

Living Out The Mystery Of Our Faith: 1 Timothy 3:14-16

Portions adapted from "The Great Mystery of Godliness," by Ronald Keller @ SermonCentral.com

Everyone likes some kind of music. And because music seems to speak more directly to our soul than the merely spoken word, hymn singing has always had a place in the church. In fact the middle book in our Bible (the book of Psalms) has long been considered God's only authorized hymn book from the days of the Hebrews and yet still for some churches today. But musical style and tastes have also changed through the ages, sometimes for the better, sometimes not so much. So the struggle to write God honoring words with an appealing melody has not been a new one.

The story is told that when Isaac Watts (1674-1748) first started writing hymns that were paraphrases rather than repetitions of the Psalms, people walked out of church in protest of such ungodly music as: Come ye that Love the Lord, Come Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove, Jesus Shall Reign Where'er the Sun, and God, Our Help in Ages Past.

The Church's internal war over "appropriate music" has a long standing tradition; some of which we also experienced here a few years past. Thankfully, under the inspired musical leadership of Bill Rutledge, we now sing a blend of old and new songs that speak to many different tastes while continuing to honor God with theologically rich words. Admittedly some songs I like. Some I do not like. You probably have similar feelings: but out of Christian love, we endure different types of music, knowing that through them others are receiving a blessing. Apparently singing has always been a more powerful way of getting God's teachings into our hearts and lives than by just listening to or studying our faith.

In 1530, Martin Luther wrote: "I am not ashamed to confess publicly that next to theology there is no art which is the equal of music, for she alone, after theology, can do what otherwise only theology can accomplish, namely, quiet and cheer up the soul of man, which is clear evidence that the devil, the originator of depressing worries and troubled thoughts, flees from the voice of music just as he flees from the words of theology."

And that is what seems to be the case with this early Christian creed or hymn that Paul included in his instructions to Timothy. While there are no audio recordings of First Century Christian vocal groups for us to listen to, I propose that their rhythm, melody, and also because they would be singing in Greek, would strike our ears as quite strange. But, while the melody has long ago been forgotten, this song about the great mystery of godliness remains to continue blessing us with the foundational truths of just who Jesus is.

So let us begin with Paul's summary remarks about the nature of the church, but it will not be long before we join him in his melodic summary about the very nature of our Christian faith.

I am writing these instructions
so that you may know how one
ought to behave in the household of God
(1 Timothy 3:14-15a)

Paul wrote, *I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these instructions to you so that, if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, (vs. 14-15a)*

Isn't it interesting, that Paul summarized all his remarks about women's style of dress, their submissive quietness in worship, and even the qualifications of church leaders, under the heading of "*this is how Christians are to behave in the family of God.*" Without again going into discussions on what might have been culturally specific guidance versus timeless Biblical mandates, notice that for Paul the very foundation of what it means to call ourselves "Christian" is to be found in our participation within the family of God.

how one ought to behave
in the **household [family]** of God,
which is the church [**congregation**]
of the **living God**,
the pillar and bulwark of the truth
(3:15)

Don't miss this point, Paul calls these gatherings of Christians and our proper behavior as members of these gatherings – the very foundational support of the truths of Christianity ("the bulwark"), and the best herald of these truths to the world ("the pillar"). Paul's use of architectural metaphors was especially appropriate, since these Ephesian Christians probably worshipped within sight of the Great temple of Aphrodite; which with its over 100 pillars was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. While a bulwark protects and supports the base of a building, a pillar holds the roof up high so that all may enter. Thus the well behaved Christian family, whether as a singular unit or a gathered congregation, becomes both the basic support and best advertiser of the truths of the Christian faith.

Further, Paul's remark that their congregational life supports the truth of the **Living** God would take on even more powerful meaning as they noted the statue lined temple standing just down the road. Because, the Greeks, like most other pagan religions including the Egyptians, did not believe that the god's bothered much to mingle with mere humans, unless they sought a romantic dalliance or revenge. So the Greek idea

was that the less the gods paid attention to you and the more distant they were from you, the better off you were. Contrast this with what Moses taught the Hebrew nation about where God lived and what God did. God told Moses...

I will dwell among the Israelites,
and I will be their God.
Exodus 29:45

So Jewish people always thought of God as living with them, as always being in their midst. This profoundly affected their community life even down to lessons on personal hygiene which showed concern for what God should not have to see as He walked among them (Stott, 1 Timothy, page 104).

Now combine this with the Christian knowledge that God no longer lives just in our midst, but now through His indwelling Spirit He lives **within each one of His children** – us included - turning our very bodies into His temple (1 Corinthians 6:15) . God is not some distant unconcerned watchmaker, but rather our very real and present helper, friend, savior, and Lord, who lives in an intimately close relationship with and within us. Thus our changed lives are the best witness to His reality in our world. That is why Paul declared well behaved Christian congregations as *the pillar and bulwark of the truth of the living God* as opposed to the worship of dead idols (cf. 1 Thessalonians 1:9b-10, Colossians 1:27-28).

Here then is our first take home for the day.

- How will our life change if we daily remembered, seriously considered, that our very bodies have now become the dwelling place of “The Living God?”
- How might our attitudes and habits – both in church and in public – change when we realize that our lives serve as the best advertisement to a watching world for the reality and love of God?

All this thinking about individual and congregational lives serving as the best witness to the reality of the Christian faith, then brought Paul to insert this ancient hymn to the historic reality of Jesus as “God among us,” whom we best advertise, not with elaborate temples or fancy rituals but with our changed lives.

Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great:
He was revealed in flesh,
Vindicated in spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among Gentiles,
believed in throughout the world,
taken up in glory.

Yes the Christian faith would seem mysterious in a world that worshipped at statues of gods; they actually suspected early Christians of being atheists since in accordance with their Jewish roots, the Christians refused to make any images of God. Now to be told that God the Christians worshipped and proclaimed as the only true and living God who also lives with and within them, had at one time become a human, had walked through our world to seek us and call us back to Himself, had died to save us, and then had gone back to Heaven where He still lives as our high priest – truly would be hard for them to believe; how could God be both there and within us at the same time?

For that answer, let's look at these creedal statements individually. But also, first notice that they appear to tell the story of the life of Jesus in a consecutive order with but one or two references seemingly out of place (which I will explain).

I. He was revealed in flesh.

In Jesus, God the Son, a Spiritual being, permanently took on flesh. Born of the Virgin Mary. The "Word" of the First Chapter of John came into our world to live, breath, be tempted and tried, to experience life on human terms, and finally like humans to physically die. Here is how John described what he saw in the person of Jesus.

the Word became flesh
and lived among us,
and **we have seen his glory**,
the glory as of a father's only son,
full of grace and truth
John 1:14

John said, I witnessed the life of Jesus and I can testify that he was truly "*God with us*," as did all the Apostles who kept repeating: "***We are witnesses***" (Acts 2:32, 3:15, 5:32, 10:39). Remember this point about the declaring themselves "witnesses" as it will come back up again.

William Barclay wrote, "Look at Jesus, and you will see the mind and the heart of God, in a form that men can understand." Jesus is "the image of the invisible God." He who was before all things, He who created all things, became fully human with flesh and blood. God with us. Emanuel. Through him we can be reconciled with and join in the family of God the Father.

[God] was revealed in flesh,
vindicated in spirit,
seen by angels [**messengers**]
proclaimed among Gentiles [nations]
believed in throughout the world,
taken up in glory.

II. So the man Jesus declared that he was God with us, as people constantly asked him, what proof did he have to back up his claims? **HE WAS VINDICATED BY THE SPIRIT.**

Vindicated means, justified, endorsed, proved to be true.

- At his baptism the Holy Spirit publicly descended on Jesus.
- His miracles, which he performed by the power of the Spirit convinced and convicted and converted hearts and lives (Luke 4:14, 5:17).
- Even before his crucifixion and thereafter, the disciples worked signs and wonders in his name, through the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 9:1, Acts 1:8.).

But his enemies refused to believe his proofs, and considering Jesus a dangerous imposter they physically killed him, only to have his physical body rise back to life three days later, again by the power of God's Spirit in vindication of who he claimed to be (Romans 1:7).

Then, on the Day of Pentecost, at the birthing of the church, the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus had promised he would send, fell upon the 120 believers and under their Spirit blessed witnessing, 3,000 people were converted in one day, and countless millions in the ages to follow. The church began and still continues through empowering and the vindication of Jesus as God, by the Spirit.

III. So God became a human as proved by His Spirit empowered miracles and resurrection, But who could testify to the historic truth of his acts? **HE WAS SEEN BY ANGELS [MESSENGERS]**

Here is why I asked you to remember all those people that claimed "*we are witnesses.*" Here is also why Jesus named a special group of his disciples "apostles" ("sent ones") And here also is another place where I think the translation from Greek to English may have missed the point. As you can see, this story of Jesus basically follows the pattern of his salvific mission to the world.

So this phrase "*seen by angels*" seems out of order. Certainly he was seen by angels eons before as the 2nd member of the Trinity, and immediately after his birth as Jesus. Satan claimed that God's angels were always watching over and protecting him. But none of this has to do with Jesus' mission! **Until you remember that the word we read as "angels" – and automatically think of as winged servants of God – is actually an un-translated Greek word that simply means "messengers"** which is the way the apostles understood that word (cf James 2:25 *angelos* = messengers). Since Jesus made a point of training and sending out specially commissioned messengers, this phrase now makes sense in the pattern of proving who he was...

God became a human,
Proved himself to be God by the works of the Spirit in his life
Which was witnessed by over 120 trained, commissioned, and equally Spirit empowered messengers (Acts 1:8,15).

In order to proclaim him among the nations,
until he was believed in throughout the world.

IV. HE WAS PROCLAIMED AMONG THE GENTILES [NATIONS].

The Greek word *ethnos* which is traditionally but misleadingly translated "Gentiles" actually refers to **all the "nations" of the world**. Jesus came to save the whole world from our sins. He was not and never was meant to be just a nationalistic hero to the Jews, but instead the Savior of ALL who believe. He trained and commissioned (commanded) a group of authoritative witnesses to proclaim the GOOD NEWS first in Judea and then throughout the rest of the world. And we Christians are still expected to be continuing this proclamation until he returns.

V. HE WAS BELIEVED ON IN THE WORLD.

Someone wrote that "*Jesus is the center of all worlds. Worshipped in Heaven's bright places by those who never knew sin and by those who committed earth's darkest sins.*" When Jesus came into our world, he changed everything within our world; 2,000 years later, we still mark our years from the day of his birth. Jesus life and teachings have not only influenced civilization, he has caused huge portions of the world's population to become born again children of the Living God; believers who were and are still willing to lay down their lives for the privilege of sharing his message (Martyrs.)

Jesus declared "*By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another*" (John 13:35). Yes, the foolishness of preaching saves many. Many are also saved through the message within hymns and spiritual songs. So also such productions as "The Jesus Film," which with its showing around the world, has brought many people in far flung nations to faith in Jesus Christ. But **nothing is more powerful more effective than the testimony given by changed lives as to who Jesus really is**

VI. HE WAS TAKEN UP IN GLORY.

Since Jesus rose into heaven before His witnesses went out to the world, this phrase might also seem out of place. Accept that here it serves as a crescendo towards the closing declaration: Jesus is who He said He was and he accomplished what he came to do. Now he continues to live in Heaven serving as our High Priest; his blood having atoned for our sins, He now makes intercession for all who have put their faith in Him.

As this ancient creed or hymn phrases it, Jesus' Spiritually empowered life, his spiritually empowered resurrection, and spiritually empowered believers continue to complete his mission to save all those who will believe. Before his crucifixion Matthew's Gospel recorded that the high priest said to Jesus, "*I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.*" Jesus said to him, "*You have said so. But I tell you, From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right*

hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." (26:63-64). One day, every knee will bow and declare him King of kings and Lord of lords! But until that day, we continue to live, speak, and sing in testimony to the truth of who Jesus is and that he came all who believe. We are still his witnesses!

And that is the most important take home you have from today.
So let us pray about this
