

“DON’T MESS WITH GOD’S CHURCH”

1 Timothy . 3:14-16

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We are surrounded by mysteries. Life is immersed in mysteries.

Every year we discover new mysteries. There are awesome phenomena we have not been able to explain.

Your body is composed of gazillion atoms, and each atom is made up of a dense nucleus surrounded by a system of electrons. What would happen if each electron in your body were increased to the size of an egg? You would be so enormous that our entire solar system would fit on the tip of your finger and you’d need a microscope to see the planets.

We are always learning more and more about the infinitesimal intricacies of our bodies and the amazing enormity of the universe, but still we don’t understand it. There’s mystery in it.

· The most mystifying of all mysteries are about God. That’s a fact, whether you grew up in a Christian home or not

At some point you learned about God who is invisible, but who sees everything you do.

You learned that God loves you. But God is the only person who loves you that you cannot see or hear or touch or smell.

A little girl named Lucy wrote a letter to God: *‘Dear God: Are you really invisible or is that just a trick?’* (Hample and Marshall, *Children’s Letters to God*)

· Even before I could understand what it means to have a relationship with God by faith, I had this strange relationship with a mystery.

The Bible tells us about a mystery. It is the hidden purpose of God that cannot be discovered by searching. It can only be discerned through divine revelation.

· The best mystery of all is the one we observe at Christmas time. It’s the mystery of the Incarnation. The infinite God chose to submit to the limitations of finite humanity to save us from sin.

God’s Word tells us about Mary’s miraculous conception and the birth of her baby who was Immanuel, God with us. Nobody can explain it. It’s a mystery; it’s amazing.

But we know it’s real. The evidence is incontrovertible. We have experienced the power of this mystery in the change that that comes with faith in Christ.

· In our Bible text this morning the Apostle Paul calls this a great mystery.

14. *Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that,*

15 *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.*

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.*

This mystery is the centerpiece of our faith. It’s the core of the gospel—the good news for the whole world.

God has entrusted this truth to his church.

This is so important that the most reprehensible offense in the world is messing with Christ’s church in such a way that the church neglects its duty to proclaim and explain this mystery of God to the world.

The Apostle Paul’s words in 1 Timothy 3:14-16 teach us that the sacred duty of Christ’s church is encompassed in two major **responsibilities**.

I. KEEP THE TRUTH CLEAR (3:14-15)

The way we behave as Christ's church in the world will either highlight or hide the gospel he has entrusted to us.

· The Apostle Paul made certain that the pastor Timothy at Ephesus grasped the seriousness of this.

14. *Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, 15 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.*

The way we live as Christians in front of a watching world makes all the difference in the world.

No matter how clearly or cleverly a church articulates the good news of Jesus Christ, any ungodly behavior among Christians will muddy the awesome gospel truth.

'Most people are brought to faith in Christ, not by argument for it but by exposure to it.' (Samuel M. Shoemaker)

What we say to a lost world must be authenticated by the way we live.

· When Paul wrote this letter he was in Macedonia, about 350-400 miles away from Timothy.

I'm sure some of you have received emails from far-away friends who wrote, *'I wish we could get together with you soon.'* Maybe you feel the same way, or perhaps you find comfort in the fact that some of them are far away.

Paul wasn't sure he'd see Timothy soon. So he wrote what was burning in his heart.

· Paul wanted Timothy to be certain that the Christians in the church at Ephesus understood that they were *'God's household, the church of living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.'*

It's good to review the fundamentals regularly.

Legend has it that Coach Vince Lombardi began training camp each year by holding up a football and declaring *This is a football.*

If we don't review what the church is according to God, we will move toward failure.

Christ's church is distinct from anything in society around us.

'The church best serves the world when it is most distinctly and most unapologetically the church . . . when the church dares to be different, it models for the world what God calls the world to become.' (John Neuhaus)

Let's look at each of these three outstanding characteristics of a church in verse 15. :

· First, the church is *God's household.*

We're God's family. The family likeness should be visible.

The world out there will believe our message if we back it up by the way we live.

Jesus said *'By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.'* (John. 13:35)

· Second outstanding characteristic: we are the *Church of the living God*

This gets to the heart of what the church is essentially. Christ's church is a living spiritual organism.

Yes, the church as also an organization. But that's secondary. The church as an organization or institution exists to serve the church as a living organism—the body of Christ.

A church that is nothing more than a religious organization will become lost in the world.

By its nature Christ's church is supposed to stand out and be distinct in the world.

If our church blends into the world, the marvelous mystery of the gospel of God's love will mean nothing to the world.

· The third outstanding characteristic of Christ's church in v.15: the church is *the pillar and buttress of truth.*

A buttress gives stability to a structure.

Christ's church is the support and pillar upon which the divine mystery, the revealed truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ is held high for all to see.

- Our church's duty is to lift up the good news of what God has done for a sinful world, so that the world can clearly see it.

We don't mess with Christ's church. We must keep the gospel straightforward and clear.

In Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois there's a restaurant chain called *Steak 'n Shake*. It has been around for a long time, and it's famous for its quality hamburgers. A few years ago their bold advertising slogan was '*Still Unimproved!*' They claimed that there was no way to improve on what they've had since the beginning.

For the church the gospel of Jesus Christ is still unimproved. Any attempt to mess with the gospel turns it into poison.

You can't improve on perfection.

When you mess with the church you mess with its message.

A church must keep the truth of the gospel simple and clear.

- Paul's language is simple and clear. Christ's church in the world is the pillar and buttress of truth. We'll see how Paul summarizes this truth in verse 16.

The church is not our favorite club or social circle that we may fashion according to our likes and dislikes.

- Christ's Church has an enemy who traffics in deceit and is hell-bent on annihilating the truth about Jesus Christ who came into this world to save hopeless mankind.

That enemy, the devil, is real. The insane evil that has permeated society is proof of this.

The enemy will do all in his power to render the church impotent and ineffective. Why?

Because God has entrusted the truth to the church.

If a church is rendered impotent and indistinct from the surrounding culture, then God's truth is silent.

- What does the evil one do to neutralize our message of hope? He tries to divert the church from our God-given priority to focus on other matters. They may even be noble and important causes.

On any given Sunday morning there are dozens of churches where the message of the day is on ecology (I'm waiting for someone to come up with a *green gospel*), or peace in the Middle East, or self-esteem, or human rights.

That stuff is not the church's God-given agenda.

Christ's church is the *pillar and foundation of the truth*—the truth that God sent his Son to save people from their sins and that Jesus is the only hope for the world.

- Paul told Timothy to make certain that Christians in the church in Ephesus understood what the church was there for, and to be sure that their behavior authenticated it.

Listen to how D.A. Carson said it: '*Of all the so-called "marks of the church," the central and indispensable one is that the church proclaims the gospel and not any other message of salvation.*' (D.A. Carson, *The Gagging of God*, p. 433)

Paul told Timothy to hold on to the truth and not to let anyone mess with Christ's church.

II. KEEP JESUS CHRIST CENTRAL (3:16)

If you keep the truth clear, you keep Jesus Christ central. You can't do one without the other.

The confession here in verse 16 is the 'truth' of verse 15.

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.*

The Apostle Paul often used this word *mystery* for the gospel—the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ.

This good news is the mystery—the truth—that must be proclaimed and explained to the world, because there is no other way to know the truth.

This is why we mustn't mess with Christ's church. Christ entrusted this gospel to his church. No other agency on earth has this responsibility/trust.

- We have the necessary evidence that it's true. The apostles were eyewitnesses. They saw our Risen Lord Jesus.

This good news of forgiveness of sins and eternal life by faith in Jesus Christ was authenticated by phenomenal occurrences and miracles of divine power.

'Whenever truth stands in our mind unaccompanied by the evidence upon which it depends, it cannot properly be said to be apprehended at all.' (William Godwin)

Christian faith is not blind faith. It stands on incontrovertible evidence.

Paul said the Church of Jesus Christ is a pillar and buttress that holds up this truth for the world to see, with supporting evidence!

This mystery revealed is all about Jesus:

- "He appeared in a body": "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." (John 1:14)

This is the mystery we celebrate at Advent/Christmas.

God Almighty, the Sovereign of the universe chose to make his entrance as our Savior in a thoroughly human way—in an infant.

- "He was vindicated by the Spirit."

We celebrate this marvelous mystery at Easter.

At the insistence of the religious leaders Jesus was crucified as a criminal.

But the verdict of the leaders of the people was overturned when by the power of the Spirit Jesus was raised from the dead.

- "He was seen by angels."

Angels announced the entrance of the Savior to the shepherds in Bethlehem.

Angels watched the validation of this truth.

The Apostle Peter gives this intriguing insight: *'They (the prophets) spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.'* (1 Peter 1:12)

I like to think that it held the angels spellbound!

- "He was proclaimed among the nations."

After the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples on the Day of Pentecost, they traveled everywhere from Jerusalem, telling people the good news about Jesus Christ.

Jesus had previously told his disciples, *'And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.'* (Matthew 24:14)

- "He was believed on in the world." On the Day of Pentecost people from various countries heard the gospel of salvation in Christ as Peter preached it. Thousands repented, believed, and were saved.

Luke writes this about the early church, "The Lord's hand was with them and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord." (Acts 11:21)

- "He was taken up in glory."

This is the ascension of Jesus into heaven. While his disciples watched, Jesus was gloriously received up. (Mark 16:19; Acts 1:2; Luke 24:51)

· That's the truth. Those are the essentials of the gospel that is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe.

You have all heard the aphorism, "No news is good news." But when we speak of the eternal destiny of people whose lives have been terminally poisoned by sin, '*No news is bad news.*' It is very bad news when the mystery of godliness, the truth of God's love and salvation in Christ fails to reach spiritually lost people.

A church is a horrible failure if it does not give priority to making the truth visible and credible.

The Apostle Paul asked, '*How are they to call on him in whom they have not believed . . . And how are they to hear without someone preaching?*' (Romans 10:13-14)

A few years ago Steven Foster, a missionary doctor serving in Angola, West Africa told me about a tribe of Africans that had never heard the gospel of Christ. First the Portuguese colonists and then the Marxist governments of Angola had banned missionaries from entering the homeland of that tribe. They lived inside a huge, ancient crater, 25 miles wide. In 1983 Steve was in the first party of westerners ever given permission to climb to this tribe.

Through an interpreter he asked them about God. They said, '*Yes. God created the world, but He left and has had nothing to do with it since.*' They had never heard about Jesus.

Steve and the others with him had the incomparable privilege of telling that tribe that God had appeared in a body. They explained the mystery of Christ. They made the good news clear! And many believed and turned to the Lord.

The truth is that God has not left the world. He is involved with mankind through the message of life entrusted to his church.

God revealed the most marvelous mystery ever in the gospel. It is something that would have remained hidden, but God chose to reveal it.

Earlier in this letter Paul wrote to Timothy, '*Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.*' (1 Timothy 1:15)

That's why God appeared in a body; that's why Jesus came. That's the marvelous mystery revealed.

It deserves full acceptance in the world, and to huge extent that depends on Christians behaving as God's family, the church of the living God, the foundation and pillar of the truth.

The duty of Christ's church is to declare good news to the world--to keep it from being hidden from the world.