

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Proclamation of the Faith (1 Timothy 3:15-16): God's house and the assembly, pillar and ground of the truth

Our new series on the Proclamation of the Faith begins with the house of God as here described by Paul in his first letter to Timothy: "...*the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth*" (1 Timothy 3:15). In these few words Paul crystallises the dignity and testimony of the Church of God.

To understand the importance and depth of what the Apostle teaches in this tiny section of God's word, we need to look first at what he means by "*the house of God*" and then what his expression "*the pillar and ground of truth*" means.

The House of God

In the Old Testament the house of God referred to places where God revealed Himself, notably to Jacob in Genesis 28. Awaking from the dream, in which God outlines the work of grace He was to accomplish in Jacob's life, the patriarch declares, "*How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!*" (Genesis 28:17). He then goes on to change the name of the place where he had slept from Luz to Bethel, which means "the house of God" (see Genesis 28:19).

Later, God instructs Moses to build a tabernacle, essentially a house, where God could dwell among His people (see Exodus 25:8). This small but remarkable tent continued its service as the place where God dwelt amongst His people throughout the wilderness journeys and then into the promised land. Its service continued until King Solomon built the first temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 5, 2 Chronicles 2). This wonderful building was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar (2 Chronicles 36:11-21) and the people were taken into captivity.

Following 70 years of captivity, Cyrus the Persian monarch gave the decree for the people of God to return to Israel to build a second temple, often referred to as Zerubbabel's Temple. Its dedication is recorded in Ezra 6:15-18. Many years later Herod the Great built a new temple on the same site. The Apostle John recorded that its construction had already taken 46 years (John 2:20). These buildings were recognised as the House of God. Jesus refers to Herod's temple as "*my Father's house*" (John 2:16).

At Caesarea Philippi (see Matthew 16:13-20) Jesus asked His disciples who people thought He was. "*They said, 'Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' Then He asked them who they thought they He was. Simon Peter replied, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' Jesus said to him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.'*"

The rock Jesus speaks of in this passage is not Peter but Jesus Himself. Paul explains this in Ephesians 2: "*Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit*" (Ephesians 2:19-22).

Peter himself affirms this further when he writes, "*Coming to him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, 'Behold, I lay in Zion, a chief cornerstone, elect, precious, And he who believes on him will by no means be put to shame'*" (1 Peter 2:4-6).

These Scriptures also teach us that the House of God is not a physical building, but is a spiritual house made up of those who belong to Christ. The Lord Jesus teaches about this change from the physical to the spiritual when He speaks to the woman at the well in John 4, "*The woman said to him, 'Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship.'* Jesus said to her, "*Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem,*

worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship him. God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:19-24)

Paul further unfolds the mystery of the church or assembly in Ephesians when he writes, *“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave himself for her, that he might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that he might present her to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of his body, of his flesh and of his bones. ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church”* (Ephesians 5:25-32).

Christ has been forming His church for over 2,000 years. Its formation is not complete yet but each of the members which Peter describes as *“living stones”* (1 Peter 2:5) is redeemed. It is not to be confused with Christendom, which is a mixture of what we could term professors and possessors - that is, true believers (possessors) and other people (professors) who associate themselves with what they find attractive in the bewildering complexities which characterise Christendom. True Christians, of course, have to navigate their way through Christendom, often coming to different views on spiritual matters. But they belong to Christ and are part of His one true church. They are indwelt by the Spirit of God, have the word of God as their guide, preach the Gospel, enjoy a fellowship of love and life, and grow in grace.

But, although the Church is a spiritual house, its features are still expressed in the way Christians meet together. This was Paul's exercise when he wrote to Timothy, *“These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth”* (1 Timothy 3:14-15).

In 1 Timothy 3:14-15 Paul is drawing to our attention the testimony of a local gathering of Christians and explaining how Christians are to conduct themselves. Paul, at the end of his life, was re-affirming the characteristics which should mark the people of God when they meet together.

Central to this is the fact that it is *“the church of the living God”*. The church is the expression of the living God acting in vital power through the work of His Son, Christ Jesus, and through the present ministry of God the Holy Spirit. God came down to indwell, first the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34), and then Solomon's Temple (2 Chronicles 7:1-3). The cloud of glory filled both structures, confirming God's presence. But Ezekiel records that, as a result of the failure and idolatry of God's people, the same glory departed from the temple, never to return (see Ezekiel 10).

When the church of Christ was born on earth at Pentecost, the Spirit of God came down from heaven to indwell true believers and to be with the people of God - in the words of Jesus to *“be with you and ... in you.”* The Spirit of God has never departed from the church but will be present until Christ returns.

God only recognises one church made up of everyone who belongs to Him through salvation in Christ. In practice, as part of the Church, Christians meet in smaller and larger numbers in buildings throughout the world. Some of these buildings are tiny, some are vast - Lincoln cathedral, near to where we live, was once believed to be the highest building in the world. But it is not the building which is important: it is those gathered within it who belong to the Lord.

Paul reminds us that *“the Lord knows those who are his”* (2 Timothy 2:19). Denominations have been invented by men, sometimes by very godly men and for the noblest of reasons. But we cannot impose upon God the limitations we impose on each other. Christians have been made free from the shackles of outward religion. The sadness is that we invent rituals and procedures which often restrict and even divide us from each other and disturb the joy and privilege of worshipping the Father in spirit and truth.

God only recognises one Church, the body of Christ, and Christ as its living Head.

It is interesting that the Lord Jesus only gave us two physical things to do. One is baptism, which normally is done once. The other is to take bread and wine as the simplest symbols of Christ's life given for us and His blood shed, and in doing so we remember His love for us. This we do often.

Paul in 1 Timothy 3:15 is writing about the House of God expressed in a local gathering of Christians meeting together as a small part of a vast redeemed company. It has the features of a household, and just as a family has order, so the House of God is ordered in ways which demonstrate it is the *“Church of the Living God”*. This local expression of the Church should be a cameo of the whole *“Church of the Living God.”* It doesn't matter if the gathering is small, because

Christ has promised to be in the midst of the smallest group of His people: *"For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them"* (Matthew 18:20).

Equally, the largest gatherings should not be focused on their leaders but on the Church's Head in Heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, what should characterise the House of God? To discover this, we have to go back to the birth of the Church of Christ. It seems to me that in Acts 2 the Spirit of God unfolds to us the spiritual features of a company of God's people when they gather together in a locality. We read: *"Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers"* (Acts 2:41-42).

Following conversion and baptism the very first Christians were characterised by meeting together in fellowship to be taught the Word of God led by the apostles, meeting together to remember the Lord Jesus in the breaking of bread, and meeting together to pray.

These central features are unfolded further throughout the New Testament. But essentially the reality of the Christian church was expressed by Christians joining together with Christ at their centre to grow in grace through ministry of the word of God, to worship the Father and Son in spirit and in truth, by the power and direction of the Spirit of God, and to pray. Alongside this they lived holy, peaceful, joyful and evangelical lives in the community, freely sharing their faith whilst ministering to the needs of their brothers and sisters and neighbours.

Jerusalem, the home of Herod's temple, was given a view of the reality of God's new spiritual house, the Church, through the visible behaviour of the people of God in their obedience to God's word, their joyful response in worship centred on the Son of God who had asked them to remember His never-ending love, and their expression of faith in prayer. It should be added that this initial expression of the Church of God on earth led to God working amongst and through His people to great blessing: *"Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved"* (Acts 2:43-47).

As the Church of God grew it was still marked by the features outlined above. Sadly, over time the meetings of believers were infiltrated by ungodly teachers. Paul warns the Ephesian elders of this in Acts 20: *"Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified"* (Acts 20:28-32).

Paul in fellowship with other apostles constantly reminded the early church to remain faithful to the word of God. This is why he encourages Timothy to lead by example and ensure the House of God reflected the fact that it was the *"Church of the Living God"* where God, not man, was supreme and, in doing so, demonstrate constantly to the world the fellowship of the life we have in Christ.

The pillar and ground of the truth

So now we come to the second part of 1 Timothy 3:15: *"... the pillar and ground of the truth."*

A pillar is a column which supports the weight of a building. It is interesting that Solomon designed into the first temple two pillars: *"Also he made in front of the temple two pillars thirty-five cubits high, and the capital that was on the top of each of them was five cubits. He made wreaths of chainwork, as in the inner sanctuary, and put them on top of the pillars; and he made one hundred pomegranates, and put them on the wreaths of chainwork. Then he set up the pillars before the temple, one on the right hand and the other on the left; he called the name of the one on the right hand Jachin, and the name of the one on the left Boaz"* (2 Chronicles 3:15-17).

Each pillar one was nearly six feet thick and 27 feet tall. And they had names. One, which stood on the right, was called Jachin, meaning "he that strengthens and makes steadfast." The other, on the left when entering Solomon's temple, was called Boaz, meaning "in him is strength."

In Galatians 2:9 James, Cephas, and John are referred to as pillars in the Church at Jerusalem, indicating their position of apostolic responsibility. John, writing about the reward of the overcomer in Revelation 3:12, states, *"He*

*who overcomes, I will make him a **pillar** in the temple of my God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from my God. And I will write on him my new name."*

In 1 Timothy 3:15 the reference to the pillar seems to indicate the collective responsibility to uphold the doctrines of the Christian faith - the truth in its entirety as revealed in Christ who is "*the Way the Truth and the Life*" (see John 14:6). This responsibility is upheld by both teaching the truth of God from the word of God and living lives consistent with it. Notice that, as there is one body of Christ, there is only one pillar, suggesting the one faith and faithfulness to it.

Paul adds in 1 Timothy 3:15: "**... and ground of the truth.**"

Ground has the meaning of "stay", suggesting "steadfast", "firm" and "a seat". As the verb "to stay" it means "to remain in a specified state or position." As the noun "a stay" it means a curb or check.

As Christian fellowships we are to be steadfast and confident in the truth God's has revealed to us in Christ through His word and we are not to allow ourselves to be moved from the ground God Himself has placed us on.

The truth of God has been challenged since the beginning of creation but the truth itself is the means by which we are kept spiritually safe. Satan's words to Eve were, "*Has God said...?*" (Genesis 3:1). This question undermined her faith in God. Satan tried the same approach with Jesus, when He was tested in the wilderness (Luke 4:1-13), to which He answered, "*Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word which proceeds from the mouth of God*" (see Luke 4:4).

Equally, the truth itself sets us free and acts to defend us by curbing and checking us when are tempted to go in directions which are not of God. Just like curbs at the edge of pavements the truth of God alerts us to the dangers of leaving the narrow road.

This is helpful in understanding the local church's corporate responsibility to remain a faithful witness to the unchangeable truth of God. And, in a world which increasingly doubts the reality of absolute truth and, like Pilate, asks constantly, "*What is truth?*" (see John 18:38) the Christian church is to remain resolute and unshaken in its faith in God's revelation in His Son Jesus Christ.

Without wishing to push symbols too far, it occurs to me that the pillar called Boaz (in Him is strength) and the pillar called Jachin (He strengthens and makes steadfast) help to remind us of the pillar and ground of truth.

Our strength is in Christ and we proclaim Him to the world, but we also find in that strength the courage to remain steadfast in a world which constantly changes and repeatedly challenges the faith we have. We are not to witness to the world by absorbing its thinking and attitudes. We witness to the world through the unchanging love and grace of God and the value of the pattern of life He has given us to live out personally and demonstrate, as suitable to express the reality of the House of God.

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