acts 24:14 Paul testified, "I do serve the God of our fathers, *believing* everything that is in accordance with the Law, and that is written in the Prophets."

Second, by reading it. It's not enough to hear the Word on Sunday. Do you have a regular Bible reading schedule? "How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word (Ps. 119:9)."

Third, by memorizing it. "Your word have I hidden in my heart that I might not sin against You," the psalmist wrote in Psalm 119:11.

Fourth, by meditating on it. Joshua 1:8 explains, "This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you should meditate on it day and night so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it..." If you're going to uphold God's truth, you must digest it, internalize it, mull over it, reflect on it, meditate on it.

Fifth, we uphold it by studying it. "Study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15)."

Sixth, by living it. Titus 2:10 says we are to "adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect."

Seventh, by defending it. Paul told the Philippians he was "appointed for the defense of the gospel (Phil. 1:16)." The truth will always be attacked, and as a church we must be ready to defend it.

And eighth, by making it known. Jesus gave us this charge in the Great Commission, "In your going, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you...(Matt. 28:19-20)."

Yes, as a church we have a great treasure in our deposit. That's part of why the church is such a great place to be! Does the church have warts? Sure. Are there problems? Since day one. But it's still a great place to be. Why? Because we have three distinctives: a distinct authority, a distinct identity, and now the third...

III. We have a distinct message (16).

Verse 16, "Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory."

Much like we do, the early church would sing its theology. Philippians 2 is a likely example of a Christological hymn. Here's another.

The lyrical quality of this hymn is missed in the English translation, but is most impressive in the Greek (Guthrie, 89). It is comprised of three stanzas of two lines each.

It's not a complete creed, for it doesn't even mention the doctrines of the cross and the resurrection, those being assumed. Like any hymn it doesn't say all there is to say about the Lord--that's not its intent. Its aim is to express a third amazing distinctive.

²See MacArthur, p. 137.

The church is a special place to be because we have a distinct message. It's a message about godliness. About how God brings sinners--no matter how wicked they have been--into a relationship with Himself. That's a mystery to the world. In fact, prior to this "church age," it was a mystery to God's people, too. The mystery of godliness is great. But we know it!

There may be a play on words here. There's a story told in Acts 19 about a riot that occurred in Ephesus a few years before this. When pagan merchants feared losing business to Christians, they stirred up a mob and cried, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" (Acts 19:28) There is archaeological evidence that this was a regular cult acclamation in Ephesus in the first century. Perhaps Paul had heard it, and now wants to set the record straight: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians? No. Great is the mystery of godliness!"

We learn two insights about godliness from verse 16. First...

A. Godliness is linked to a person. Jesus Christ. You can't legislate godliness. Morality, maybe (the threat of the sword is a powerful deterrent to stealing your neighbor's chariot!). But godliness, no. Mankind can create religion, but not godliness. Godliness is linked to a person, to one person as we'll see momentarily.

B. Godliness is linked to what He did. To Jesus' redemptive work. As sinners, we could never become godly on our own. Our only hope is what Jesus did for us.

That's the distinct message we have to offer to this world, the hope of a life that pleases God now and a life in the presence of God forever. We possess the message of godliness.

What did Jesus do that made godliness possible? The hymn of verse 16 shows us by taking us on a walk through His life. Paul uses six passive verbs to depict what happened to Jesus so that we might experience the mystery of godliness--six truths about our Lord.

1. *He was revealed as a man.* The song begins, "He appeared in a body." "God was manifest in the flesh," as the KJV puts it. The invisible God robed Himself with human flesh (John 1:14). Flesh doesn't refer here to sinful, fallen nature, but to humanness. God became a human. "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity [why?] so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death, that is the devil (Heb. 2:14)."

It's no wonder that cults and false religions attack the deity of Jesus Christ. It's intrinsic to our message. If Jesus wasn't God, there is no hope of godliness. But He is! And He was revealed as a man. Secondly...

2. *He was vindicated by the Spirit.* The KJV says "justified (from the same term used in Romans to depict what happened to us, *dikaiao*)." What does that mean? How could a sinless Savior be justified? The term means "to declare righteous." Commentators offers various interpretations. I think it's a reference to the Holy Spirit's vindicating work in Jesus' life.

When Jesus was baptized, the Spirit came on Him like a dove (Matt. 3:16). Then came the message from heaven, "This is my beloved Son!" Jesus was no mere self-appointed Savior. His ministry was vindicated (or declared right) by the Spirit. Ultimately, His "rightness" was demonstrated in the resurrection, as Paul explains in Romans 1:4: "Who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord."

3. *He was beheld by angels.* When? The verb means "to see, to visit, to observe, to attend to." Angels were present at His birth (Luke 2:9). They ministered to Him at His wilderness temptation by "attending to" Him (Matt. 4:11). An angel appeared and strengthened Jesus while in the agony of Gethsemane (Luke 22:43). Angels were at the empty tomb, too (Luke 24:4).

Even fallen angels saw Him according to 1 Peter 3:18-20. After His death on the cross, Jesus apparently visited the place where certain demons are kept imprisoned and proclaimed His triumph over them (Col. 2:15).

Thus, Jesus was beheld by angels. 1 Peter 1:12 indicates that "even angels long to look into these things."

4. *He was preached among the nations.* We mustn't forget that a Jewish Messiah has become a Messiah for the nations. Before Jesus left the earth, He told His followers to proclaim Him to the world (Acts 1:8). And they did.

By the time Paul penned 1 Timothy, thirty years had passed, and the disciples had preached Christ literally among the nations.

5. *He was believed on in the world.* First by the twelve, then by the 120. Then by 3,000 in Acts 2. The number swelled to 5,000 in Acts 4:4. Acts 5:14 says that "more and more men and women believed in the Lord" (the number was getting too high to count!). Jesus was believed on from Jerusalem to Rome. And beyond.

Beloved, what Jesus did doesn't help you until you do what countless others have done--until you *believe* (Eph. 2:8). Do you believe?

6. *He was taken up in glory.* Please notice that the story of Jesus begins in heaven and ends in heaven. God the Son left the glories of heaven to robe Himself with the rags of humanity, but He's no longer in rags, is He? He who extended His hands to the nails of the soldiers, and He whose body was laid on the cold slab of Joseph's unused tomb is now seated in heaven, receiving the glory He deserves, the glory He left to rescue us. Is He receiving glory from your life?

Beloved, now do you see why the church, with all its imperfections, is such a special place? God has so graciously given us a distinct authority (His precious Word), a distinct identity (we are God's household, the assembly of the living God, the pillar of the truth), and we have a distinct message (the message of godliness through Jesus Christ).

We're living in a cynical age. It's the "in" thing to mock institutions--the government, the family, even the church. I hope you love the church. I hope you prize the church. The Lord does.

Implications: Remember two things...

1. *Though the church isn't perfect, it's special to God.* I thank God for the church, for *this* church. Yes, we've faced some recent challenges, but the church is still a special place to be. Why? Because though the church isn't perfect, it's special to God. And #2...

2. *What makes it special is Christ.*