

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver St.
Flagstaff, AZ 86001
www.fcfonline.org

WHY IS THE CHURCH IMPORTANT?

1 Timothy 3:14-16

By

Steven J. Cole

March 27, 1994

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Lesson 11

Why Is The Church Important? 1 Timothy 3:14-16

If you were to ask the person in the street, "Why is the church important?" you would probably get a wide range of answers. Some would laugh at the question, because for them the church is not important in any way. Others might see the church in the same category as museums: They both preserve things from the past. They're a nice place to visit on rainy days, where you can observe how quaintly people used to live, but they're out of touch with our modern world.

Others might couch their answer in political terms: They view the church as a powerful voting block to oppose the erosion of morality and to preserve the family. Or, some might respond to our question by saying that they see the church's importance as a social institution. It helps meet the physical needs of the poor and the emotional needs of the lonely and distraught. It ministers to people at the pivotal times of life: birth, marriage, death, and times of crisis.

For many American churchgoers, the church is important because it meets many of their personal needs. They shop around for a church that makes them feel good each week. They get a weekly boost that enables them to cope with life.

As we continue our man-on-the-street interviews, we come to a short, balding man with a beard, who looks decidedly Jewish. Somewhat hesitantly, we ask him, "Sir, we're asking people the question, 'Why is the church important?' Would you care to comment?" We're hardly prepared for his answer.

He says, "I believe the church of Jesus Christ is the most important force in the world today. Its task is more important than all the governments and universities of the world combined. There is nothing to compare with it!"

We reply, "That's a pretty strong statement, sir! Why do you say that?" He responds, "Because the most significant event in

human history was when the living God took on human flesh and lived among us as the Lord Jesus Christ to bear our sins. And since He ascended into heaven, His church now reveals Him on earth, even as He revealed God when He was on earth." So,

The church is important because it reveals Christ,
even as Christ reveals God in human flesh.

That is essentially what our Jewish friend, the Apostle Paul, is saying in 1 Timothy 3:14-16. The church is the continuing incarnation of God incarnate. The word "incarnate" comes from two Latin words meaning "in flesh." It means that God took on a human body in the person of Jesus Christ. And since Jesus ascended into heaven, we now, as His body continue His presence on earth until He returns. Since the eternal destiny of every person on earth depends on his or her being rightly related to Jesus the coming King and Judge of all the earth, nothing could be more crucial than the church!

David Watson wrote, "It is the church that is willing to die to worldly standards that will know the power of Christ's resurrection. It may be envied for its depths of loving relationships or for its spontaneous joy; it may be hated and persecuted for its revolutionary lifestyle exposing the hollow values and destructive selfishness of the society it seeks to serve; but it certainly cannot be ignored. When God reigns among His people, they become a city set on a hill and cannot be hid" (*I Believe in the Church* [Eerdmans], p. 61).

The Lord wants us as His people to catch a vision of the incomparable importance of the church in its role of revealing the risen, ascended Christ. In order to catch that vision, we must understand the significance of Christ's incarnation.

1. Jesus Christ reveals God in human flesh. (3:16).

In our text, Paul tells Timothy his purpose for writing, namely, so that God's people would know how to conduct themselves as members of God's church. A key function of the church is to be the pillar and support of God's truth which centers in the person of Jesus Christ. Thus Paul, in verse 16, quotes an early church hymn to elaborate on the core of truth as it centers in Christ. The best Greek manuscripts do not begin with "God" (as in

the KJV) but rather with “who,” indicating that we are picking up in the middle of the hymn. The flow of thought, working backward from verse 16, is that Christ is the embodiment of God’s truth; and (v. 15) the church is to be the present embodiment of Jesus Christ.

“The mystery of godliness” refers first to God incarnate in Christ. A mystery referred to something that could be known only by revelation, not by speculation. No one can come to know God by human reason alone, but only through the revelation God has given of Himself in the person of Jesus Christ. He revealed what perfect godliness is: God dwelling in us and living through us. Thus “the mystery of godliness” refers primarily to Jesus Christ, but secondarily to us, His church, as we are indwelt by Christ and reflect Him to the world.

This early church hymn is a brief synopsis of the life of Jesus Christ incarnate. It is saying that Christ is God revealed in human flesh; and, as such, He is the only Savior. There are six lines to the hymn:

A. “Revealed in the flesh”

Although the best manuscripts do not say “God,” we know from many other Scriptures that Jesus is God revealed in the flesh. John begins his Gospel by writing of Jesus, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” In verse 14, John continues, “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us”

Larry Richards and Clyde Hoeldtke write,

The doctrine of the Incarnation is distinct and unique to the Christian faith. Many religions speak of appearances of deities in the guise of men or animals. But these are ‘appearances’ only. None takes the startling position of Christianity, which affirms that the God who existed from eternity and who created all things entered His creation to actually *become* a human being. Yet this is just the radical affirmation of the Christian faith.” (*A Theology of Church Leadership* [Zondervan], p. 61).

Note that our text implies the pre-existence of Jesus: “He was *revealed* in the flesh.”

B. “Was vindicated in the Spirit”

The word is literally, “justified” or “declared righteous.” When Jesus came to this earth, He did not come as a mighty King, revealing the splendor of God. He took the lowly form of a servant. Thus the ministry of the Holy Spirit was to declare Jesus to be the Righteous One by attesting to His deity. When Jesus identified Himself with sinners by submitting to baptism, the Spirit “justified” Him by descending on Him as a dove. When He went to the extreme humiliation of the cross and bore our sin, being numbered with the transgressors, the Holy Spirit declared Jesus to be the Son of God by raising Him from the dead (Rom. 1:4). If Jesus had been a sinner, then He would have had to die for His own sins, and God would not have raised Him from the dead. But the fact that God did raise Jesus from the dead proves that He is the Righteous One.

C. “Beheld by angels”

Angels had an interest in the Savior from His conception to His ascension. An angel announced the conception to Mary, angels proclaimed His birth to the shepherds, angels ministered to Him after His temptation in the wilderness, an angel strengthened Him in His agony in the Garden, angels proclaimed His resurrection at the tomb, and angels addressed the disciples at Christ’s ascension. Perhaps here the reference is especially to Christ’s resurrection, which secured God’s ultimate victory over Satan and his demonic hosts.

D. “Proclaimed among the nations”

After the resurrection, the Lord Jesus made it plain to the disciples that the message of salvation was not just for the Jews, but for all nations: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20). There is only one message for every people, that “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3-4).

E. “Believed on in the world”

This is the only means that God has ordained for every person around the world to receive the gift of eternal life: “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever

believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

F. “Taken up in glory”

This refers to the bodily ascension of the risen Lord Jesus. It is put last, out of chronological sequence, because “it is the crown of his exaltation” (*Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* [Revell], VI:818). Now He is seated at the right hand of the Father, with all authority in heaven and earth. As the angels promised, one day He will return to earth in the same manner as He ascended: visibly, bodily, in power and glory.

Thus this hymn packs a lot of theology in a nutshell: the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, commission, and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is God revealed in human flesh, and, as such, is the only Savior.

Before we look at the implications of this truth for the church, I call to your attention the theological depth of this hymn. It is simple, and yet deep. There is a ton of solid theology packed into a small package. We need some hymns like that in our day! Hymns are a great way to communicate theology. Also, we need to evaluate the hymns we sing, because sometimes their theology isn’t what it ought to be.

Paul’s point in verse 16, then, is that the incarnate Son of God reveals the Father to us. And the connection between verse 16 and verse 15 is, just as Jesus reveals God, even so ...

2. The church reveals Christ to the world (3:14-15).

God continues to be incarnate, not only in Jesus Christ, but also in the church. Jesus is God incarnate; the church is Jesus incarnate. Please understand: the incarnation of Christ is unique. One time and only one time in history did God take on human flesh as the baby of Mary, and grow up as a human being to die on the cross for our sins. That event can never occur again. And the incarnation continues on for eternity. Jesus was raised bodily from the dead and ascended into heaven bodily. He will return bodily to earth to reign as King. And yet in another sense, Jesus is not only incarnate in heaven now; He is also incarnate in His body, the church. We are the visible expression to the world of the Savior who is presently in heaven. When I refer to the church I mean, of

course, the people of God, not a building. Paul shows the importance of the church by three word pictures:

A. "The household of God"

This term views the church as the extended family of God, with God as the head of the household. It mainly focuses on the relationships which should be built among those in the church which should reflect Christ to the world.

In America, we tend to be individualistic and goal oriented, and it affects our view of the church. We tend to see the church as an organization that ought to have clearly defined goals and offer programs in line with those goals to meet our needs. We like efficiency. If people are attracted to our programs, they will come. But isn't it enough just to gather unto Christ as God's household or family?

I read recently of an American missionary in Papua New Guinea who asked a native for the best route to get from one place to another. The native, with a puzzled look on his face, replied, "There are all kinds of routes, friend." He continued, "We could go through the bush and visit some friends along the way. Or we could take the coastal route. The sun will be strong, but an old man lives there and he knows many stories from World War II. If we take the road, we can talk to some members of my wife's family who live on this side of the river."

The missionary was getting frustrated with all this, thinking, "He just doesn't get it! I want the *best* route." Then it hit him—his American idea of "best" was the most efficient, easiest way to get there. The Papua New Guinea idea of "best" was determined by which relationships you wanted to build! (From "In Other Words," Jan./Feb., 1994.)

I suggest that the Papua New Guinea definition of "best" was more in line with Scripture. We need to modify our perspective on the local church. We're not just a collection of individuals who happen to meet at the same spot every week for worship and instruction. We are to become the family of God, which implies relationships. While not everyone can know everyone else well in a church this size, there ought to be a network of caring relationships where a person can be nurtured to maturity in Christ in a family

atmosphere. As the household of God, the church is to reflect through relationships the person of Jesus Christ, who dwells in our midst.

B. "The Church of the Living God"

He does not say simply, "the church of God," but rather, "the church of the *living* God." That is, the church is the place where the living God actually dwells and is at work. Just as the phrase "the household of God" focuses on our relationships with one another, so the phrase "the church of the living God" focuses on our relationship with God (Rom. 9:25-26). The word "church" means "called-out-ones." We have been called out of this sinful world to be a holy people, set apart unto the living God who dwells within us and among us.

There's a serious danger which both individuals and churches must guard against—institutional religion. It's so easy to fall into routine Christianity, where you run through your programs and activities, but you don't live in close touch with the living God. You even can have a personal quiet time, but not meet with God. You can go to church and go through the worship service, but you haven't made contact with the living God.

One day several years ago the phone rang in the rector's office of the church in Washington, D.C., where the President sometimes attended. An eager voice said, "Do you expect the President to be there Sunday?" The rector replied, "That I cannot promise. But we do expect God, and we fancy it will be incentive enough for a reasonably large attendance." (In "Our Daily Bread," Fall, 1986.)

Not a bad answer! We need to expect the living God to meet with us. The church is of vital importance in the world today because we are called out of this sinful world as a holy people, in close relationship with the living God who dwells in our midst. The world should sense that the living God is here.

C. "The pillar and support of the truth"

In one sense, the truth is absolute and independent of us. God's truth as revealed in Jesus Christ is--it is true whether or not we believe it or proclaim it. But in another sense, the church upholds and supports the truth. David Wells, in his book, *No Place for Truth* (Eerdmans), and John MacArthur, in *Ashamed of the Gospel*

(Crossway Books), both argue convincingly that the evangelical church in America has minimized biblical truth in favor of things like modern psychology and American marketing techniques. We're big on spiritual experiences, emotions and methods, but we're weak theologically.

If you don't believe it, read through the Westminster Shorter Catechism sometime. It used to be that every Presbyterian child learned this summary of Christian doctrine. I would venture that most adult American Christians would be at a total loss to answer many of the questions in an adequate manner. For example, question 33, "What is justification?" Answer: "Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone."

Or, question 35: "What is sanctification?" Answer: "Sanctification is the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness." The Shorter Catechism has 107 questions like that, covering everything from the nature of God, of man, and salvation to the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer. The Longer Catechism has 196 questions! We need to get back to knowing God's truth!

But doctrine is not merely to fill our heads. It is to affect our lives. The truth concerning God incarnate is transforming truth. And so the church acts as the pillar and support of the truth by putting that truth into daily life. As people in the world observe the church, our conduct should undergird and uphold the doctrinal truth concerning our God who was revealed in the flesh.

Conclusion

Why is the church important? Because God has left it here to reveal His Son to the world, even as Jesus revealed God when He was on this earth. As the household of God, the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth, we are the current expression of Jesus Christ in the world until He comes. What a staggering job description! Nothing could be of greater importance! Maybe you've been turned off by bad experiences in churches that were institutional—where God dwelled only in name, but not in

reality. You need to grasp a new vision of what God intends for His church, locally expressed, and commit yourself to this church. We need to make it happen right here, so that people will say, "I have seen the living God dwelling among His people."

The great composer, Giacomo Puccini, whose operas number among the world's favorites, was stricken with cancer in 1922. But he was determined to write a final opera, "Turandot," which some consider his best. His students implored him to rest, to save his strength, but he persisted, remarking at one point, "If I do not finish my music, my students will finish it."

In 1924, Puccini was taken to Brussels to be operated on. He died there two days after his surgery. But his students did finish his final work. In 1926, the gala premiere was held in Milan under the baton of Puccini's favorite student, Arturo Toscanini. All went brilliantly that evening until they came to the point in the score where the master had been forced to put down his pen. Toscanini, his face wet with tears, stopped the production, put down his baton, turned to the audience and cried out, "Thus far the master wrote, but he died!"

After a few moments, his face now wreathed in a smile, Toscanini picked up his baton and cried out again, "But his disciples finished his work!"

Our Master died, was raised from the dead, and ascended to the Father, leaving us the most important task in the world: to finishing His work, to proclaim His great salvation among the nations. To do it, each one of us must commit ourselves to a living relationship with the living God. We must commit ourselves to one another as members of God's household. We must commit ourselves to know, live by, and defend God's Word of Truth.

Discussion Questions

1. Agree/disagree: The American church is doctrinally anemic? What can we do about it?
2. Which should take precedence in the church: Truth or love?
3. On which of the three descriptions (3:15) is this church strongest and weakest? How can we grow stronger in each?
4. Why do some complain that doctrine isn't practical? How can we avoid dead orthodoxy and yet promote solid theology?

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