

How to Safeguard the Truth

Our study comes from 1 Timothy 3:14-16. These three verses encourage every believer, especially pastors and church leaders, to follow Paul's directions in 1 Timothy so that the truth of the Scriptures is safeguarded. Therefore, I have titled this study, "How to Safeguard the Truth."

You will learn that those churches who do not follow Paul's instructions are like boats on the sea that failed to drop their anchors. Consequently, they are drifting out on the great oceans of the earth and are not fulfilling their mission. They are like lighthouses with lights that no longer light to shine the truth once given to us by the apostles. Consequently, people do not see or hear the truth. Revelation 2-3 describes seven churches. We are told that only two of the churches escaped rebuke. Laodicea was rebuked because that church did not have any believers. Sardis had a great name that it was alive, but it was almost dead.

There were only a few Christians left. The churches at Pergamum and Thyatira tolerated false teachers and false doctrine. The church at Ephesus was the seventh church. It was drifting too! It had lost its first love for Christ; consequently,

they had lost His truth. History tells us that Christ removed them. Now I am sure there were some believers in those drifting churches who sensed they were not being spiritually fed and left for greener pastures, and they should have. They realized their churches were in trouble better than their spiritually numb leaders. The church that Timothy was pastoring had some problems. So Paul was giving Timothy some

biblical principles as to how the church should conduct itself to safeguard the truth.

The message of these three verses is about how the saints are to conduct themselves in the church so that it remains the pillar and support of the truth.

OUR STUDY — 1 TIMOTHY 3:14-16. Verses 14-16 can be outlined in three sections: a) the benefits of 1 Timothy (v. 14-15a), the purpose of the church (v. 15b), and the core truth (v. 16). These sections give us three important facts.

BENEFITS OF 1 TIMOTHY (v 14-15A). The first fact is found in verses 14-15a.

I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; but in case I am delayed, I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is

the church of the living God . . . 1 Timothy 3:14-15a (NASB)

Paul told Timothy that he is writing about "these things." Then he said that he was hoping to come to Timothy "before long," or "soon," but he could be delayed. Since

Paul was not sure when he could come, he wrote this letter. At this point, Paul was traveling in the West, probably in Spain, and Timothy was in Ephesus.¹ Personally, I love Paul's statement to Timothy. He expresses love and tenderness to Timothy. He revealed that he wanted to visit Timothy. Paul showed

1. Clement of Rome. 1 Clement 5:5-7; The Muratorian Canon 34-39; Eusebius. Eccl Hist. 2.25.5; John Chrysostom. Second Timothy, Homily 10.





the same compassion for the believers in the city of Corinth in 1 Corinthians 16:5-7. In 2 Corinthians 1:15-18 he explained why his trip was delayed. He did not want these dear saints to think he did not love them. In 1 Thessalonians 2:18 Paul told the believers in Thessalonica that Satan hindered him from coming to them. He also told Philemon that he wanted to visit him (Philemon 22). Paul repeatedly demonstrated that he loved people, just as he did for Timothy. This time Paul is far away, and his return may be significantly delayed.

So, Paul wanted Timothy to know that he wanted to visit him. The letter explained why he wrote 1 Timothy. He said, “so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God.” The important word in this verse is “conduct.” Other Bibles say “behave.” The Greek word is an old verb which had the sense of “to turn up and down,” or “upside down.” It is usually translated today as “conduct.” There are two ways to understand “conduct.”

First, this word may reveal that Timothy had not been conducting himself correctly in the church. There are hints in this letter of rebuke. For example, in 1 Timothy 1:3-7 we learn that Paul had urged Timothy to again instruct certain men to not teach strange doctrines. Then in verses 18-19, Paul commanded him to keep the faith. In chapter four, verse seven Paul urged Timothy again to avoid worldly fables. Later in the last chapter in verse 20-21, Paul urges Timothy to avoid

worldly and empty chatter, and so-called knowledge. Here is what Paul wrote.

O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you, avoiding worldly and empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is falsely called “knowledge” — which some have professed and thus gone astray from the faith. Grace be with you. 1 Timothy 6:20-21 (NASB)

Notice Paul said, “which some have professed and thus gone astray from the faith.” Paul implies some have drifted from the truth as a result. So, Paul warned Timothy about the danger of abandoning the truth. Maybe Timothy had been drifting. If not, the encouragement is still true. Pastors, elders, and every believer must “conduct” themselves correctly in the household of God.

The second way to understand “conduct” is in a positive way. That is, Paul was simply telling Timothy what is the correct conduct for believers in the church of God. But it seems best to understand Paul’s instruction as a warning because 2 Timothy reveals that Timothy was drifting like a boat on the ocean.

Then Paul referred to the church in two ways when he said, “household of God, which is the church of the living God.” First, he says, ‘the household of God.’ The Greek word for

“household” is *oikos*. It is the same word that he used in 1 Timothy 3:4-5 and 12. In those verses it refers to a family in a house or home.

Then Paul says, “which is the church of the living God.” Now he refers to the body of Christ, or every believer around the world and in times past who have believed in Christ. That is, the church of the living God gathers as a local family in individual buildings or groups somewhere. We call those gatherings the local church. Wherever it meets, Paul has given us instructions about the correct conduct of the church; so, Paul is talking about your church!

Before we leave this verse, notice that Paul referred to God as the “living God.” Paul reminded us that the body of Christ, all believers, belong to a living God, and not an idol. In Isaiah 46:5-9 God speaks. He says,

To whom
would you
liken Me
And make
Me equal and
compare Me,
That we would
be alike?
Those who
lavish gold from the purse
And weigh silver on the scale
Hire a goldsmith, and he makes it into a god;
They bow down, indeed they worship it.
They lift it upon the shoulder and carry it;
They set it in its place and it stands there.
It does not move from its place.
Though one may cry to it, it cannot answer;
It cannot deliver him from his distress.
Remember this, and be assured;
Recall it to mind, you transgressors.
Remember the former things long past,



For I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is no one like Me . . .
Isaiah 46:5-9 (NASB)

The message is that God does not sit on a table in the living room, on some rocks in a patio, or on the mantle of a fireplace. He is not lifeless. He is the living God who can hear our prayers, and act to help us. True believers are members of the family of the living God.

So, Paul instructed Timothy and every local gathering of the church of the living God, wherever it meets, how to conduct itself. That is the benefit of 1 Timothy and the first important fact. 1 Timothy is God’s manual on how the church

should function. It is God’s instruction manual on “how to do church correctly.”

PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH (v. 15b). Why did Paul tell Timothy how he and the congregation should conduct themselves in the church? He tells us in verse 15.

Paul gives the reason in the last part of verse 15. Paul says the church is . . .

. . . the pillar and support of the truth. 1 Timothy 3:15b (NASB)

Now we must not quickly blur or smear “pillar” and “support” together into one word. Paul and the Holy Spirit gave us two words for a reason. So, I want to discuss each word briefly so that this becomes alive. First, the word “pillar” reminds us of the pillars of the ancient temples that found throughout the Roman empire. Their function was to hold the top of the temple high so that everyone could see the temple. Second, the

Greek word for “support” has the sense of foundation. This means the church of the living God is the foundation of the truth. Its pillars are to hold the truth up high so that everyone will be able to see and hear it.

This reminds me of the first house that we purchased. It was a “fixer-upper.” We bought the house “as is” from a private party. We did not understand what we were doing, but at least we had a house. After buying it, I began to see cracks in the walls inside the house. Later I walked around the house and noticed a crack that ran all along the outside wall around the house. Then I crawled under the house and discovered the house stood above the ground on wooden supports. Later, a neighbor told us that the area used to be a swamp. The house had been moved from its original site and placed there. Then I realized why the house had cracks. The foundation was not solid. The ground was not stable. So, I spent several years repairing the cracks both on the inside and on the exterior walls. The house looked great and we were able in time to sell it. Then an earthquake occurred, and all the cracks reappeared. You see, the problem was not the cracks in the walls. The problem was that the foundation was bad. If our house had been a temple with pillars, some of the pillars might have collapsed. Paul said the church is the pillar and the foundation of the truth.

Paul’s illustration is perfect. When the church has ungodly elders and deacons, or false teachers, the foundation of the church begins to break, and the truth begins to crack and so does its doctrinal truth. When the church does not pray, strange doctrines are permitted, or pastors do not preach as they should, or elders are not honored or disciplined without preference, then the foundation begins to crack. Paul gave his instructions for a reason. If his instructions are not followed, the foundation of the church will begin to crack. Then the church stops proclaiming truth. Then the gospel will not spread and ultimately, the church will be devoid of truth.

Paul’s point is that his instructions are given so that the church will fulfill its purpose. The purpose of each local church is to safeguard the truth once for all handed down to the saints (Jude 3). So, Paul has been telling Timothy how believers should conduct themselves in the church. Paul has already instructed Timothy that teachers must avoid strange doctrines. He must reject false teachers. We understand how

false teachers are a threat to the truth. Paul says the church must pray, women are to dress modestly, and women are not to teach men or exercise authority over men. We understand prayer, but we fail to realize that violating the role of women results in sin in the church. Failure to identify elders and deacons results in immature spiritual leaders. In the next three chapters, Paul will warn Timothy about deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons in chapter four. Next, he will tell Timothy how to teach and how to care for widows, the seniors, and the elders in the church. Then Paul will conclude with instructions both to pastors and to the saints. These instructions apply to the body of Christ everywhere it meets. Failure to obey are sins of the church.

So, Paul has been discussing the doctrine about how we are “to do church,” or ecclesiology, since chapter one. He will continue through chapter five. That is what he means by “how one ought to conduct himself in the church.” He does not begin to give us personal application until chapter six.

The first important fact is that the book of 1 Timothy teaches how the gathering of the church is to function. The second important fact is that the church is to safeguard the truth. When the church does not function correctly, it will not safeguard the truth.

THE CORE TRUTH (v. 16). This leads us to the third section of our study which is verse 16. This will give us the third important fact. The core truth of the Scriptures is what we teach and preach about Jesus Christ. So, Paul closes with what we believe was an early church hymn. He did not provide us with the musical score. He just gave us the lyrics of the hymn. Here are the words.

By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness:

He who was revealed in the flesh,

Was vindicated in the Spirit,

Seen by angels,

Proclaimed among the nations,

Believed on in the world,

Taken up in glory.

1 Timothy 3:16 (NASB)

The immediate question is what does Paul mean by mystery

of godliness? While there are a variety of opinions, I think the answer is that it refers to Christ. The best Greek manuscripts include the word *hos*. That means the best translation is, “great is the mystery of godliness He who was revealed in the flesh.” That is, Christ is the mystery of godliness. He was revealed in the flesh. The idea of mystery is that it is difficult for us to understand all that Scripture teaches about Jesus, who is our sinless and holy Savior. It is difficult for us to understand how our holy God could take on human flesh, be without sin, return to life, and ascend back to heaven. He is truly a mystery. Later in chapter six, Paul will remind us that Christ is immortal and dwells in unapproachable light—in His Shekinah glory. Jesus was and is a mystery of godliness.

Paul and the Holy Spirit may also have said it this way to remind us to pursue godliness. I found it very interesting that the word godliness occurs fifteen times in the New Testament. Every time this Greek word occurs in the epistles, it is written by Paul and Peter, except for one time in Acts. It occurs in 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and 2 Peter. These two men were fathers of the faith who were preoccupied with godliness. When Paul declared that Jesus is the mystery of godliness, he also reminds us to pursue godliness because Jesus is holy.

So, what does the hymn say? Those interested in music and poetry will quickly discover this hymn has six lines, which are divided into three parts, with two lines per part. Some divide the hymn into two parts of three lines.

He Who Was Revealed in the Flesh. The first line compares Christ to His flesh. It says, “who was revealed in the flesh.” This reminds us of the birth of Christ or the incarnation of Christ. Our holy and majestic God took on human flesh in a virgin named Mary and was born in the city of Bethlehem. Hebrews 2:14 tells us,

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil. Hebrews 2:14 (NASB)

Philippians 2:6-8 also tells us that Jesus was completely God and completely man. He was one hundred percent both. Notice the word “revealed.” It is translated from a Greek word

that means “to make visible.” It is telling us that the early church understood that Jesus had existed previously, before appearing in human flesh. If you have wondered what the early church believed about Jesus, this hymn will be helpful. That is, suddenly He appeared in human flesh. Galatians 4:4 says that when He did, it happened in the fullness of time. 1 John 4:1-3 teaches us that anyone who denies the incarnation of Christ is a false teacher.

Was Vindicated in the Spirit. The second line is, “Was vindicated in the Spirit.” There are two important words here. The first word is “vindicated.” It means “to declare righteous,” or “to reveal to be righteous.” The second word is “spirit.” There is debate if “Spirit” refers to the spirit of Jesus or the Holy Spirit. But it seems best to understand it to refer to the Holy Spirit.

So if we combine these together, we are being told that it was the Holy Spirit who helped to declare that Jesus was righteous. In that sense He was vindicated against His accusers. The Holy Spirit caused Christ to be virgin born (Matthew 1:18; Luke 1:35). The Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus at His baptism (Luke 3:22), led Him into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan (Luke 4:1), and led Him back to Galilee (Luke 4:14). During His temptation He proved Himself to be holy or righteous. The Holy Spirit filled Jesus during His ministry and empowered Him to perform miracles (Luke 4:18; 5:17; Acts 2:22). Acts 10:38 says Jesus was anointed by the Spirit. The Holy Spirit also helped Jesus offer Himself on the cross (1 Peter 3:18) and helped Him be resurrected (Hebrews 9:14). His resurrection revealed that He was God (Romans 1:3-4) and His sacrificial death was accepted by God the Father (Romans 4:25). That is, the Holy Spirit helped Jesus throughout His entire ministry.

Seen by Angels. The third line is, “Seen by angels.” This reminds us that the angels were with Jesus from His birth to His ascension. Gabriel announced the birth of Christ to Mary (Luke 1: 26-27). Angels announced His birth to some shepherds (Luke 2:8-14). They ministered to Jesus after His baptism (Matthew 4:11). Angels were at the tomb after His resurrection (Matthew 28:1-5; 26:2-6; Luke 24:1-7; John 20:11-13) and at His ascension (Acts 1:11). 1 Peter 1:10-12 teaches us that the angels longed to know about Christ.

Proclaimed Among the Nations. The fourth line is, “Pro-

claimed among the nations.” The gospels and Acts tell us that Jesus commanded the disciples to spread the good news about Him to the entire world (Matthew 28:19-20; Luke 24:45-49; Acts 1:6-7). The book of Acts and the rest of the New Testament tells us that this did happen.

Believed on in the World. The fifth line is, “Believed on in the world.” That did happen. John 12:42 tells us that many of the Pharisees believed in Jesus. Acts 6:7 says many of the Jewish priests believed in Jesus. The book of Acts tells us that eight thousand souls believed in the early days of the church. Then many more believed in Jesus in the years that followed. This was surely an encouragement to the early believers to see what God was doing.

Taken up in Glory. The sixth and final line is, “Taken up in glory.” That happened too! Acts 1:9-11 says,

And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. They also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.” Acts 1:9-11 (NASB)

So, the third important fact is the central truth the church is to safeguard - the truth outlined in the hymn. That central truth is about Jesus Christ. Like a waterfall, that truth shouts loudly and clearly that men can have their sins forgiven by believing the truth captured in this hymn. This hymn summarizes the gospel.

CONCLUSION. So, what is the message for every believer? We must follow Paul’s instructions. He has told us how to conduct ourselves in the local gathering of the church of the living God. Only then will the church safeguard the truths of Scripture, and the central truth is the gospel. It is the good news about our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. So, is there something that should be done differently in your church?