

Guardians of the Truth

1 Timothy 3:14-16

May 3, 2015

As we get into our time around God's Word this morning, I want to preview what's coming, not just today, but for the rest of the month. We have about 25 people waiting to enter membership here at Grace Church, and the elders have been working on an update to our whole membership process, our membership application. Gotta couple more things to do, but we think we're just about ready.

And we just wanted to let you know that if you're interested in membership, in joining this local representation of the body of Christ, just let us know. We're going to have some folks available for you to meet with after the service. One of the elders in the coffee shop will add you to that growing list and we'd like to spend some time today talking about membership, about issues of membership.

So in the interest of promoting a biblical understanding of church membership, we want to take a few weeks here in the month of May to see what the Bible says about the purpose of membership, the privilege of it, the responsibilities and really the significance of membership in the local church. At the end of our series, in the month of June, we're going to have a membership Sunday, where we bring all these new folks into membership formally, into the church here. We're going to have a great day of it; we're going to put food out on the lawn, soak up some Colorado sunshine, and just enjoy together the rich fellowship that we share in Christ.

I wanted to introduce the topic this morning by acknowledging an obvious fact, we are living, as you know, in some interesting days, some very turbulent, troubling times in our country. We've recently witnessed, if you've been watching the news, some pretty serious social unrest in Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland. Other cities as well have been affected by social unrest. So very sad to see the anger that's been expressed toward law enforcement. It's been sad to see the loss of life, loss of dignity.

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We understand that social unrest, whether, whether it's driven by racial tensions, the use of authority, labor disputes, whatever, that kind of social unrest ebbs and flows throughout history. You just kinda continue looking back in history, as you study it, social unrest is always with us. It's part of the evils of the curse; it's part of the evils of sin. And if you tie all of it back and ask for an underlying reason for all the social unrest, sin is at the root of it all.

But perhaps even more surprising than even that kind of social unrest in our society is this radical moral revolution. And it's been represented most recently by the demand to legitimate and to celebrate same-sex marriage. If there's any remaining question as to whether or not our country is traveling down the Romans road, not that Gospel tract presentation, but the Romans road of Romans 1:22-32, those questions were answered this past week.

The US Supreme Court heard oral arguments last Tuesday from lawyers petitioning the Court in favor of same-sex marriage, and

from lawyers defending the traditional definition of marriage. I listened to the two and a half hours of oral arguments and read along with the transcripts. The nine Supreme Court justices already had been presented with and read briefs provided by the petitioners and by the respondents. So the justices weren't wholly unfamiliar with the arguments for and against.

But the justices were asking the lawyers on both sides to answer some questions they had about non-deprivation and equal protection clauses that are in the Fourteenth Amendment. The first and the most important question posed by the court was this: Would a ruling from the Supreme Court in favor of gay marriage require states to grant marriage licenses to same-sex couples. It's an issue between federalism; federal domination over state rights and all of that. And the implications there are very significant.

A federal ruling in favor of same-sex marriage would probably spell the end of tax exemption for any organization that doesn't approve of gay marriage. Think about churches. Think about non-profit organizations, mission organizations.

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Removing tax-exempt status would kill many if not most of the Christian non-profit parachurch organizations in the country and have significant implications on the tax status of every church as well. It was somewhat encouraging to hear several justices acknowledge the radical nature of the petition to redefine marriage. Even Justice Kennedy, himself an advocate of same-sex marriage and viewed by everyone as the tie-breaker on the Court. Justice Kennedy was concerned that same-sex marriages, only been on the scene only the last ten years. In the light of how recent same-sex marriage is, that any reliable, empirical data as to its positive or negative impact on society.

It's a frightening proposition to change a definition of marriage that has been with the human race universally for millennia. Justice Kennedy said this, quote, "But still, ten years is...I don't even know how to count the decimals when we talk about millennia. This definition of marriage has been with us for millennia, and it, it's, it's very difficult for the court to say, 'Oh, well, we, we know better.'" End quote.

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It was refreshing to hear that brief moment of sanity and humility from the court. Another good comment came from Chief Justice John Roberts. He told one of the petitioners arguing for the same-sex marriage, quote, "You're not seeking to join the institution of marriage; you're seeking to change what the institution is." End quote. That's exactly right. They are asking to redefine the definition of a word and an institution. Very radical!

No one really knows how the Supreme Court will decide at the end of June when they make their decision. Will God grant our country yet another reprieve, or will he give our country a little bit more of what it truly deserves for abandoning him? Only time will tell.

The real question for this morning, for us Christians here in this local church in Greeley, Colorado, is this question: How did this moral revolution happen in a self-professedly Christian nation? I mean, it's come so quickly, and with such an aggressive demand, not just for toleration, but a demand for celebration. It's not enough to tolerate homosexuality. If

you're not rejoicing in it, you're out. How did this happen in our Christian nation?

Well, the full answer to that question is multi-layered, and it really goes beyond the scope of what we need to accomplish this morning. But I just want to say this word. Paul summarizes God's answer to that question in Romans 1:21-23. He says this "Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images..."

That's idolatry. That's the fundamental issue. Rather than liv, than worshiping the living God, Americans have worshipped the dead gods of modernity: productivity, human potential, wealth, progress, scientific discovery and pragmatism. Americans have been bowing before those idols for more than a century. And therefore, Romans 1:24, 26, and 28, "God gave them over." He gave them over to his judgment. And that's what we're suffering in American right now. The real question, here, in my mind, is

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Why has God withheld his judgment of giving us over for so long? He's certainly demonstrated his patience.

It would be easy for us to point the finger at the world, to blame all the corruption we see on the pagans outside the gates, beyond the membership of the church, but you know what? The moral actors on today's stage are church members. These days we're watching church after church cave in on the issue of gay marriage. The latest high-profile church is San Francisco's City Church. It comes from the Reformed perspective. The senior pastor wrote in a letter to make the announcement, he said, quote, "We will no longer discriminate based on sexual orientation and demand life-long celibacy as a pre-condition for joining. For all members, regardless of sexual orientation, we will continue to expect chastity in singleness until marriage." They accept gay marriage.

I listened to another Southern Baptist pastor in Orange County, California, give an impassioned plea and appeal for Christians to change their minds on the gay marriage issue. Turns out his own son had just come out of the closet. Mega-

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church pastor Andy Stanley, son of the renowned Charles Stanley, says, "Churches and youth groups should become safe places for gay students." Mega-church pastors Brian Houston and Carl Lentz, both of the Hillsong brand, they refused to be pinned down to a yes or no answer on homosexuality in the church. Rather than being clear and unambiguous about the issue, which is what fidelity to the truth requires in times like these.

The two Hillsong pastors and others have chosen a very different tactic, skirt the issue, don't answer a direct yes or no question, and shift the conversation to questions about how the church stays relevant in the midst of a cultural debate on homosexual marriage. They say clear answers like yes and no are unhelpful to the conversation.

Listen, Christian faithfulness requires us not to skirt these issues, beloved. To go silent, to speak only of the truths that are not under attack in the moment, is to refuse to do what God has put the church on earth to do, to be salt and light. The Christian church and every local expression of the Christian church is salt, prever, preserving the society around it. It's

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light, a warning to the culture and a pointing of the culture to Christ.

Dan Allen sent me an article the other day that talked about the usefulness of doctrinal confessions, especially ones that are posted publicly, like on a web site. Confessions, doctrinal confessions, they're useful for reger, registering Christian protest against the ungodliness of the surrounding culture. That article that he sent me was written by Dr. Carl Trueman. I listened to a short lecture by Dr. Trueman on the same issue: the role of churches in protesting the culture. Listen by simply conducting ourselves in the church faithful to God's Word, we stand here as a protest to an ungodly culture. That is part of the church's role in society.

Sadly, that's not what's been going on. The church has largely abandoned that crucial and vital role in its witness. Throughout the past century in America, many churches and denominations have embraced something called, modernity. Now when I speak about modernity, we're really talking about here a secular religion. Modernity, it's the word modern. Modern,

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modernity it's characterized by faith in human potential and perfectibility. It's characterized by individual liberty and self-autonomy. It's known to be in favor of all scientific and evolutionary progress.

The attributes and attitudes of modernity actually go all the way back to the founding of our nation. The founding fathers of our country, some of whom were Deists. Deists had no problem acknowledging God as Creator, but they believed he had and has no continuing involvement in the world. The god of the Deists left mankind to work out his way in the world. Because he put the light of his nature in them and they could find their own way. That's the spirit of modernity. It's in the air we breathe. It's in the assumptions of every social argument, every cultural debate.

Modernity is the foundation of everything that is taught in schools and colleges and universities. The religion of modernity prefers the contemporary to the historical. It favors the city over the country, the urban over the rural. And it wants to see industrialization and progress continue to build

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and build and build until we have a human utopia, and bring back that holy grail, a form of eternal life, without God. Modernity is nothing more than a sophisticated form of human pride, undergirded by science and scholarship.

The major denominations were the first to compromise with modernity. At first, they were intimidated by science; then they became enamored by it. They bowed before modern science, choosing to interpret the Bible in light of scientific knowledge rather than to accept God's testimony of how things happen, and then start their scientific, inqur, inquiry from his vantage point. First, the liberal modernists stopped emphasizing the supernatural; then they denied it altogether. Belief in the supernatural was considered passé, out of vogue, simplistically and hopelessly pre-modern, and unsophisticated. So liberal preachers preached about natural law, and the natural moralism, common to all humanity. No more talk of a transcendent law of God, no more talk about sin, about moral accountability, about judgment and hell.

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But it wasn't just the liberal denominations that compromised with modernity. Bible believing evangelical churches, though they began with a concern about the liberal modernity that overtook the mainline denominations, evangelical churches also came under the influence of modernity. The spirit of modernity, has, has blown through evangelical churches in two subtle but equally devastating forms: entertainment and consumerism. The thirst for entertainment and the demands of the marketplace have probably done more damage to evangelical churches than the skepticism and the denials of a more formal theological liberalism. One example of how the spirit of entertainment entered the church is found right here in Greeley, Colorado.

In 1948, an Egyptian Muslim student named Sayyid Qutb came here to study at the State College of Education. Phil Johnson actually wrote a fascinating, excellent article about this. Sayyid Qutb was invited during his time here in 1948-1949 he was invited to a local Methodist church where, immediately after the religious service, the minister encouraged the young folks to dance together in the church. As a conservative-minded Muslim, that mix of the sacred with the profane absolutely shocked him.

Qutb wrote about that experience in his book *The American I Have Seen*, and he cited it as one of the evidences that Americans didn't take their religion too seriously. He actually despised what he saw, and it fueled his rejection of Western values and Christianity. Phil Johnson writes this, quote, "Qutb went back to Egypt, seething with outrage and contempt against the West's unbridled, materialistic selfism; and he began to produce the body of writings that became the manifestos and chief handbooks for today's Islamo-fascism. Qutb was chief mentor to Ayman al-Zawahiri, who mentored Osama ben-Laden." End quote.

So now you know the story, all the problems we've experienced with Al-Qaeda, Isis, all can be traced back to young people dancing in a Methodist church, right? No, that's not true. But it does illustrate for you the impact on people's minds of blending the church with entertainment. I continue to see examples of people bringing all manner of entertainment into the church. I watched a video recently where a pastor, well-known megachurch pastor, was preaching from the driver's seat of

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a Ferrari up on stage, pretty cool. Another video showed someone in a church service riding a bull. Yeah, like a rodeo, a bull.

People blended their favorite pastimes and created their own brand of churches, cowboy church, biker church. There's even an MMA church, mixed martial arts church, not making that up. It's a ministry called, Fight Pastor. Probably started by a former Baptist deacon. I'm just kidding! That was a joke. I wrote that joke down. The spirit of fun, levity, and entertainment has become quite an influence. It has brought the spirit of modernity right into evangelical churches.

But it's not just entertainment that's led to a compromise with modernity. The spirit of modernity has entered the church through materialism as well. Consumerism has turned the church into a marketplace. The pragmatic demands of consumerism has turned every church member, every parishioner, into a potential customer. They come to the church to examine a product, the sermon, the music, the atmosphere, all of it's viewed through the eyes of a potential customer. And church leaders ask the question, What will the newcomer like? What, what will be

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Greeley

acceptable to the visitor who sees our church for the first time? Will they like our product? Will they like what they put together? Will it be comfortable here?

That mentality has turned everything in the church into a commodity. It's made merchandise of the Gospel and all its derivatives. You can even buy church related products. Sermons, you can buy them online and preach them to your congregation. You can buy pre-packaged worship music. You can buy entire worship services, all available to you at a very reasonable price. So you want to set up a church? Just plug in the Internet and pull it up. Turns out evangelicalism is big business, especially in Christian publishing. It's worth billions of dollars, that's billions with a, B.

The consumer-driven, market-driven environment, all the publishing, the conferencing, the retail selling, all of that has produced what one writer aptly described as the evangelical industrial complex. It's a very apt description. According to Skye Jethani, here's how that works. It's an extended quote, listen, "Through any number of methods, powerful gifting, shrewd

marketing, dumb luck, a pastor leads a congregation to megachurch status.

"Publishers eager for a guaranteed sales win offer the megachurch pastor, a book deal. Knowing that if only a third of the pastor's own congregation buys a copy, it's still a profitable deal. The book is published on the basis of the leader's market platform, not necessarily the strength of his ideas or the book's quality. Sometimes the pastor will actually write the book. Other times a ghost writer hired by the publisher will do the hard work of transforming his sermon notes into 180 pages with something resembling a coherent idea. Wanting to maximize the return on their investment, the publisher will then promote the pastor at a publisher sponsored ministry conference or other events.

"As a result of the pabst, pastor's megachurch customer base and the publisher's conference platform, the book becomes a best seller. Or if that doesn't work, sometimes, sugar daddies, purchase thousands of copies of the book to literally buy the pastor onto the best seller's list, where the perception of

popularity results in more sales. This market driven cycle of megachurches, conferences, and publishers results in an echo chamber, where the same voices espousing the same values create an atmosphere where ministry success becomes equated with audience aggregation." End quote.

That description of the evangelical industrial complex, the celebrity pastor phenomenon, the, the conferencing, the publishing, add all that to the entertainment minded, fun-seeking culture, sprinkle it with a superficial Bible teaching by people who don't even know any better anymore, and the old evangelicalism has been cannibalized to become the liberalism it reacted against. Trouble is, these kinds of evangelicals, these neo-evangelicals, still think they're faithful to Scripture. They don't recognize the drift that's taken place and their pride at holding on to the old rugged cross, it goes unchecked as they wave the banner for biblical fidelity they no longer practiced, a biblical fidelity that they've long since abandoned and you can't tell them anything different.

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Now amid all that activity, the transic, transactions, all the web site hits, accounting, the sales, the conferences, the blogs, the bestselling books, is it any surprise, amid all that distraction, that the current moral crisis has come upon us? Is it really a shock that many evangelical churches are embracing this moral revolution? How did this happen? Look, I can tell you that in every case, maybe at different rates and in different ways, but in every case churches lost sight of exactly what it means to be a church. They forgot what the purpose of the local church actually is, and they forgot what involvement, significant involvement, in the church actually means. Why it's important to invest themselves, invest their lives throughout the rest of their lives in the local church, in building it, in strengthening it. Instead, they put their sights on the parachurch. They go outside, and they, they fulfill some desire for ministry outside the church, rather than building it right here.

Now with all that in mind, turn in your Bibles to 1 Timothy 3. Yeah, all that was introduction. But just a little bit to go. Little bit to go. We're going to look at some of the clearest statements on the purpose of the church. The most succinct

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statement on the purpose of the church in all the New Testament, Jesus said, in Matthew 16:18, he said, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Praise God for that!

But sometimes, when you look around, it can be hard to find that unconquerable church under the dark shadow of this evangelical industrial complex. But make no mistake, it's there. "Nevertheless," 2 Timothy 2:19, "God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: 'The Lord knows those who are his,' and 'Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.'" That's us, beloved. That's you. That's me. God knows us, and he keeps us, even carrying us through some very confusing times. He protects us in the refuge of a local church that knows its place and knows its purpose in the world.

Take a look at it there, 1 Timothy 3:14. Paul says to Timothy, "I hope to come to you soon, but I'm writing these things to you so that if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. Great indeed, we

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confess, is the mystery of godliness. He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.”

That, whether you recognize it or not, that is a crucial text. Absolutely vital because it spells out clearly and explicitly the nature of the church. It spells out its role in the world and the method by which it carries out its purpose. So those are going to be the three points of your outline this morning they are in your bulletin. The nature, the role, the method of the church. Let's get into that first point: nature. What is the nature of the church? Well, the church is God's family. That's what its DNA is, it's God's family.

After being released from his first Roman imprisonment recorded at the end of Acts, Paul traveled to visit the churches he'd planted. Coming to Ephesus, he found some significant problems in the church: false doctrine, disorderly worship, unqualified leaders, and materialism. So he left the situation in the capable hands of his protégé Timothy and then continued on to Macedonia. And after arriving in Macedonia, realizing he

wouldn't be able to make it back to Ephesus as soon as he'd hoped, Paul wrote this letter to help Timothy in the work in that church. Difficult work. That's where we pick it up in verse 14. "I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth."

Now the purpose clause isn't as clear here in the ESV, but it's there in verse 15, "I write," and it's the word, so that or the word in order that, showing purpose, "in order that you may know how one ought to behave in the church." One of the priorities of church leadership is to put order and structure into place. Order and structure creates an environment within the church that allows Christians to carry out the purpose of the church, which we're going to get into in a moment.

An orderly, structured environment allows Christians to receive clear biblical instruction, so that Christians then can be transformed increasingly by the Spirit through the Word that's directed to their minds. That's what our weekly assembly

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is all about. That's why we get together, so we can preach and teach so the community of saints, all of you, will live in conformity to the message of the Gospel.

The church must be a body of people that lives consistently with the Gospel it preaches. So Paul's aim here, as you can see, is for godly conduct in the church, which is consistent with the church's nature. Notice the nature, how Paul describes the church, three phrases. The church is, one, "the household of God"; two, it is "the church of the living God"; and three, it is "the pillar and support of the truth." Those first two terms, household and church, they're terms of identity. And the final phrase, the pillar and support of the truth, that refers to the church's role.

Okay, let's start with the first two terms there, household and church. First of all, the church is God's household. It's God's household. That means we're members of God's household, his family. God is the master of the house; we are related to him as slaves by the purchase of redemption. We're also related to the master of the household as sons. Sons, children by the

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loving act of adoption. In a word, we belong to God's household because of his amazing grace. We don't want to act in any way that brings shame or dishonor on the master of the house. We don't want to act in any way that dishonors our loving Father by adoption. We want to conduct ourselves in ways that bring honor and glory to the household of God.

Second, Paul calls the church, "the church of the living God." The church of the living God. The word, church, is *ekklesia* in the Greek. It's a word that originally referred to a public assembly, just a regular, general word. It could refer to a civic assembly, a political assembly, a religious assembly, even an unruly assembly, like a, like a mob, the mob that attacked in Ephesus. That was called a church, an assembly, *ekklesia*.

So the church here, is a gathered assembly of people together in a corporate body. It has living, breathing people in it who gather together in a particular place. It's a local assembly, that's church. Churches emphasis here is on gathering together, an assembling together in a particular location. So

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when the early Christians thought about church, they thought about local church. They needed to learn about the universality of all Christians bound together in Christ, but local church was their immediate point of contact. That universal church still had practical, concrete reality in the local assemblies, the local church.

Now in contrast to the pagans, who also gathered together in local assemblies at the temples of their gods, Christians, they gathered together to worship the living God, not a dead idol. As worshipers of a living God, Christians, then, are to show to the world the life and vitality of their God among them, that flows through them and out of them. The living God is known by life. He's known by the fruits and the evidences of the divine life that flows through his people, through his children, and is manifest to the world. So the church is God's household. It's the assembly of the living God and it's probably that imagery of an assembly worshiping a living God and the contrast to the many assemblies that worshiped dead idols that, that imagery that prompted Paul's next description of the church.

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Here's the second point in our outline. First point was about the nature of the church, the church is God's gathered family, a local assembly of God's redeemed. The second point is about the role of the church. The role of the church. The church is God's treasury. The church is God's treasury. This household, this assembly of the living God, is also a temple that holds a precious treasure. It's like a vault, a treasury guarding an immense storehouse of wealth.

That last phrase there in verse 15, "the pillar and support of the truth," that would call to the Ephesian mind the pillars of the famous Temple of Diana. It was located in the city of Ephesus. It was one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. William Barclay wrote about Diana's temple, he said, quote, "It contained 127 pillars, everyone of them the gift of a king. All were made of marble, and some were studded with jewels and overlaid with gold." End quote. The pillars of the temple supported the roof, and that whole thing, that whole structure stood atop a firm *hedraioma*, that's the Greek word for a foundation, a buttress, a support.

And what's important about Paul's metaphor isn't necessarily the structure, the beauty of the structure, even though that's there, the importance is about what's inside. The assembly of the living God, that is us, is the pillar and the support, it's the temple of the truth. The truth is what's important. Used in that way, with that definite article, the truth, it's talking about a specific truth.

The truth, refers to the entire body of doctrine revealed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ; everything expounded and unpacked by the New Testament prophets and Apostles; its eternal, saving truth. God placed that truth inside local gatherings of believers, these little assemblies dotted all over the world. Let that sink in for a moment. God has deposited the truth of his saving Gospel in our midst. You know what that means? We are the guardians of the truth. We guard the treasure that's been entrusted to us. That's why Paul ends his first letter to Timothy with this impassioned appeal, 1 Timothy 6:20, "O, Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you!"

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Pretty amazing, isn't it, that God would entrust this immense treasure of eternal, infallible truth to us, weak fallible human beings. The local church is the pillar and support of the truth. Each individual believer is a custodian of the truth, a guardian of the truth. Such a weighty and an awesome responsibility! And let me tell you this, beloved, it's worth investing your entire life and energy and resources into. That's what you were made for.

The question is how do we guard the truth? How do we keep this deposit safe and sound, protecting it, guarding it, preserving what God has entrusted to us? Well, here's the paradox of this text, we give it away. That's how we guard it, we give it away. Take a look at verse 16, here's point three: the method. The method, the church is God's testimony. The church is God's testimony. Verse 16 says, "Great, indeed, we confess is the mystery of godliness. He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory."

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This appears, this text appears to be an early church confession, like a summary of Gospel truth. Translations differ a bit in how they render that opening phrase. The ESV says, "Great, indeed, we confess is the mystery of godliness." The Christian Standard Bible says, "Most certainly, the mystery of godliness is great." New American Standard says, "By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness." And the King James Version says, "Without controversy, great is the mystery of godliness." You have to read the King James in an English accent. Even a poor one will do.

The word that all those translations are struggling to translate is *homologoumenos*. And you're thinking, I'd struggle, too. How do you, I can't even pronounce that! It's an adverb that you could translate in several different ways, confessedly, undeniably, or most certainly. But at the root of the word, the basic verb is, to confess, *homologeō*, to confess. This adverb is a fascinating word because it does contain the concepts of certainty and universality.

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On the one hand, this early church confession is absolutely certain, it is undeniable, it is beyond any controversy or disputation. On the other hand, the early church, or this early confession is a common confession, that is, it's universally held by all churches. This confession is the universal, certain, undisputed truth held, guarded, preserved, and maintained by every true Christian church. Deny just one of those points, you've slipped from certainty, and you've fallen away from the true church.

Denying the truth, this truth is the path to apostasy. But again, don't miss the emphasis on the root of the word, which is confession. What is confessed is something that is spoken. It's, it's something to which we testify. It is something we profess and we proclaim. It's verbal. It's loud. It's spoken. The content of this confession is the content of all our preaching, all our teaching, all our evangelism, all our discipleship. We confess these truths, agreeing with God as to their truthfulness and trustworthiness, and we speak them out loud for the world to hear.

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And the amazing paradox in this powerful passage is this, we guard the truth by giving it away. We preserve the truth by proclaiming it. We protect the truth by confessing the truth. And in that way the church is God's living and abiding testimony to this ungodly world. We're responsible for proclaiming, upholding, and defending the Scripture, which is the revealed Word of God. We do that by faithful preaching. As John Calvin put it, quote, "This commendation relates to the ministry of the Word, for if that be removed, the truth of God will fall to the ground. Silence in the church is the banishment and crushing of the truth." End quote.

Beloved, it's the height of irony that evangelical churches, churches which are supposed to be characterized, as their name implies, by the evangel, by Gospel proclamation, it's the height of irony that these evangelical churches have silenced the truth by failing to proclaim it. As they become dulled by entertainment, as they become distracted with the next big thing being marketed to them by the evangelical industrial complex, the Christian witness has fallen silent. And if it's proclaimed, it's falling on deaf ears. An aggressive modernity

is attempting to banish the truth, and the sexual revolution seeks to crush it.

The task of evangelical churches is to proclaim it, registering, by so doing, registering their protest. Local churches that truly belong in God's family, that hold the wealth of God's treasury, they need to renew their commitment to guard that treasure by being bold and courageous as God's testimony to this ungodly age. We are the pillar and support of the truth by preaching, teaching, proclaiming, evangelizing, disciplining through the truth constantly.

What is the truth we proclaim? What is it? Paul calls it here, verse 16, he calls it, "the mystery of godliness." Godliness is the word *eusebeias*. *Eusebeias*, it generally refers to our conduct, our behavior, and the root of the word *eusebeias* is the root *seb*. *Seb*, it had the sense of worship and reverence in it. This is nothing less than the fear of God at the root of this word. It's this reverential attitude toward God that seeks to please him in everything. One writer said, he called it, this word, "the practical awareness of God in every aspect of life."

Okay, so, why is it called, the mystery of godliness? Is it mysterious? No. In the Bible, a mystery is something that was once hidden in generations past, but now it's been revealed, it's been unpacked, it's been unfolded. And there's a sense in which all New Testament truth is a mystery in that sense. God sovereignly hid New Testament truth from the world, but then he revealed it starting in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. There's something about true godliness that was unknown until Christ came.

Godliness was a mystery once hidden, now revealed fully in Jesus Christ. And that's why the mystery of godliness here, that's unpacked in this passage, it's not a matter of, what, it's a matter of whom. The, what, statements refer to the whom. The propositions refer to a person. Paul sets this early church confession in three poetic stanzas. Each line is structured the same way grammatically, so that there's a rhythmic, song-like quality when you read it out loud. Why do you think he structured it that way? Easy to memorize, right? Maybe even easy to set to music. Maybe sing it together, verse 16, "He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by

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angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up on glory." That right there, the mystery of godliness. Each of the three couplets, there, as you can see, flows back and forth between the earthly and temporal realm to that which is spiritual and eternal.

So we start with, look at the first phrase there, we start with the incarnation, that's the temporal realm and then flow to the vindication of Christ, that's the spiritual realm. We move from the, we move from the angelic realm, and then we flow to the nations, so the spiritual to the temporal and then back again, it says. We consider the *kosmos*, the world, temporal. We flow again into glory, that's the spiritual. So temporal to spiritual, spiritual to temporal, temporal to spiritual.

Not only that, these three stanzas provide a series of three contrasts. Look at the first contrast, there, it has to do with the person and work of Christ in his incarnation. "He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit."

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Jesus was revealed; he was manifest in weak, unimpressive flesh, flesh and blood. As it says in says in Isaiah 53:2, "He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him." And yet Jesus was vindicated by the power of the Holy Spirit in his life and ministry. The Spirit was there as a witness at his baptism. He empowered him for miracles and works of power during his ministry. He was the power for his resurrection and his ascension into heaven.

Look at the second contrast, it has to do with salvation. The contrast there is between angels and men. "He was seen by angels, but," he was, "proclaimed among the nations." Holy angels observed all the major events of Jesus' life. As we've seen in our study of Luke, the angel Gabriel announced Jesus' birth. The angels worshiped him in view of the shepherds at his birth. Angels ministered to him after his temptations, and in his agony at Gethsemane. Angels were present with him at his resurrection and yet, there is no salvation for angels. Holy angels, even though "they long to look into the things of salvation," 1 Peter 1:12, those things don't pertain to them. And salvation isn't offered to fallen angels at all. They're without hope.

Only men can experience salvation, which is why it says, "He was proclaimed among the nations." Human beings of all nations, not just the Jews, and not just those who saw all the events as the angels did. People of all nations can hear the proclamation of the Gospel, this good news of the salvation of Jesus Christ. Again, that's why it's so crucial that we continue to do our part by proclaiming this message among the nations. That is the role of the local church. That's what we do. We don't assign that to some mission agency and special missionary people, as much as we appreciate them. That's the local church's responsibility.

So there's a contrast, here, having to do with the incarnation, a contrast regarding salvation, third contrast has to do with redemption. Look at it, there, "He was believed on in the world and taken up in glory." Simply put, the immediate redemption that we find through faith in Jesus Christ, while we're still here on this earth, in this world, that redemption is going to find fulfillment and culmination in a full and final redemption one day. And because Jesus Christ was taken up in glory, you know what, we're going to follow him there.

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That's the hope of salvation we proclaim from this treasure, of which we're guardians. As Paul said in Romans 8:23, "We ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit," we, "groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies, for in this hope we were saved." Since Jesus "was believed on in the world, taken up in glory," all who believe in him and live a godly life of repentance from sins will follow him to glory.

Beloved, that is the purpose of this local church in this world. We're God's family, we're God's treasury, we're God's testimony. We are guardians of the truth, and we guard it by giving it away. Membership involvement in the local church, listen, it's worth investing your life into. It's worth spending your life on. It's worth investing your energies and your resources and your gifts and your talents into. As Jesus said, "On this rock." What is the rock? The rock is the truth that Peter confessed. It's his good confession that Jesus "is the Christ, the Son of the living God."

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We've seen this rock of truth in a more glorious light this morning, unpacking it out of these phrases. And Jesus promised, "On this rock I will build my church." Do you believe that? And he said, "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it." It doesn't matter what revolution is going on out there. The gates of hell will not prevail against this truth. What a wonderful promise from our Lord!

Listen, in these confusing times, it's time for our church and all faithful churches to return its purpose: to guard the truth that has been entrusted to us. And as a local church in this community, we need to turn away from all the spirit of modernity in all of its forms, so we can be can be a pillar and foundation of the truth, and you know what? We're going to guard that truth by giving it away.

Next week we'll have more to say about the significance of your membership in the local church, how you get into the church, entrance into it. We'll get to that in the weeks to come. Let's pray together.

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Heavenly Father, we're so grateful for the truth of your Word, how it illuminates, how it helps us to understand, and how it focuses us on our purpose. Help us to be free from distraction. Helps us not to be dulled by the world around us. But help us to give ourselves completely and wholly to this Gospel, to this truth you deposited in this local church. Let us be faithful to proclaim that Word. Help us to be faithful, like James said, to be doers and not merely hearers who delude ourselves, but to be doers of the Word. Give us productivity, fruitfulness by your grace. In Jesus' name, amen.