



1 Timothy 3:14-16

# Being Part of Something Great

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent – December 4, 2016 (am)

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## INTRODUCTION

Back when I was in elementary school I was a Cub Scout. For my school picture in third grade, I wore my uniform: the navy-blue shirt with badges and troop insignia above the pockets and on the shoulder, the gold-and-blue neckerchief with the gold metal slide. I always walked taller and sat up straighter when I was wearing my uniform.

The same was true in Jr. High when we first wore our football jerseys to school on game days. You had to be on your best behavior on those days because your uniform set you apart as among the privileged few, the team that represented the school on the field of athletic competition. When you're set apart in that way, as part of a team, it's supposed to have implications on the way you conduct yourself. I remember getting in trouble in my eighth-grade history class for goofing around with several of my teammates on a game day. As our teacher corrected us, he looked us in the eye and said: *You guys are Miami View Patriots! Act like it!* And we instinctively knew what he meant.

There's just no two ways about it: when you're a Cub Scout, or on the football team, or part of some other respected organization, it has an impact on the way you *behave*. You carry yourself differently. You have to; you're not just an ordinary student any longer.

And if this is true for groups like that, how much truer is it that we'll *behave* differently when we're members of *the household of God, ... the church of the living God*? That's what Paul is writing to Timothy about in this week's text (3:14-16). This is *the high point and turning point of this letter* (Kostenberger 530). Paul is expressing his goal in writing to Timothy in the clearest purpose-language he'll use anywhere in this letter. And it's a thrilling expression. He's telling Timothy and the Ephesian *church* not only who they are and what they should do, but how all that actually happens. In fact, he's giving one of the clearest expressions in the NT of the church's identity and mission. He's saying: *You're the church of the living God! Act like it!* But more, he's also telling them how to *act like it*. And it's different from being a Cub Scout or on the football team. Something

fundamentally different is happening here—something that tells us not only who we are and what we should do as *the church*, but specifies the only way it is possible for us to do it.

Let's explore Paul's purpose first by stating it as an affirmation, then by addressing how it's to be achieved.

### **THE CHURCH SHOULD BE ACTING LIKE THE CHURCH – 14-15**

Affirming this statement is Paul's purpose for writing. Look how he puts it here: **14** *I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, 15 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.* Some suggest that *these things* (14) only refers back to 3<sub>1</sub> and the qualifications for (*elders*) and *deacons* (Knight 178). But others say it refers to everything Paul has written since 2<sub>1</sub> where he began his instruction with: **21** *First of all...* (Kostenberger 530)—speaking to the whole body about praying in line with God's heart, then to the *men* about personal piety, and to the *women* about *proper attire* and service, and then on to the qualifications of (*elders*) and *deacons* in c.3. I agree with this view, that *these things* (Paul has written) refers to all of cc.2-3 together.

And he's written them so that Timothy and the Ephesians **15**... *may know how (they) ought to behave in the household of God...* Now don't think this means: *so they'll know how... to behave at church*, like *the household of God* is some building. He's reminding them that they are *the household of God, the church of the living God*. And as *the church*, they are *a pillar and buttress of the truth, (guarding) the good deposit entrusted to (them)* (2Ti.1:14; cf. 6:20), supporting *the truth of the living God* and displaying it in their lives—in their (*behavior*) as *the church*.

### **HOW IS THE CHURCH SUPPOSED TO DO THIS? – 16**

We'd expect a call to a certain type of (*behavior*) to be followed by a list of commands, a code of conduct. We'd expect a first-person pronoun if Paul is folding himself in with his readers: *I/we must pledge to do x, y, or z in order to behave like the church should behave—we must be good, and love one another, and defend true doctrine*, or the like. Or we'd expect a second-person pronoun if Paul is just going to issue some new rules: *You must attend church weekly to behave like the church*.

But that's not what we get. First we hear an introductory statement suggesting that the nature of our (*behavior*) as *the church* is quite different than we'd expect. Paul writes: **16** *Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness. Great... is the mystery of how we are to behave... as the church of the living God.* So right (*behavior*) as *the church* is called *godliness* here, and how we enter into

*godliness* he says is a *mystery*. That's an encouraging thought to begin with, isn't it? But we need to remember that the NT writers didn't define *mystery* the same way we do. Paul isn't saying the path toward *godliness* is random or vague or non-rational. In the NT the word *mystery* means *something previously hidden has now been revealed because of Christ*. So, what Paul seems to be saying is: *by common confession* (NASV), or *beyond all question* (Kostenberger 531), *the (greatness) of the revelation of Jesus Christ is displayed in His enabling godliness in the church*.

In Him we're actually enabled *to behave (as) the household of God, (as) the church of the living God, (as) a pillar and buttress (holding forth) of the truth*. In Christ we're equipped to grow in *godliness*. That wasn't possible before His coming. The reality for which Adam and Eve were created, but from which they fell into sin, is actually possible again. God's standard of *godliness* was revealed in *the law*, but it wasn't possible for us in our sin to meet that standard. Now it's a reality for us in Christ—like a *mystery* revealed. And the call to live in the reality of this *godliness* is a high priority in this letter. It, or a form of it, is used ten times.

We saw in 2<sup>1-2</sup> that *a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way* is the desired outcome of our *prayers*.

In 2<sup>10</sup> a key characteristic of *women who profess godliness* is that they seek to *adorn themselves with good works* more than with stylish clothes and accessories.

In 4<sup>7-8</sup> Paul calls Timothy to avoid the empty ideas of the false teachers and *rather, to train (himself) in godliness* because that has *value in every way*.

In 5<sup>4</sup> *godliness* is the primary quality *children or grandchildren show* as they care for their aging *parents*. And Paul says *this is pleasing in the sight of God*.

In 6<sup>3</sup> *teaching that accords with godliness* is set alongside *the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ* Himself as the standard by which the *different doctrine* taught by the false teachers is shown to be *unhealthy* and misdirected.

In fact, in 6<sup>5-6</sup> this *different doctrine* actually leads their *people* to see *godliness (as) a means of financial gain*, rather than as *great gain* in its own right as it's accompanied with *contentment*.

Finally, Paul opens his closing charges to Timothy saying: **6<sup>11</sup>** *But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness.* **1<sup>2</sup>** *Fight the*

*good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.*

We don't know the exact content of that *good confession*, but I'm guessing it didn't differ much from the one before us here, the one that begins not with a first- or second-person command, but with a third-person reflection, a redirection away from human effort to the Person and work of Jesus:

<p><b>16</b> ... <i>He was manifested in the flesh,</i>  <i>vindicated by the Spirit,</i>  <i>seen by angels,</i>  <i>proclaimed among the nations,</i>  <i>believed on in the world,</i>  <i>taken up in glory.</i></p>	<p>or</p>	<p>... <i>He was manifested in the flesh,</i>  <i>vindicated by the Spirit,</i>  <i>seen by angels,</i>  <i>proclaimed among the nations,</i>  <i>believed on in the world,</i>  <i>taken up in glory.</i></p>
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Commentators say the that the lyrical beauty of this hymn in Greek just can't be captured in English (Guthrie 103). And it's hard to know whether to group it as three couplets (Kostenberger 531) or two three-line stanzas (Fee 94). But it's not hard to know Who is in view, or what is being said about Him.

The *great mystery of godliness in the church*—that which produces *godliness in the church*—is nothing other than our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, come *in the flesh*. Following His death and burial, His victory over sin and death is proven—He was *vindicated by the Spirit* in His resurrection, which was witnessed *by angels*, then *proclaimed* and received, *believed on in the world*. Finally, in ultimate victory He was *taken up in glory*, returned to the Father, where His *church* will one day join Him, forever. **16** *Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness...* But as Paul wrote to the Colossians: **1 27** ... *God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.* And in John's words: **1Jo.33** ... *everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. Christ in (us) produces purity.* It produces *hope*. It produces the *godliness* that Paul is calling for in His letter to Timothy.

*Godliness* is (*behavior*) flows from the inside out. It is generated as we receive the saving, sanctifying Person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ into our hearts and minds and lives by faith. This is not the sort of change that happens as you put on a Cub Scout's uniform or a football jersey. This isn't self-motivated, self-empowered, external change. This is the change that results from being **1Pe.13** ... *born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.*

## CONCLUSION

**16** *Great indeed... is the mystery of godliness...* But that *godliness* previously hidden, completely out of our reach, is now ours through the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, proclamation, and promised return of our Lord Jesus Christ. He makes us (*godly*) by His saving, sanctifying grace, (*confessed*) and received by faith.