

*The Church of the Living God: 1 Timothy 3:14-16*  
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Genuine spiritual revival is something I long to see in our church, in our city, in this nation, and abroad. I desire to see an outpouring of the Holy Spirit in our day that resembles what the apostles experienced in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, what the Reformers experienced in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and what Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield and others experienced in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. I love Christ, and I love the Gospel, and therefore I yearn to see the Name of Christ and the cross of Christ exalted in more and more lives as individuals come to cherish this Gospel. I pray for revival in my own heart. By God's grace, I do cherish and embrace the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but I'm also painfully aware of the fact that I don't love Christ as I ought. And so I need God to revive me and refine me and make me more dependent upon Him and more in awe of Him and more in love with Him. I also pray for revival in our church. I think of our congregation and I am encouraged by the spiritual fervor that I see in many of your lives. I am grateful for the evidences of God's grace that we can observe in one another: the fact that we're gathered here to worship God together, the hunger for God's Word, fervent prayer, fellowship, accountability, helping one another in times of need. There are many clear evidences of God's grace among us. And yet my heart also aches at the spiritual apathy and hardness of heart and lack of hope that is also present here. And I want so badly for God to revive us. I want to see marriages growing and flourishing to the glory of Christ. I want to see single men and women living holy lives, radically committed to the cause of Christ. I want to see boys and girls who are already developing a passion for God's Word and prayer and holiness and missions. I want to see confession of sin, brokenness, and humility. I want to see us pleading with God for His grace and for an outpouring of His Spirit upon our lives and this congregation. Will you pray with me to that end? Will you pray for God to do that work in your heart and in the hearts of many others in this church?

To clarify what I'm referring to with the word "revival" let me read you this quote from Iain Murray's book entitled *Revival and Revivalism*. He writes, "what happens in revivals is not to be seen as something miraculously different from the regular experience of the church. The difference lies in degree, not in kind. In an 'outpouring of the Spirit' spiritual influence is more widespread, convictions are deeper, and feelings more intense, but all this is only a heightening of normal Christianity. True revivals are 'extraordinary,' yet what is experienced at such times is not

different in essence from the spiritual experience that belongs to Christians at other times. It is the larger ‘earnest’ of the same Spirit who abides with all those who believe” (23). So when we pray for revival, it’s not as though we’re praying for something different than what we’ve already experienced to some extent. But it’s that we want much more of it. We want our worship to be more vibrant and satisfying, and more glorifying to God. We want the Word to be preached with greater effectiveness. We want our fellowship to be more edifying. We want our evangelism to be more fruitful. We want our lives to increase in godliness and purity. And our desire to experience these things (and also our lack of desire), should cause us to plead with God for His grace and for a movement of His Spirit among us to bring these things about, because only He can do this. We cannot manufacture these things. It’s a heart work that only He can do. And in this way prayer for true revival is very closely linked with a God-centered understanding of salvation and sanctification. To quote Murray again, he says, “wherever conversions are multiplied, the cause is to be found not in men, nor in favourable conditions, but in the abundant influences of the Spirit of God that alone make the testimony of the church effective. No other explanation of revival is in harmony with the truths that are ‘the essence of the Christian scheme—the utter depravity of man, the sovereignly-free grace of Jehovah, the divinity of Christ, the atonement in his blood, regeneration and sanctification by the Holy Spirit’” (21-22). As a people who cherish these truths, we should be pleading with God for His sovereign grace to be manifest in greater ways in this church. We should pray for revival.

This is connected to the passage that we’re about to study because our text this morning speaks of the church of the living God as a pillar and buttress of the truth, and then it sings of the mystery of godliness. And I want us to see in this passage the central role that God has ordained for His church in protecting and proclaiming the truth. Therefore as we think about revival and as we pray for revival, it is something that is very much tied up with the church. If we want to see spiritual renewal in this city, then we should pray for spiritual renewal in the churches of this city. We should pray for Gospel preaching to flourish in pulpits all across this region. We should pray that churches will be structured in a biblical way, as we’ve learned in the past couple weeks in our study of 1 Timothy 3. We should pray for godly leaders to be serving as elders and deacons. We should pray that the roles of men and women in the church would conform to what God’s Word prescribes. We should pray that everything we do as a church would be according to what God has revealed. God will work through His church, so if we want to see revival we should pray

very specifically for revival and reformation in the churches. John Stott writes of the verses we are about to read, “One of the surest roads to the reform and renewal of the church is to recover a grasp of its essential identity as God’s household, the church of the living God, and the pillar and foundation of the truth” (*Guard the Truth*, 108). This is my hope for this morning’s message, that we will grasp the significance of the fact that we are God’s household, the church of the living God, and the pillar and foundation of the truth, and that this understanding will serve to reform and renew us. I am praying for revival. I am praying for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that will deepen our faith, heighten our spiritual fervor, bring conviction of sin, regenerate unbelievers, and have widespread and lasting influence. And I believe if God chooses to answer such a prayer it will come in the form of a special work of God among the church of God, which is the pillar and foundation of the truth.

I want to begin by commenting on each of these verses and then I’ll close with three points of exhortation that I draw from the message of these verses. Verses 14-16 make up an important paragraph in this letter, because here Paul expresses his purpose in writing. He says that he hopes to visit Timothy soon. Timothy was ministering in the church at Ephesus, and Paul desired to come and instruct the church in person. But these matters could not wait until Paul arrived. He needed to write ahead of time and send along these instructions, in case he was delayed. And here’s the purpose, “so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God.” That’s what this letter is about. That’s what the instructions that we’ve been studying are all about. Instructions concerning prayer, the roles of men and women in the church, the qualifications for elders and deacons, and much more to come. The purpose of this letter is to instruct Timothy and the church in Ephesus, as well as the church today, concerning how we ought to behave in the household of God.

We are the household of God. We are a spiritual family. We may come from different earthly families, but we have now become brothers and sisters in Christ. We have the same spiritual Father. We have the same Savior, Jesus Christ. And we are filled with the same Holy Spirit. We are the household of God. And as I’ve mentioned the past two weeks, it is such a beautiful thing that God has clearly revealed His will for His household. He has given us this truth so that we might know how to behave in the household of God.

Paul goes on to elaborate on this phrase with two other descriptions of the household of God. Next he calls it the church of the living God. God’s household is the church. Earlier in this chapter, in the qualifications for elders, there was a comparison between a household and the church. Verse 4 says that an overseer

must manage his own household well, and verse 5 gives the reason: “for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?” There are parallels between the home and the church, and we saw this as well in the discussion of gender roles, which apply in specific and parallel ways both in marriage and in the leadership structure of the church. Well, now in verse 15 we see this parallel stated explicitly. The church is the household of God. It is the family of God.

And Paul further describes the church in this phrase as the church of the *living* God. This term, “living God,” draws on an Old Testament concept that is used in the New Testament in many places. For instance, it is used to contrast God, who is true and living, with idols, who are false and dead. 1 Thessalonians 1:9, “For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.” Also, Paul preaching at Lystra in Acts 14:15, when the people thought that he and Barnabas were Zeus and Hermes. Paul responded, “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.” Even in 1 Timothy there are other allusions to this truth, using different words. The doxology of 1:17 refers to God as “the King of ages, immortal (He lives forever), invisible, the only God.” And in 6:15-16, “the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of Kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality.” There is only one God, and our God is the only living God, which means that His church is the only true church.

There are a lot of different kinds of spiritual gatherings going on. There is a lot of interest in spiritual things. There are many different religions and cults. And yet there is only one true church, because there is only one true and living God. Don’t be deceived by the relativism of our age. Don’t be deceived into thinking that there are many different gods, or many different ways to God. There is only one living God, and there is only one means of access to this God, which is His Son Jesus Christ. He is the way and the truth and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through Him (John 14:6). Those who have been forgiven through the blood of Jesus Christ are those individuals who make up the church of the living God.

Finally, Paul describes the church as “a pillar and buttress of the truth.” These are both structural terms. In a building a pillar serves the purpose of upholding the roof, and a buttress (or in other translations, the foundation or support or ground or bulwark) serves to uphold the building itself in some way. This is the image

of how the church is to uphold the truth. God has ordained that His church be the pillar and foundation of the truth. It is God's will that believers would gather together and be structured in a particular manner and that we would faithfully defend and promote the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is an amazing privilege and responsibility, that God is going to use His church to defend and proclaim His truth in the world. This is what we get to be a part of, and it's all of us in the church who are part of it. It's not just seminary professors who defend the truth, although they can serve the church in important ways. It's not just preachers who proclaim the truth, although they must. But it's all of us, growing in our understanding of the truth and living it out in our relationships with one another, living it out in our holy lives before an unbelieving world, sharing it with the unbelievers around us, rejecting the lies of sin and the errors of false religions and unbiblical worldviews, promoting the truth, speaking the truth in love. This is what it means for us to be the pillar and foundation of the truth. We must be unwavering in our commitment to God's Word and our submission to it, and we must joyfully uphold this truth for all around us to see. We are the pillar and foundation of the truth.

In the hymn of verse 16, then, we see some of the key aspects of this truth that the church is to uphold. Paul calls it the mystery of godliness. Last week we saw the phrase "mystery of the faith" in verse 9, which is the truth of the Gospel revealed in God's Word. It is a mystery in the sense that it was once concealed, but is now revealed. And the mystery of godliness is referring essentially to the very same thing, although there is an emphasis on the effects of this truth. It produces godliness in the lives of those who are transformed by it. And in this way the two dimensions of verse 15 are repeated again in this phrase. Verse 15 referred to our behavior and also to upholding the truth. And here, again, we have the mystery, which is the truth of the Gospel, and godliness, which is the behavior that is produced by the Gospel.

Paul confesses that this mystery of godliness is great indeed as he introduces what is assumed to be a quotation from some hymn or creed that was known in the early church. He quotes six lines, and in the Greek each line is almost identical in the way it is structured. Each verb is in the same form, the same preposition is used in five of the lines, and the nouns are all in the same form. So we conclude that this is some kind of liturgical statement that was used in the apostolic church. And it is a beautiful and succinct proclamation of the Gospel. Let's take it one line at a time.

First, "He was manifested in the flesh." This is a reference to the incarnation. Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, became a man. This is one of the glorious and foundational truths of the Gospel, that Jesus Christ, who has eternally existed with the

Father, came down to earth and became one of us. He remained 100% God, and He became also 100% human. He took on human flesh. He was manifested in the flesh.

Second, He was vindicated by the Spirit. A couple similar statements in Paul's letter to the Romans help us understand this. Romans 1:4 says that Jesus Christ "was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead." And Romans 8:11 refers to "the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead." So we see a connection between the Spirit and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and also how the resurrection vindicated Jesus' claims to be the Son of God.

"Vindicated by the Spirit," then, is a reference to His resurrection.

Third, He was seen by angels. This seems to point both to his resurrection and ascension, for angels were present at both. It was an angel who rolled away the stone from the empty tomb and then spoke to the women who later arrived there (Matthew 28:2-7; Mark 16:5-7; Luke 24:4-7; John 20:11-13). Then when Jesus ascended to heaven, two men in white robes (angels) stood by the disciples and told them, "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 1:10-11). Angels witnessed these great events.

The fourth and fifth lines refer to the spread of the Gospel throughout all the people groups of the world. Christ is being proclaimed among the nations and believed on in the world. This is the work of the Great Commission, and it's success is sure. Jesus said in Matthew 24:14, "this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." He gives us the mandate, then, in Matthew 28:18-20, known as the Great Commission, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." The Good News of Christ crucified for sinners is on its way to the ends of the earth. It has reached many places and many people groups, but there are still multitudes who have not yet heard. There are people groups to whom this message has not yet been proclaimed. And there are sheep who have not yet believed.

Maybe you're here this morning as an unbeliever. Maybe you have not heard this message before, or maybe you have listened to this message in the past, but without spiritual insight or understanding. I want to plead with you right now to believe on Jesus Christ. It is not a mistake that you are here today in the midst of the household of God, the church of the living God,

hearing the truth of the Gospel. Jesus Christ came to earth to become one of us. He was manifested in the flesh. And He did so in order to be our substitute. You see, we are all sinners. We have fallen short of God's perfect standard of righteousness, and for this we deserve the eternal punishment of hell. We deserve to be cast out of His presence forever. But Christ came to earth and lived a perfect, sinless life, and then He died on the cross, which is where He bore the penalty for our sin. He experienced the wrath of God so that we don't have to. He took our place. And then He rose again. He was vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels. And now all those who turn away from their sinful ways and embrace Jesus as their eternal treasure will be forgiven. All who believe on Him will escape the punishment of hell and will instead receive the eternal reward of enjoying Christ forever in heaven. This is Good News! Believe it. Embrace it. Give up everything else so that you can have this treasure. If you are an unbeliever here today, I'm so glad you're here, and I would love the opportunity to talk to you more after this service about the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The last line of this hymn, "taken up in glory," is most likely a reference to the ascension, when Jesus was taken up and exalted. Ephesians 1:20-23 and Philippians 2:9-11 both speak of Christ's exaltation. He is seated at God's right hand. He is highly exalted.

So we have in these few words a glorious summary of what Christ has done. From incarnation to resurrection to the proclamation and reception of this message, and also Christ's ascension and exaltation.

I want to close now with three points of exhortation that I draw from the message of these verses.

### **1) Become a Member of a Local Church**

Be committed to the church of the living God, for it is God's household, and it is the pillar and foundation of the truth. Maybe you're already a member of this particular local church, or you're planning to become a member in the near future, or maybe there's another Gospel-preaching church in the area where you need to plug in. But whether it's here or somewhere else, every one of us needs to be invested in and accountable to a local church. This is God's design for His people. We are not to be lone ranger Christians, fighting the fight of faith on our own. Neither are we to be involved only in parachurch ministries. Parachurch organizations may be wonderful, but they cannot be a substitute for the church. Bible studies can be great, campus ministries can be useful and effective, various parachurch groups can benefit the church and promote the cause of the Gospel in many ways. But they cannot become a substitute for the church. We each need to

be committed to a local church where the Word is proclaimed, the Gospel is cherished, the ordinances of the Lord's Supper and Baptism are practiced biblically, and where we provide encouragement and accountability for one another.

My hope is that this passage of Scripture will heighten our awareness of how important the church is in God's plans. It is the household of God. It is the church of the living God. It is a pillar and buttress of the truth. And I hope a deeper understanding of these truths will motivate all of you to become a member of a local church, committing yourself to the church and submitting yourself to the teaching and guidance and accountability of the church.

## **2) Pray that the Church Will Preserve and Proclaim the Truth**

I want the gravity of verse 15 to fall on us in a way that will deepen and clarify the significance of what we're doing here. We are not a club that exists to help us all feel good about ourselves. We are not an organization that exists to impress the world with our skills or our resources. We are the church of the living God. We are the community of the redeemed. We are the gathering of those who have been called by God and changed by God's grace. And one of the functions we are to serve in God's plans is to preserve and proclaim the truth. It is impossible to overstate the privilege this is, and it is also impossible to overstate the profound responsibility this is. Only by God's grace will we persevere in this task, and that's why we must pray. It is my prayer that this church will faithfully uphold the Gospel of Jesus Christ, consistently expounding God's Word, delighting in God's beauty, and calling others to repent and believe this Good News. And if the Lord tarries, it is my hope and dream that this church will continue to preserve and proclaim these truth long after we're all dead and gone, for generations to come. Let us pray to that end.

## **3) Pray for Revival**

This is not distinct from praying for the church to preserve and proclaim the truth. The two are fundamentally tied together. And I want to come back to what I said at the beginning of this sermon, because I want this passage to reform and renew us and result in genuine spiritual revival. So pray for revival in your own heart. Pray for God to give you a greater zeal for Him, a greater delight in Him. Pray for God to show you your own sin, so that you can repent of it and confess it to brothers or sisters in Christ and begin to triumph over those sins. Don't let your heart be hardened. Some of you might be here this morning and there is some sin that you are refusing to let go of. You have convinced yourself that you are in the right. You have justified your sin. You are hardening your heart. Please, don't harden your heart. Plead

for God's mercy. Confess your sin, and experience the joy of personal revival. Wherever you are in your walk with the Lord, pray for more grace. Pray for sanctification. Pray for ministry opportunities and witnessing opportunities.

Pray also for revival throughout this church. Pray that God will work in you as well as everyone else here. May God give all of us a great spiritual fervor so that we might spur one another on and encourage one another in the faith. May He use us as means of grace in one another's lives. Be involved in a small group, where you can study God's word and pray with other believers. There's the opportunity to attend other prayer gatherings as well. There's one that meets on the first and third Wednesday evening of each month, and there's also a group of men who meet every Thursday morning. And it would be great for other prayer groups to be established, too. Let's pray individually, and let's pray together with others from this church, for God to move in a mighty way in our midst.

And let's also pray for the city of Pittsburgh and beyond. Let's pray for the other churches in this region and for their leaders. May the churches be reformed and renewed, for the good of His people and for the ingathering of the elect from all people groups, to the glory of God. May the church of the living God truly live out her calling to be the pillar and foundation of the truth, and as we labor to do this may God give us the privilege of seeing much spiritual fruit.