

The Church in One Verse – 1 Timothy 3:15  
1 Timothy 3:14–16

Turn to 1 Timothy 3. In Acts 19, we read the story of Paul and Silas and Timothy first preaching Christ in Ephesus and starting the church there. They were there quite a while, a little over two years. Some years later Paul sent Timothy back to Ephesus to correct some things, and while Timothy was in Ephesus Paul sent him this letter with more instructions, the letter we call 1 Timothy. In the middle of 1 Timothy, Paul tells Timothy the real reason that he's writing this letter. Let's read our text.

*3:14–16 - Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to behave in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth. Beyond all question, great is the mystery of godliness: He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.*

Here's 3:15, one verse that says a lot about the church: *If I am delayed, you will know how people ought to behave in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.* We'll go through this verse in four parts, the four parts of 3:15.

### **1. You Will Know How People Ought to Behave**

This sermon is mostly not about behavior, it is about what a church is. But knowing what a church is will help us understand the Bible's behavior instructions. Most of the time, God does NOT say we should do things just because he says so. He does say what we should do and not do, but there is also a lot of explanation in the Bible, telling us why God's way makes sense.

This is one of those places. Because of what church is, we act in some ways and not in others. Paul wants the Ephesians to know how to behave, and there's also a "why," that is, "here's *why* church people act this way." We act in certain ways because of what the church is.

### **2. A Church is God's household**

*You will know how to behave in God's household.* A typical household in the Roman world had a husband and wife, and their children, and their slaves. Slaves were common, sort of like furniture. The woman of the house would have one or two and the man of the house might also have a few. Instructions to believing households taught the wives and their husbands and the children and their parents and the slaves and their masters.

In 1 Timothy 3, Paul has already talked about Ephesian households three times. Both elders and deacons need to be people who manage their own households well, because the leaders will manage the church the same way they manage their own households. The first thing we learn about the church is that each local church is God's household, and we should live together in that way. Imagine we are all living under one roof, young and old, different genders and ages and roles, all one household, and it's God's household. He owns it, he is the head of this household.

In this letter, Paul instructs all kinds of people in that church. He tells men how to act in worship and he tells women how to act in worship, he says what kind of people should be church leaders, overseers and deacons. Paul tells Timothy how to treat older men and younger men, how to treat older women and younger women, and all of this is in family terms. Paul gives instructions for older widows and younger widows, and he tells families to make sure they take care of needy widows in their own family. Paul gives instructions to slaves, and he gives instructions to rich people.

This is God’s household, all these people are in God’s household, and these are all instructions about how to act in the church, which is God’s household. These are all about relationships within the church at Ephesus.

“*You will know how people ought to behave in God’s household.*” Because we, together, are God’s household, we are obliged to act in certain ways, we conduct ourselves in some ways and not in others. Much of the Bible’s teaching comes down to this. It is about how we live in relation to each other, how we fulfill our roles in relation to each other. Because, we together are the household of God.

### **3 The Church of the Living God**

*You will know how people ought to behave in God’s household, which is the church of God.* For now, we’ll leave out the word “living,” and just talk about “the church of God.” Paul uses “the church of God” twelve times in his letters. In English, “the church of God” is redundant. The way we use the word “church” already implies the God of the Bible. What other kind of church would there be? Of course it is the church of God.

But the Greek word *ekklēsia* was not a holy word. If you’ve heard word studies that make something special out of *ekklēsia*, I suggest you put them aside. It just meant a gathering of people, a group, a collection of people.

Now to Acts 19. While Paul was starting the church in Ephesus, there was a riot, because the idol making business was losing business. They made a fuss. Verse 29: *Soon the whole city was in an uproar. The people seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul’s traveling companions from Macedonia, and all of them rushed into the theater together. Paul wanted to appear before the crowd, but the disciples would not let him. Even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message begging him not to venture into the theater. The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there.*

“The assembly was in confusion.” The word for “assembly” is *ekklēsia*. *The ekklēsia was in confusion. Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there.* *Ekklēsia* is not a holy word, and this is not the *ekklēsia* of God. It is a group, a gathering, more like a mob than an assembly.

This crowd shouted “great is Artemis of the Ephesians” in unison for about two hours. Artemis was a goddess they worshipped in Ephesus. A sensible Ephesian city clerk eventually calmed the crowd enough to listen to him. We’ll pick it up in 19:39, the city clerk still speaking:

*If there is anything further you want to bring up, it must be settled in a legal assembly [that is, a legal *ekklēsia*, a legal gathering]. As it is, we are in danger of being charged with rioting because of what happened today. In that case we would not be able to account for this commotion, since there is no reason for it.” After he had said this, he dismissed the assembly [that is, the *ekklēsia*, the rioting mob that was against Roman law].*

Usually they used *ekklēsia* more formally, “assembly,” but it is not a religious or Christian word. I have no problem with what “church” means in English in our day. But *ekklēsia* did not mean that, and *that* is why Paul writes, “the church of the living God.”

We are the gathering of the living God, the group of the living God, crowd of the living God. What makes us special is not that we’re called *ekklēsia*. What makes us special is that we’re *God’s* group, *God’s* gathering, *God’s* assembly. The church of God.

The church of the *living* God. Two hours chanting in unison, “great is Artemis of the Ephesians.” Artemis was not a living god, just a little statue made out of silver or whatever. Artemis was a god who could not see or hear or speak or act in any way. That crowd in Acts 19 was the *ekklēsia* of a dead god. We are the *ekklēsia* of the living God.

#### **4 The Pillar and Foundation of the Truth**

*I am writing you these instructions so that ... you will know how people ought to behave in God’s household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.*

This one was my biggest surprise. The church is the pillar and foundation of the truth? I would have thought that would be Scripture. No, the church is the pillar and foundation of the truth. At the time that Paul wrote to Timothy, the New Testament did not exist.

The citizens of Ephesus don’t know any Scripture, and they can’t see Christ, but they can see the church. The church is the pillar and foundation of the truth. A pillar and a foundation hold up a building, they make the building stable and make sure it lasts. Paul pictures the truth here as a structure. The church is not the truth, the church is the pillar and foundation of the truth, the church holds up the truth and keeps it solid and stable, that’s our role in the world.

Is the church the pillar and foundation of the truth by the message of Christ that it announces, or by how the people behave? Is it our message or our behavior? Taking 1 Timothy as a whole, it is unquestionably both. What we believe about Christ changes how we live. It is both.

1 Timothy begins and ends warning about wrong teaching, and there are two long sections on this in the middle of the letter. What we believe matters. On the other hand, 1 Timothy includes instructions to all those people we noted earlier, older men and younger men and older women and younger women and older widows and younger widows and leaders and slaves and wealthy people. How we live in the household of God matters a great deal. We are the pillar and support of the truth *both* by what we believe about Christ *and* by how we live that out together.

Let's go to verse 16.

### **5 Beyond all Question, Great is the Mystery of Godliness**

*Beyond all question, great is the mystery of godliness: He appeared in flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.*

“Mystery” in the Bible is something we would never have known, but now God has made it clear. In the Bible, “mystery” is never a riddle we have to sort out, never a puzzle, it is always something that God has made it plain. Usually it is in the same paragraph. In this case, the “mystery” is that package of six short lines about Christ that immediately afterward, beginning with “revealed in the flesh.”

The mystery of godliness. What we believe about Christ changes how we live. People are godly, says Paul, because of Christ's career, beginning “revealed in flesh” and ending with “taken up in glory.” The mystery of godliness is Christ's story, his story before and after his death. The church is the pillar and foundation of the truth, and the truth is Christ's story of death and resurrection and exaltation. “The mystery of godliness” and “the truth” are the same thing, and he gives us a summary in those six phrases.

*Beyond all question, great is the mystery of godliness.* That's a literal translation, and it sounds a lot like “great is Artemis of the Ephesians.” There is some evidence that this was city slogan, and it seems like Paul is writing a correction, for Timothy to read out to the church at Ephesus.

“Great is Artemis of the Ephesians? No, says Paul, that is not what's great. Beyond all question, great is the mystery of godliness, which is the story of Christ our Lord. That's what is great.”

### **6 Appeared in Human Weakness, Declared Righteous by the Spirit**

*He appeared in human weakness, was declared righteous by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.*

Let's take a closer look at the first pair: *he appeared in human weakness, was declared righteous by the Spirit.* Paul has a similar line in 2 Corinthians: *He was crucified in weakness, but he lives by the power of God.* That seems to be the sense of the first two lines in 1 Timothy 3:16. He appeared in human weakness, he was declared righteous by the powerful Holy Spirit.

There is a lesson here for us. Jesus fought the fight, he ran the race, he kept the faith. And then he died like the wicked die. He died beside the wicked, and in the same way. His enemies thought this was all as it should be. Someone needs to vindicate Jesus, to declare that he's righteous!

After Jesus died, God raised him, God openly declared him righteous, by honouring him and exalting him, seating him at his right hand. After Jesus died, he was vindicated. Heaven and earth found out that he had been faithful to God the whole time.

We said we would follow Christ. This is our time of human weakness. Let's follow him. Let's fight the fight and run the race and keep the faith. Our vindication is coming.

He appeared in human weakness, he was declared righteous by the powerful Holy Spirit, he appeared to angels.

When Jesus was exalted to God’s right hand, after he ascended back to heaven, there was a great power shift in heaven. All angels and spiritual authorities and rulers saw him and were put under him. At this point the dragon was thrown out of heaven. This line “appeared to angels” refers to all spiritual beings good and bad being put under Christ’s authority.

The last three are pretty clear. He appeared in human weakness, was declared righteous by the powerful Holy Spirit, appeared to angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.

In our text today, 1 Timothy 3:14–16, those six lines are the truth. When we say that God’s household is the church, the pillar and foundation of the truth, that’s the truth we’re talking about: the Christ story. Those six lines are the mystery of godliness in plain speech. We live godly lives because of that Christ story.

*I am writing you these instructions so that you will know how people ought to behave in God’s household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth. Beyond all question, great is the mystery of godliness: He appeared in human weakness, was declared righteous by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory. Amen.*

PRAYER: Father, we want your Spirit to build these things into us. Thank you for the incredible story of Christ our Champion. Help us understand what we really are, in your eyes. Not our eyes or the world’s eyes, but in your eyes. Lead us to live as your people ought to live. We want to be a pillar and foundation of the truth, so complete in us the work you have begun.

BENEDICTION: May God himself, the God of peace, make you holy through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. Amen. Go in God’s peace to love and serve the Lord.