

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 4 March 2001

No. T0152

Speaker: Mr. Ernie Brown

Paul's First Letter to Timothy: 1 Timothy 3:1-16

There is a well known little poem which is often used to make Christians aware of their responsibility to live, and behave, and act in a way that helps to give other people the right idea about God. It goes like this:

*"We are writing a gospel
A chapter a day
By the things that we do
And the things that we say.
Men read what we are
By the things that we do
So what is the Gospel
According to you?"*

(Anon)

Very telling, I'm sure you will agree!

The climax, of 1 Timothy 3, which divides very easily into three sections, explains the basis and secret of this concept (see 1 Timothy 3:14-16).

1. 1 Timothy 3:1-7;
2. 1 Timothy 3:8-13;
3. 1 Timothy 3:14-16.

1 Timothy 3:1-7

The first section 1 Timothy 3:1-7, examines the moral qualities and functions of those who provide spiritual care for the members of their local church, or assembly, to use the proper Bible term. The terms the Bible uses for this kind of work are "bishops" and "elders" (1 Timothy 3:1). The term "bishop", or "shepherd", refers to the work the person does. The term "elder" involves the personal and moral qualities and qualifications of the person doing the work. I puzzled for a long time over what these verses mean. Then, one day, a Christian friend said to me, "The local assembly is a spiritual family. In the family sphere, it takes family experience to produce the family wisdom necessary to deal with the family problems that arise within the family circle." That just about sums up 1 Timothy 3:1-7 for me. All the details fit into place when we see the truth of that statement. There is a kind of wisdom that only time and experience can produce.

1 Timothy 3:8-13

The second section, 1 Timothy 3:8-13, deals similarly with those who share in the administrative responsibility in their local church or assembly. The term "deacon" describes both the kind of work involved and the moral qualifications of those who are suitable to do the work. The qualifications needed for deacon service are very similar to those demanded of spiritual elders. In addition, the moral qualities of the wives are also to be taken into account. This might well be because deacons have to deal with the kind of administrative affairs which involve their wives as well as themselves.

Overall, for both elders and deacons, the privilege of serving the Lord's people is a grave responsibility, not to be undertaken lightly. Moral wisdom, practical righteousness and mature experience are essential qualities for both.

1 Timothy 3:14-16

The third section, 1 Timothy 3:14-16, gives us the very heart of the Epistle. The older and more experienced man, the Apostle Paul, was hoping to see the younger man, Timothy, very soon (1 Timothy 3:14). However, in case that was not possible, some things were too important to allow for delay. The alternative to waiting until he saw Timothy was for

Paul to write to him, conveying in writing the important truths Timothy needed to learn and apply. As we read in 1 Timothy 3:14-15, "These things I write unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly: But if I tarry long..."

What is the subject that is so important that it cannot wait? 1 Timothy 3:15 tells us: "...if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." That's it! At the present time, the Christian church has a vitally important role to play in the world.

Throughout the Bible, Old and New Testaments, it is made plain that God in heaven wishes to make Himself known on earth. He does this through those on earth who already know Him. A distinctive term is used to describe this special group. God is pleased to dwell amongst them, in a spiritual way, of course. For that, among other reasons, the Bible describes them, collectively, as the House of God. At the present time, indeed since it was inaugurated on the Day of Pentecost (see Acts 2:1-39), this role is fulfilled by the Christian church. That is why the term "house of God" is used here. Then, in order to explain how this is done, the church is further described as the "pillar" and "base" of the truth.

There are two main kinds of pillars in common knowledge. There is the kind that is very strong and supports great weight without giving way under the strain. A very useful and important kind of pillar, but that is not the kind referred to here. No, what we have here is that other kind of pillar, what we might call a monumental pillar. You know the kind of thing. When it is desired to commemorate a great person or event, an imposing pillar is erected. The relevant details, the person, the place, the event, the date, are all inscribed on the pillar. It is significant that the outstanding details are clear from a distance. Then, the closer you get to the pillar, the more readily you are able to read the story in closer, finer detail. Indeed, it's not until you get really close up to the pillar that you are able to read the small print and the story is fully told. This is a wonderful picture of the fact that God intends people who know nothing about Him to get to know Him by watching, indeed examining, even scrutinising closely, the lives of Christians of their acquaintance.

You know, most people don't know God, at all. They could find out about God by reading the Bible. Sadly, very few people do that. They don't read their Bible at all. But they do read the lives of Christians they already know well. The same writer, in a letter to Christians at Corinth, puts it in this way: "Ye are our epistle, written in our hearts, known and read of all men", 2 Corinthians 3:2. In other words, the Christian's life should be a living monument to the truth of God.

Now we've thought a little bit about it, let me quote that little poem again.

*"We are writing a gospel
A chapter a day
By the things that we do
And the things that we say.
Men read what we are
By the things that we do
So what is the Gospel
According to you?"*

(Anon)

The other term used, "base", is not so very far removed from the more usual meaning of the term "pillar." In the Old Testament, we read about the ark of the covenant, which, during the journeys of the people of Israel, was carried through the wilderness on the shoulders of living Levites (see Deuteronomy 10:8). No man-made carriage was allowed to support it. Neither was it permissible for the ark itself to be actually touched. The ark was carried on wooden staves which were supported by the shoulders of the Levites (see Deuteronomy 10:8). No other nation had such an ark, which signified that only Israel, of all the nations of the world, enjoyed the presence of God in their midst. Any knowledge of the true God that the nations gained came to them by their contact with Israel, God's special people. Similarly, at the present time, the Christian witness to God is carried figuratively on the shoulders of living Christians who know Him and love Him.

The Person of God's Son

Having made that plain, Paul gives us one of the most sublime statements in the whole of the Bible, 1 Timothy 3:16: "Without controversy, great is the mystery of godliness; God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory."

He begins by saying that what he is going to write is beyond dispute. Furthermore, the heart of the matter might be termed the secret spring of right behaviour, the inner source which prompts outwardly correct conduct. He declares this to be the revelation of God in the Person of God's Son. Overall this means that the knowledge of God has been made plain in the Person of His Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. It is the privilege and responsibility of

Christians generally to make that revelation of God known in their lives and conduct, so that others might be brought to a knowledge of God through the witness of the Christian's lifestyle, attitude and behaviour. Let us now examine the substance of this revelation of God, as detailed in 1 Timothy 3:16.

First of all, it is a help to me to understand that the statement is split into six parts. These six parts are presented as three contrastive couplets: the first couplet contrasts flesh and spirit; the second contrasts angels and men; the third contrasts earth and heaven.

“God has been manifested in flesh”

The first of the six parts is an amazing declaration. It is an amazing thing that the Son of God became a real man. We are told in Hebrews 2:16 that He did not become an angel to help angels, but He became a man to help mankind. To help mankind, indeed to save sinful men, it was necessary for the Son of God to become a man. That is, He must enter into a condition in which it would be possible for Him to die. By dying the death that men deserved, He became their redeemer. What a tremendous statement this is, “God has been manifested in flesh.”

“Justified in the spirit”

Outwardly, there was very little to vindicate the life and service of the Lord Jesus Christ while He was here on earth. The more He did, the purer He showed Himself to be, the greater the opposition against Him. However, at all times, in all things, He had a deep, inner conviction that all He did, indeed all He was, in Himself, was well pleasing to His God and Father (see Matthew 17:5, John 8:29). This sense was in the realm of the spirit, the spiritual realm, certainly not the material or physical realm. In His perfect manhood, all the Lord Jesus did on earth was done in the power of the Holy Spirit. So, as to this inner vindication, it was in the power of the Holy Spirit that His personal spirit rejoiced in being well pleasing to God. What a wonderful consolation, in life, in His service, as He moved onward, ever onward, to His unique death, the death of the cross!

“Seen of angels”

The Bible records very occasional examples of God making Himself visible to His creatures. Those occasions were all transient, rather mysterious and always for a very special purpose. As a group these incidents are called Theophanies, appearances of God in a form that is recognisable to at least some of His creatures on earth. Since it is part of the role of angels to observe what happens on earth, it must have been absolutely fascinating for them to be given those fleeting glimpses of God, Who was normally withheld from their gaze.

With the advent of the Son of God into the world, all was changed. Not now a fleeting glimpse! Not now a quickly passing moment! Not now an obscure vision! For over thirty years, in a continuous, sustained way, God was visible to the angels, in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. They rejoiced at His coming into the world at Bethlehem, Luke 2:13-14. They took account with joy of His departure out of the world from the Mount of Olives to go back to heaven, Acts 1:10-11. In between, it was the immense privilege of the angels to behold Him, day by day, even moment by moment, for the whole of that period. What a volume of truth is contained in those three words, “seen of angels!”

“Preached unto the Gentiles”

Before Jesus died and rose again, “Salvation was of the Jews,” as the Lord Himself said more than once (see John 4:22). Gentiles could only enjoy the blessing of God in a secondary way, through their links with the nation of Israel. From now on, the narrow confines of one nation, even Israel, could not limit the immense blessing accruing from the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Jew and Gentile alike could trust Him and know Him as Saviour and Lord. The middle wall of partition between them had been broken down (see Ephesians 2:14). So, one of the marks of God having made Himself fully known in Christ is that He is “preached unto the Gentiles.”

“Believed on in the world”

In John 14:1, we read the Lord's statement to His disciples, “Ye believe in God, believe also in Me.” They had never actually seen God. He was not available for them to see with their natural eyes. He was an object for their faith. Up to this point, the Lord Jesus had been with them physically. They could actually see Him. But that was to end. He was to be with them no longer (see John 13:31-38). He was going back to heaven. Their link with Him was going to be the same as they had always enjoyed with God. “Ye believe in God, believe also in Me” (John 14:1) He, too, was to be the object for their faith. Paul here broadens out the principle. The gospel was to be preached. Those who believed on Him would have a link by faith with Him in heaven. Their link with Him was to be as firm and definite as if He were still with them on earth, except that it would be a spiritual link and not a physical or material one. “Believed on in the world” (1 Timothy 3:16). What a tribute!

“Received up in glory”

The Gospel of Mark records the moment when the Lord Jesus ascended from earth to heaven, “So then, after the Lord had spoken unto them, He was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God”, Mark 16:19. In Mark, the ascension is looked at as God's seal of approval on the work of God's perfect Servant. Luke 24:50-53 also records the ascension of the Lord Jesus. In this case, it is God's tribute to the life of the perfect Man. In Acts 1:9-11, again there is the clear record of the Lord's ascension. So how are we to understand this lovely phrase - “received up in glory”? What is being considered here is not the fact of the ascension, but the manner of it. He was received up “in glory.” As we might say, “He was given a glorious reception as He went back to heaven.” Again, a final tribute to the full, final perfect revelation of God given in the Person of God's glorious Son.

The six things that are said about the Lord Jesus, in 1 Timothy 3:16, are more or less sequential. They trace His life on earth from His coming into the world as a baby in Bethlehem to His departure out of the world from the Mount of Olives. However, careful consideration of these statements highlights a rather strange thing. The purpose of His coming into the world, the climax of His life on earth, His death on the cross at Calvary, receives no specific mention. Why should that be so?

To me, at any rate, it confirms the whole point of this climactic statement. Down the ages, God has progressively made Himself known. He has now finally and fully revealed Himself in the Person of His beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Only those who are in the good of His death can know anything about it. His death removed the penalty of sin for all those who trust Him as their Saviour. They believe, quite rightly, that “Christ died for [their] sins according to the scriptures; and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4) They have been the recipients of the mercy of God. Their sins are forgiven. Their place in heaven is assured. God has put His Holy Spirit within them to give them an understanding of spiritual things. And all because of the value to God of the death and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Notwithstanding all that, the Lord Jesus in Person, and not His work as such, is the epitome of the revelation of God. He is the living embodiment of all that God is. He is, in Person, the substance of the revelation of God. How privileged we are to be able to take account of it in such a Person. As we read in Hebrews 1:1, “God, Who at sundry times and in divers manners, spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, but in these last days spoken unto us in His Son”, what response from you and me has God had to this amazing revelation of Himself in the Person of His Son? He can do no more. He has fully, finally made Himself known, in Person, in the Lord Jesus, His beloved Son. It is now up to us, you and me, to respond to this revelation by trusting the Lord Jesus as our personal Saviour.

Concluding Challenge

The challenge, personal to you and me, is plain. As we read in Romans 10:9, “If thou shalt confess with thy mouth Jesus as Lord, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.” Having done that, we are then so to live that other people will themselves be attracted to the Lord Jesus, and trust Him as their own personal Saviour and Lord. What a privilege!

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.