

In his book, “No Place for Truth, or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?”, David Wells argues that the church is weak because it has “exchanged the sensibilities of modern culture for the truth of Christ”. If Wells is right, then the church is no longer the church. For in the process of explaining his purpose for writing to Timothy, the apostle Paul defines the church by its relationship to the truth: “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” (vv.14-15).

Paul was planning to visit Ephesus before long. But in case he was delayed, he wanted Timothy to know how to carry out his pastoral duties in the meantime. Since 1Timothy was a public letter, it seems that he also wanted to remind the Ephesians to support their pastor by behaving themselves in the household of God. Looking back at what we have already seen in 1Timothy, the kind of conduct the apostle has in mind includes proper doctrine (1:1-20), proper gender relations (2:1-15) and proper spiritual leadership (3:1-7).

1. God’s Household

Paul is addressing proper conduct in “God’s household”. The members of the true church are sons and daughters of God the Father - brothers and sisters in Christ. Each and every one of us has a place of fellowship and service in God’s household. But the church is not simply God’s household - it is also his house. It is “the church of the Living God”. The church is the house that God built. Remember Paul’s words to the Ephesian church in an earlier letter, “And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Ephesians 2:22). This must have been a special encouragement to the Christians in Ephesus. The temple of Diana in Ephesus was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. But however impressive it seemed from the outside, it was utterly devoid of life. The goddess in the temple was nothing more than a dead idol. By contrast, Paul wanted to remind the Ephesians that the church of Jesus Christ is the real temple. The living God lives among his people, by His Spirit, especially in their public worship. Whenever visitors enter a church where the Spirit of God is present with the people of God in worship, they say, “Surely God is in this place!”

The church is not only a home for God and for his people - it is also a home for God’s truth. Paul continues his temple imagery with a third definition of the church: “the pillar and foundation of the truth”. Roman Catholic theologians often use this verse to argue against the Reformation doctrine of sola Scriptura. They say, “See the church is the foundation for the truth. Therefore, Scripture (the Bible) is not the only rule of faith and practice. We must obey church tradition as well as the Bible.” One problem with the Catholic view of this verse is that it forgets Ephesians 2:19-20, where Paul says: “.....you are.....fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief corner stone”. The ultimate bedrock foundation of the church is the Word of God spoken by the prophets of the Old Testament, written by the apostles of the New Testament, and made incarnate by God’s own Son. How can the church be the foundation of the truth if the truth is the foundation of the church?

The word translated “foundation” in the NIV, actually is better translated “buttress”. A buttress is not a building’s foundation, but part of its supporting structure. To be specific, a buttress helps to stabilize the walls and pillars of a large building. The architectural function of pillars is well known - they hold up the roof. So to say that the church is the pillar and buttress of the truth is to say that it lifts up the truth for all the world to see. Over against the Roman Catholic view that the church determines the truth, the Bible teaches that the church displays the truth. It may be significant that the Greek omits the definite article - verse 15 should read “a pillar” rather than “the pillar”. Every Christian congregation is one pillar of truth. Every church is a pillar that helps to bolster the truth

(1Timothy 3:14-16; Ephesians 2:19-22; Acts 1:1-11)

of Jesus Christ by holding it up for the world. But for the truth to be fully displayed, every church, every pillar must play its part.

2. The Mystery of Godliness

If the church is a pillar and buttress of the truth, it needs to know what the truth is, and the truth is a great mystery: "Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great". When the Bible uses the word "mystery", it is not referring to something that is unsolved, but to something long hidden that has now been revealed. In the Bible, a mystery is the secret plan of redemption which is no longer secret because God has revealed it. The mysteries concerning Jesus Christ are profound. The greatness of the mysteries of the gospel is demonstrable and undeniable. There is no doubt about it. The mysteries of the gospel are great by common consent. This is the truth that the church is called to uphold in the world: the saving mystery of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The mystery of Jesus Christ is described in 6 lines that sound like part of an early creed, confession or catechism. These lines deserve careful study, especially since scholars disagree about how they should be divided. One suggestion is to separate the creed, or perhaps hymn (since the lines are rhythmic and their first words all rhyme), into 2 stanzas of 3 lines each. The first stanza refers to the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ (he "appeared", was "vindicated" and "seen"), while the second stanza refers to the work of Jesus Christ after his ascension (he was "preached", "believed on" and "taken up"). Other scholars point out that the lines come in pairs or couplets. However, since it is not certain how to sub-divide this verse of Scripture, perhaps it is better not to try. This creed or hymn is a short history of Jesus Christ. It contains the gospel truth about his work of salvation in outline form. Each line describes a different period or event in his life and ministry. Therefore, it seems best to understand these statements in chronological order.

(a) "He appeared in a body"

God the Son had lived in all the splendour of his deity from eternity past. Then he became a man, identical to us in his physical body. This is the mystery of the incarnation: God the Son became the God-man. By taking upon himself human flesh and blood, he became one person with two natures: a divine nature and a human nature. Since God the Son appeared as a man, everything he did on this earth he did in a real human body. The events of the passion of Jesus Christ were physical events. As Peter says in his first letter, "Christ suffered in his body" (1Peter 4:1). Christ even died in the flesh. It was a real body that was nailed with real nails to a cross of real wood. It was a real body that was punished for sin. Then it was a real body - a corpse - that was taken down from the cross, wrapped in linen, and laid in a tomb. God the Son did not just appear in a body - the body in which he appeared was crucified, dead and buried.

(b) "Vindicated by the Spirit"

God the Son did not remain in the grave, however, he was "vindicated by the Spirit". In other words, the Holy Spirit confirmed and proved that Jesus Christ is God's own Son and the Saviour of the world by raising him from the dead. The resurrection was such an important event that it required the work of each and every member of the Trinity. God the Father raised God the Son from the dead by the power of God the Holy Spirit: "for Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit" (1Peter 3:18). The Holy Spirit was the one who gave life and glory to the dead body of Jesus Christ.

When the Holy Spirit raised Jesus from the dead, he confirmed that everything Jesus ever said or did was true. Although Jesus Christ was rejected by the world, he was approved by the Spirit. The word for "vindication" is also the word for "justification". In this case, it means that by his resurrection Jesus was declared to be the Son of God and the Saviour of the world. The resurrection was the Holy Spirit's verification that Jesus is the Christ.

(1Timothy 3:14-16; Ephesians 2:19-22; Acts 1:1-11)

(c) “Seen by angels”

After Jesus was “vindicated by the Spirit”, he was “seen by angels”. The word “angels” usually means what it says. It refers to the principalities and powers of the unseen world, especially those glorious, supernatural creatures who worship God in heaven and serve him on earth - the angels. We know from the gospels that some of the angels were witnesses of the incarnate Christ. As one commentator has put it: “These ministering spirits sang at his birth, ministered in the hour of his temptation, guarded his sepulchre, attested his ascension, and expected his return”. The reason for mentioning the angels here is to show that the mystery of godliness is known in heaven as well as on earth. Although the angels themselves are not saved by grace, they glorify God for our salvation, as they are doing this very moment.

There is, however, another possible meaning for this line of Paul’s creed of hymn. The word “angel” simply means “messenger”. Hence it is an appropriate word for God’s heavenly messengers - but it can also refer to his earthly messengers, meaning the apostles. The apostles were eyewitnesses of the life and work of Jesus, and especially of his resurrection. In fact, the Greek word Paul uses here for “seeing” is the same word he uses when he tells the Corinthians that the risen Christ “appeared” to Peter and the rest of the apostles, including Paul himself (1Corinthians 15:5-7). When the first Christians confessed that Jesus was seen by messengers, therefore, they may have been referring to the apostles. Although dismissed by many commentators, this possibility is in keeping with the logic of the hymn. The next thing Jesus did after he appeared in a body and was vindicated by the Spirit was to show himself to Peter, John, and the rest of the disciples, including Thomas.

The post resurrection appearances of Jesus were essential to the plan of salvation. In order for the apostles to know that Jesus was the Christ, they had to see his glorious resurrection body. Otherwise, they would not have been able to testify that he had won the victory over the grave. Without their eyewitness testimony, we ourselves would never believe in the resurrection, and the church of the living God would not be able to stand as a pillar and buttress to the gospel truth. The same cannot be said of the angels and their testimony. They glorified God when they saw the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But our faith rests upon Jesus’ presentation of himself to the apostles, not the angels.

(d) Preached among the nations

There is another reason for thinking that “messengers” may refer to the apostles. Notice what comes next: Jesus was “preached among the nations”, meaning all the Gentile peoples of the world. This clearly refers to the apostolic preaching of the gospel. Having seen the risen Christ, the apostles preached the risen Christ. The apostles received the commission to do this from Jesus himself. Before he ascended into heaven, Jesus said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:18-20a). The apostles began to fulfil this commission at Pentecost. But Pentecost was only the beginning of the world wide work of the gospel. Jesus Christ was preached, not only in Jerusalem, but in Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Jesus is preached among the nations to this very day. This is part of the great mystery of godliness. What the church is doing at this moment in history is essential to God’s plan for the redemption of the world. The gospel is going to the nations as the good news about Jesus Christ is proclaimed to every tribe, people and language.

(e) Believed on in the world

Wherever Jesus Christ is proclaimed, he is “believed on in the world”. The first to believe were the first eyewitnesses of the resurrection - even Thomas, in spite of all his initial doubts. As soon as the apostles began to preach the gospel to the nations, others began to believe as well. Nearly 3,000 people believed on the Day of Pentecost alone. As the first

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church in Jerusalem continued to preach the gospel, we are told that “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). It has been that way ever since. It is doubtful whether a single day has gone by since the day Jesus rose from the tomb without people coming to him in faith, giving their lives to him.

The confession in 1 Timothy 3:16 makes a historical claim: “he was believed on in the world.” But this statement is for the present as well as the past because God is still making history. He will continue to bring men, women and children to salvation in Christ until history comes to an end. In fact, if you trust in Jesus Christ for your salvation, then this verse is about you as well. You are in the world. You believe on him. Therefore, your faith is one proof that Jesus is believed on in the world.

(f) Taken up in glory

The only problem with taking Paul’s hymn or creed about the mystery of godliness in chronological order is the last phrase: he was “taken up in glory”. This seems to refer to the ascension. In fact, the same verb is used in the book of Acts, in 1:9, to describe the way Jesus ascended to heaven. The problem is that this seems to be out of sequence: Jesus was “taken up in glory” before he was “preached among the nations” or “believed on in the world”. One possible solution is that “taken up in glory” refers to the second coming of Jesus Christ. When Jesus returns to this earth he will come the way he left, trailing clouds of glory, to gather all his people to himself. The reason this is put in the past tense is that it is such a certainty. Jesus has promised to come again in power and glory, and he will undoubtedly do so.

The important thing, in any case, is that Jesus has become the glorified Christ. By virtue of his resurrection, Jesus is exalted and enthroned. He radiates the glory of God. What better way to end a hymn or creed than with the glorious praise of the glorious Christ.

The truth that the church holds out to the world is the mystery of the incarnation (“appeared in a body”), resurrection (“vindicated by the Spirit”), presentation in his resurrection body (“seen by angels”), mission (“preached among the nations”), reception as Saviour and Lord (“believed on in the world”) and glorification (“taken up in glory”) of Jesus Christ. The only thing left to say about this mystery is that it is a mystery “of godliness”. In other words, this hymn or confession contains practical truth - it promotes the worship of God and encourages the living out of our faith.

What does it mean, then, to live worthily of the mystery of godliness? Since Jesus “appeared in a body”, let us glorify him with our bodies. Let us use our hands to help, our lips to bless and build up, and our minds to serve. Since Jesus “was vindicated by the Spirit”, let us pray that we ourselves will be vindicated on the day of judgment. Let us ask God to prove that we belong to him by giving us glorious resurrection bodies. And let us be thankful for the gift of the Holy Spirit, who is “a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance” (Ephesians 1:14). Since Jesus was “seen by messengers”, let us join the angels and the apostles in their worship around his throne. Since Jesus was and is “preached among the nations”, let us testify to his grace, declaring the gospel to everyone we know and sharing in the worldwide work of missions, so that all peoples might praise him. Since Jesus was and is “believed on in the world”, let us believe on him with all our hearts for salvation as well as for everything else we need. Last of all, since Jesus was “taken up in glory”, let us await his return with eager expectation, living holy and godly lives and longing for the day when we will see the great mystery for ourselves.

Amen