

PILLAR TRUTHS
1 Timothy 3:16

Wherever God's people have met, in whatever time and place and culture, under whatever circumstances, there are certain things they've always done. – Whether the early Christians met in the courts of the Jewish Temple, or in the home of a Lydia in Philippi, or underground in the catacombs of Rome while fleeing persecution – wherever Christians have met, they have always shared in certain activities: the reading and teaching of Scripture; prayer; giving; the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper (as we've just enjoyed); and [one other thing]...

What is one of the favourite activities of God's people, in response to the truth of God's Word, in response to all that God is and has done for us and promises to do?:
SINGING.

But WHAT did the first Christians sing? – We know they loved to sing OT psalms, especially as they now saw the fulfilment in Jesus. But we also know that the early church, as members of a New Covenant, indwelt by God's Spirit, were eager to write & sing *new* songs to Christ.

And right here in our hands this AM we have a sample of one of the first songs ever written in the Christian church. – God has left for us, in a sense, part of a page from the first church hymnal ever. – What a treat! – Turn to 1 Tim. 3:16...

There is no doubt that the phrasing & structure of this verse in the original reveals a rhyme & a rhythm that must point to an ancient hymn or creed of the early church.

Few things will reveal more about a church's heartbeat and doctrine than to examine the songs that they sing. – And here is a hymn full of doctrine, full of gospel, full of missions, full of Christ!

Stand, Read (vv. 14-16) & Pray:

Give title...

v. 16a – Lit., “by common confession, confessedly”, i.e., “certainly, undeniably” – In an age of so many different Christian views on so many different issues, here is something we should ALL agree on:

a. We agree that **godliness** is very important: For Paul this word godliness was his favourite synonym for ‘true Christianity’. –

As a ‘Pillar Church’, v. 15, “the truth” we uphold is not essentially something abstract or academic or theoretical; it is something intensely practical. – I.e., godliness = authentic religion, true spirituality, a God-centred life!

→Beloved, a Christianity that doesn't lead to changed lives is no Christianity at all. – Tit. 1:1, “Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ for the faith of God's elect and the knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness....”

The most exciting thing about being a ‘Pillar Church’ that upholds “the truth” is that this truth is so POTENT, so capable of transforming people's lives, so mighty to take the most godless and make them godly.

b. We agree that godliness is a **revealed truth**:

mystery = Not as the English word implies, a hidden truth, a deep secret. – But the biblical word, “mystery” = a once-hidden, previously-unknown truth that is *now revealed in Christ*. – So you could even transl. v. 16a, “Beyond all question, the revealed truth of godliness is great....”

→Ours is a faith that does not revel in uncertainty but in *certainty*; As the Apostle Paul said in his grand finale in Rom. 16: We can be sure that “the mystery hidden for long ages past” is “now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe & obey Him”!

c. We agree that godliness a **great** mystery: NOT b/c it is great in obscurity or complexity, but again, great in what it reveals! – “Great” in the importance of what God has now unveiled to us. – Paul speaks here with awe and wonder over the greatness of Christ and the gospel!

+ Don’t forget where Timothy was at this time, the context into which Paul was announcing this great confession? – This was Ephesus, that city which Luke tells us in Acts 19 had a very different idea of what made for a truly “great” confession. – This was a city who, in opposition to Paul’s preaching, went around in a 2-hour toy-toy, shouting out in unison: “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” – i.e., Diana, their revered goddess.

Lit., in 1 Tim. 3:16a, Paul says, “Great is the mystery of godliness!” To think, perhaps some of the very same people who once ranted & raved over the greatness of a lie were now confessing the greatness of “the truth”. –

Now they stood side-by-side with other saved sinners, redeemed idolaters, singing in unison, “Great is the mystery of godliness, great is the Lord Jesus Christ!”

→And so it is today. – We who were once lost, hailing the greatness of the gods of our age – e.g., ‘Great is wealth, great is fame, great is fleshly pleasure, etc.’ (as we see marketed and advertised all around us) – We now, by the lavish grace of God, declare, ‘Great is Jesus, great is revealed truth of godliness!’

+ On our recent Israel trip, we went up to the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. – Once you get through all the tedious checkpoints, plus the ‘modesty police’ (their definition of “godliness”), your tour guide then gives you a security briefing about how sacred this site is for Muslims, and how you dare not be heard saying anything disparaging of Islam or you’ll soon find out why all the guards walking around are armed.

But then our brave guide explained to us, very quietly, about all the myths and deceptions upon which Islam was founded. – And as you may know, one of the great slogans of Islam is “Allah akbar, Allah is great!” –

But at one point, I must confess that a few of us were tempted just to see what would happen if we cried out, “Jesu akbar, Jesus akbar!”, and then ducked!....

Thankfully, wisdom prevailed. – But at least in our hearts, is that not *the cry of every believer*? – God has now revealed to us what is truly great, truly stupendous: ‘Jesu akbar! Great is the mystery of godliness!’

BUT WHAT exactly is it about Christ that is so great, that so excites our hearts and moves our tongues to confess Him?...

***SIX PILLAR TRUTHS that we confess as a church and that are at the heart of godly living & true Christianity:**

Paul gives us here six truths that he especially wants the local church to keep on top of the pillar – to hold them up HIGH for all the world to see, and to keep them SAFE & dry from the rising tides of any error or heresy....

[~ Scottish pastor Sinclair Ferguson: *The evangelical orientation is inward and subjective. We are far better at looking inward than we are at looking outward. Instead, we need to expend our energies admiring, exploring, expositing, and extolling Jesus Christ.*

→So I want to help us to do that this morning!...]

1. We confess Christ's INCARNATION.

He appeared in a body – As the early church fathers would say, 'Remaining what He was, He became what He was not.' – God the Son, without losing any of His deity, added to Himself humanity.

Says one writer, "The eternal Son of God stood, so to speak, on the rim of the universe and dove headlong past a billion stars, through the Milky Way, and into the womb of the Virgin Mary, where he swam and grew until his birth" on that starry night in Bethlehem (K. Hughes).

As Gal. 3 tells us, "in the fullness of time, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman....". – There, in that manger, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." (Jn. 1:14)

As Peter writes in 1 Pet. 1:20, "Christ was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake." – As the writer of Hebrews proclaimed, "...now [Christ] has appeared once for all at the end of the ages...." (9:26) –

In contrast to the gnostic false teachers who said that God could never take on human form, b/c all physical matter was evil, the early church confessed: He appeared in a body, lit., "in flesh", where we get our word 'Incarnation' from, 'en-fleshment'. –

Christ was not just a myth or an experience, a dream or a vision. – He was a real, historical person with parents and a name and an address.

~ J.I. Packer, in his classic, *Knowing God*:

God become man; the divine Son became a Jew; the Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby, unable to do more than lie and stare and wriggle and make noises, needing to be fed and changed and taught to talk like any other child. And there was no illusion or deception in this: the babyhood of the Son of God was a reality. The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets. Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as is this truth of the Incarnation.

+ Recall what the old Apostle John wrote, probably when he was in his 90s, as he looked back over six decades and testified: *What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and our hands have touched, this we proclaim concerning the Word of Life – And the Life appeared and we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was the Father and has appeared to us.*

→ Now for John's APPLICATION to us: v. 3, *We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ.*

I.e, Here's why Christ appeared in a body – so that you & I could have a relationship with Christ Himself, just as the ol' apostle John was enjoying sweet spiritual communion with Christ even though Jesus had departed the earth physically 60 years earlier.

[→ WHAT else does the incarnation mean for us? – Heb. 2 gives one of the clearest applications:

Since the children have flesh and blood, He too shared in their humanity SO THAT by His death He might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is the devil...

For this reason He had to be made like His brothers in every way, in order that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest...

He appeared in a body, sang the early church, b/c only an Incarnate Christ could crush the Serpent and free us from eternal death, and only an Incarnate Christ could become our sympathetic High Priest forever!]

*Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
Hail the incarnate Deity!
Pleased as man with men to dwell,
Jesus, our Immanuel!*

*Hark, the herald angels sing,
'Glory to the newborn King!'*

Recite lines 1 & 2 (this is surely worth memorising)...

2. We confess Christ's VINDICATION.

A kind of puzzling phrase...

He was vindicated by the Spirit – This phrase seems obscure to us b/c we are so far removed from the N.T. era. –

We take for granted that Christianity is at least a legitimate, established, worldwide religion. –

BUT that wasn't the case in the 1st c. – Jesus didn't bring with Him instant credibility in the eyes of an unbelieving world. – It was only through Christ's miracles, His teaching, and ultimately HIS resurrection that God proved the credibility of His Son.

Here is the corresponding bookend to point #1 re: Christ's earthly life. – His earthly life began with incarnation and it ended with vindication: Despite all the accusations thrown at Jesus, and despite his cruel death as a crucified 'criminal', on that 3rd day, when the tomb was found empty, and when the risen Christ began appearing to witnesses, God was

demonstrating that Jesus was no fraud. – He was indeed the very Son of God, now vindicated!

Rom. 1:4 is the most helpful cross-reference here, where Paul says that Christ “through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead.” – Or as Peter says in 1 Pet. 3, “Christ was put to death in the body, but made alive by the Spirit.”

Repeatedly in the NT, there is one point at which we are told that God vindicated His Son: at His resurrection. – As Peter said at Pentecost, “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” (Acts 2:36). – Acts 3, “[God] has glorified His servant Jesus. You handed Him over to be killed...You killed the Author of life, BUT GOD raised him from the dead.” (vv. 13,15).

But what does this by the Spirit mean? – The incarnate Christ first ministered ‘in the sphere of the flesh’, in weakness and vulnerability. But the resurrected Christ entered a whole new sphere, the supernatural realm of God’s Spirit, a new stage of existence!

→Like Jesus’ incarnation, so His bodily resurrection & vindication is a pillar truth, indispensable to our faith. – Take away or tamper with these truths, and Christianity becomes like bread without flour – all the substance is gone.

Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son.

Endless is the victory, Thou o’er death has won.

Recite thus far...

3. We confess Christ’s EXALTATION.

Was seen by angels – To what part of Christ’s life is this referring?

Perhaps this includes all the times that angels witness our Lord during His earthly life: at His birth, His temptation, His agony in Gethsemane, His resurrection as they sat by the empty tomb, and His ascension as the angels then turned to comfort the disciples.

BUT probably the main event Paul has in mind here, that fits best in the flow of this verse, following His vindication & resurrection, is this: Rev. 5:6-12:

There the angels and the living creatures and the 24 elders all gaze at the Lamb in the centre of the throne, the slain & risen Jesus Christ, and they sing, “You are worthy...!” – Then John writes, v. 11:

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang:

“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!”

And so the early church sang, He was seen by angels – b/c when the angels saw Him they sang with universe-rattling enthusiasm!

→The angels could not get enough of Him, and never will! – They could not stop adoring Him and singing His praise. – Oh that it would be so with us too!

BUT WHY was this such a 'pillar truth' in the early church? – Wasn't it obvious that Christ is greater than angels? – No, it wasn't at that time; there was real confusion over this:

NB, Col. 2 shows that some of the false teachers were telling people to worship not only Jesus but ALSO the angels (v. 18). –

And then the Book of Hebrews devotes the entire first chp. to refuting the belief that angels should be worshipped. – The writer there shows that angels are just God's servants, but Jesus was God's Son, and God's appointed King, superior to the angels, the only One worthy of worship!

And our world today also gets into confusion often over this issue of the angels. – Who exactly are they? – What can they do and what can't they do? – What role should they have in our spirituality?

→To answer this, TONIGHT I am going to teach on the doctrine of angels, what the Bible truly says about these amazing beings....

NB, Paul is giving here a 'pillar truth': it is no small thing, then or now, for Christians to confess that Jesus was seen by angels. – It is of cosmic significance for us to declare our Lord & Saviour has, as 1 Pet. 3:22 states, "has gone into heave and is at God's right hand, with angels, authorities, and powers in submission to him." –

And it is thrilling to realise that Jesus has been given "the name that is above EVERY name," and that at His name even angel knees will bow and even angel tongues will confess that Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father! (Php. 2)

If Christ was incarnate, vindicated, and exalted, what effect does that have back here on earth?...

Recite thus far...

4. We confess Christ's PROCLAMATION.

[He] was preached among the nations – Christology inevitably leads to missiology! – If we believe that this Jesus was truly God incarnate, resurrected & exalted now in Heaven, we cannot keep our mouths shut. – We have to tell others or we will pop!

As the OT had prophesied, Israel was "blessed to be a blessing" to all the families of the earth (Gen. 12ff), to be a "kingdom of priests" that reached all peoples. – The prophets foretold of Messiah who would be a "light to the nations" and that the 'ends of the earth would see His glory'. – "The root of Jesse will...arise to rule over the nations; the Gentiles will hope in Him." (Rom. 15:12). – "Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand." (Rom. 15:21).

The psalmists longed for true worship to spread 'among the Gentiles': "Let the nations be glad, let them sing for joy...Let all the peoples praise You, O God, let all the peoples praise You." (Ps. 67).

And so, as it was prophesied, so it was being fulfilled through the apostles and esp. through Paul's mission, this 'Apostle to the Gentiles'. – That's why earlier, in chp. 2:3ff, he was telling us of God's universal heartbeat for all humanity to be saved.

And this floodlight of Christ's gospel was now penetrating the darkest corners of the Gentile world.

NB, Paul adds one crucial letter: "nationS". – Many Christian Jews only wanted Jesus proclaimed in the "nation", as they figured it had been for the first 2,000+ years. – But Paul gives us this 4th pillar truth b/c it is a non-negotiable that Christ be proclaimed among the "nationS", to all peoples!

→No matter how politically incorrect it is to say that people are lost & perishing without Christ, no matter how many obstacles Satan tries to throw in our path to hinder us from missions, we must keep singing with the first Christians: He was preached among the nations!

→John Stott, "The God of the Bible is a missionary God. ...We need to become global Christians with a global vision, for we have a global God."

Acts chp. 29 is still being written. – There is no more exciting story to a part of than this!....

Recite thus far...

5. We confess Christ's RECEPTION.

[He] was believed on in the world – The proclaiming of Christ was not in vain! – Amidst much persecution and suffering, some were responding and being saved; there was fruit!

In almost every place where Jesus preached, and every place where Paul preached, no matter how fierce the opposition, there were always SOME who listened, SOME who had 'ears to hear', some who were the prepared soil in which the seed took root.

→And there was and is NO OTHER way for people to be saved, except through faith. – No matter how religious or how sincere or how spiritual people are, the N.T. is so clear that no one can be saved apart from *conscious, personal faith* in Christ. –

As Paul preached to the Phillipian jailer, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved." (Acts 16:31; "whosoever believes in Him...", Jn. 3:16)

NB, with these 'past tense' verbs that Paul appears to use, he is NOT saying that God's mission was complete and the task was finished. – This hymn is just stating historical fact and giving some of the wonderful characteristics of true Christianity, that Christ was preached and some believed.

And so we sing with the first Christians: He was believed on in the world.

Recite thus far...

6. We confess Christ's ASCENSION.

Was taken up in glory – As one writer put it, "If the angels sang in wonder at the birth of Christ when he came down to earth, how they must have sung when he returned to Heaven! What a shout must have gone up when the everlasting gates lifted for the King of glory!"

Jesus not only resurrected, but He was then seated at the place of highest honour, at God's right hand, ruling as the vindicated, glorified, exalted King!

→I love being in a church with people who still insist on gathering to honour Ascension Day, even if it's no longer on the govt. calendar. What a treasure is this doctrine of the Ascension of Christ; I wish I had time to go into it! – I encourage you to study it further on your own some time....

Soar we now where Christ has led, Alleluia!
Following our exalted Head, Alleluia!
Make like Him like Him we rise, Alleluia!
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies, Alleluia!

CONCL. – One last recitation of all 6 lines...

→All of THIS is what Paul calls “the great mystery of godliness”. – I love the way the Bible jars our thinking. – What would you have said if someone asked you to fill in the blank: ‘The secret to true godliness is _____.’

I know I could've easily said: ‘The secret to godliness is prayer, personal revival, Bible study, church attendance, etc.’ – And all those are important.

BUT when it's all boiled down, Paul says the essence of godly living is not a ‘WHAT’ or a ‘HOW’, but a WHO! – At the end of the day, true Christianity is not about a program or a list of principles; it is about a Person, the Lord Jesus Christ. – Genuine godliness is inseparably bound up in a relationship with the God-man, and sometimes the only way to describe Him is in song: v. 16b...!

PRAY