

CHURCH CONDUCT

Ben Janssen | 1 Timothy 3:14-16 | August 18, 2019

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. ¹⁶ 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.

We are in our annual sermon series called “Crosstown Basics,” in which we preach on the three basic elements of discipleship: gospel, community, and mission. Today we’re considering the importance of the gospel community. Today we’re talking about *ecclesiology*, the doctrine of the church. The church is what we mean when we say “community.” And what we’re arguing is that disciples cannot be made apart from the church. The church is essential in discipleship, and that makes ecclesiology of “first level” importance in the Christian faith. That’s why we say in the Apostles’ Creed, “I believe in the holy catholic church.” The church is *holy* because Christ has claimed her for himself, purchasing her with his own blood (Acts 20:28). The word *catholic* does not refer to the so-called Roman Catholic Church, but to the church’s global existence, to the fact that there is only one true church although there are thousands of local expressions of that one church.

So, do you believe in the church? You say you believe in God the Father Almighty, and that’s good. You believe in his Son, the Lord Jesus, and that’s good. And in the Holy Spirit? Yes! But do you believe in the church? Do you really? And what does that mean anyway?

In these verses before us today, we find three ways in which we ought to believe in the church, three ways in which we ought to conduct ourselves as a church if we really do mean what we say in the Creed. If we believe in the church, then we will believe that the church is the family of God, a protector of the truth, and the herald of the mystery.

THE FAMILY OF GOD

First, notice that the church is here called “the household of God.” We could even translate this phrase as “the house of God” (KJV). The word “household” can refer both to a place of dwelling or to the people who dwell in the same place. Here the emphasis surely lies on the latter image. So take this in: the church is here called, explicitly called, God’s family, his *household*.

Practical Images

Throughout the Bible we encounter various analogies and metaphors for the church, the people of God. You are probably familiar with many of these: the church as the “bride of Christ” (Rev 21) or the “body of Christ” (1 Cor 12:27). There are others. Michael Horton reminds us that the church is related to God as a vassal is related to the suzerain. God has established a treaty with his people, a covenant, and he rules over them according to the terms of the treaty as their Lord while they submit to him as his servants.¹ These images for the church are practical. We are to let Christ rule the Church, through the ministry of the Scriptures, while we all submit to his rule by being

obedient to those Scriptures. He is the Chief Shepherd of the Church (1 Pet 5:4), its Senior Pastor, and we are to humbly submit to him and follow his lead.

So when we come across one of these biblical images for the church, we should be asking ourselves about the implications of the symbol. The implication of the church as God's family means we relate to God not only as servants to their Lord, but also as sons and daughters to their father. Horton writes, "The federation is a family, with the suzerain as the father and the vassal-people as his son—and therefore brothers and sisters to each other."² We really are family.

The Real Family

Now don't make the mistake here of saying, "the church relates to God a little bit like a vassal to his servant and a little bit like a child to his father." The Bible would have us turn this around. It is the earthly relationships alluded to that are the metaphor. The heavenly relationship is the real thing.

So when we read here that the church is the family of God, and that you and I in the church are brothers and sisters together, we should not think, "We are *like* a family." No, we truly *are* family. All other family relationships are the metaphor. Your family, your *household* is like the family of God, but it is the family of God that is the real and lasting reality.

This explains why we see Jesus so radically redefining family in texts like Matthew 10:34-37:

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

Or when told that "his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him," Jesus replied, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" Pointing to his disciples he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!" (Matt 12:46-49).

To be united to God through Christ is to be united to one another as family. Some in the church understand this better than others. In many parts of the world if you receive Christian baptism you are ostracized or even expelled from your family. But Jesus promises something better. If entering into his family costs you even your closest biological relationships, have no fear:

Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life (Mk 10:29-30).

Family First

I really don't know how the Scripture could be any clearer on this than it is. As baptized followers of Jesus, we've been given a new identity. We are now members of his family, and therefore

members one of another (Eph 4:25). And that means that our primary relational commitments are to God and to his people. To be a disciple of Jesus necessitates that we not only say we believe this but that we actually live like we believe this.

In fact, notice what our text today says. Paul has written to Timothy so that he and others in the church “may know how one ought to behave in the household of God” (v. 15). Most commentators now recognize that this is at the heart of what Paul has written in the three “Pastoral Epistles” (1, 2 Timothy, Titus).³ Because we really are family, there is a code of conduct for how we are to act within this family.

What is this code of conduct? Well, you know, “don’t run in the church” and “always wear your Sunday best.” We are pretty good at making up our own rules, and no community of people can live without location-specific house rules, but this is not the behavior that stipulated. In 1 Timothy, the code of conduct begins in chapter two and includes specifics about corporate worship, the complementary roles of men and women, and qualifications for church leaders (elders and deacons). We cannot discuss these details now.

But what we can say is that our doctrine of the church, our *ecclesiology*, matters a great deal, not just in theory, not just in what we can write down on a statement of faith, but in our practice.

So how is your ecclesiology? How is your life shaped by your commitment to your church? Is it the center of your life and relationships, or is it ancillary? The church is the family of God. So we should live like this is true. We should live as family, and we should understand that this is critical to our discipleship.

A PROTECTOR OF THE TRUTH

But next, notice that the church is also called “a pillar and buttress of the truth.” So the church is not only the family of God, it is also a protector of the truth.

Pillar and Foundation

What does it mean that the church is a pillar of the truth? A pillar, of course, is placed within a building for support. It “holds up” the building, ensures that it does not collapse. The word *buttress* in the ESV refers either to the foundation of a building (NIV) or to objects designed for its protection (“bulwark” NET). It is doubtful that too much distinction is intended between the two terms.⁴ The idea is clear enough: the church is a protector of the truth.

The Church’s Crucial Role

Notice, then, the crucial role the church is designed by God to serve. The “truth” is the gospel itself, the “mystery of godliness” described in verse 16. Notice that our text does not say that the gospel is meant to protect the church. It’s the other way around: the gospel is supported and protected by the church. This is striking; one commentator says it may be the most significant phrase in the Pastoral Epistles.⁵ Just consider what happens to a building if the supporting structures or protective elements fail. We are here encouraged to see the importance of the church in its relation

to the gospel in the same way. If the church fails, the gospel is in danger. So you can say that you love God or Jesus or the gospel or the Bible, but if you say you don't love the church or live as though the church doesn't matter then you are an accomplice to the enemies of the gospel, throwing flaming darts at the central message of the Christian faith.

Now this does not mean that the church is more important than the gospel. That which is protected is more sacred than that which protects. Our love for the gospel that makes us a family should not be superseded by our love for the church any more than we ought to love our houses more than we love our families who dwell within its walls and under its roof. Nevertheless, if we love our families, we take care of our homes. And if we love the gospel, if we love the truth, then we cannot ignore the health of the church which serves it.

Maintaining a Healthy Church

So what makes for a healthy church? That's a huge question, isn't it? Again, we best keep our convictions limited to the context of 1 Timothy. At the very least the church's health must be measured by her worship (specifically, her corporate prayers), relationships, and leadership. And there's plenty there in 1 Timothy 2-3 to explore and flesh out.

But we must also keep in mind the first image, that of the church as God's family, and make sure our commitment to the health of the church is not merely a matter of its institutional health, things like finances, facilities, and Sunday attendance (or: budgets, buildings, and butts). If you read on in 1 Timothy, especially into chapter 5, you'll see just how "family" the church is supposed to conduct themselves. Listen to this:

Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity (1 Tim 5:1-2).

So how we relate to one another—yes, on Sundays, but throughout the rest of the week just as importantly—is so crucial to the life of a healthy church. I don't want us to pit Sunday worship against the rest of the week. I want us to be faithful to God and to each other regardless of what day of the week it is.

But I do think it is important that we keep emphasizing the importance of our Missional Families. Surely the world should be able to see that we really do consider the church our "first family" not only because we never miss a Sunday but because, like the early church, we are devoted to what we say we believe in the Apostles' Creed: "I believe ... in the communion of the saints." And so, "day by day, attending the temple together *and* breaking bread in their homes" (Acts 2:46).

The Gospel at Risk

Yes, the church has a crucial role to play in the gospel story because it is designed to support and protect the gospel. Why does the gospel need protection? Because it is under attack.

Now how does the gospel come under attack? Well, how would you attack something that is well-guarded? You would have to attack the guard. You would have to get around it in some way. And this is what was happening in the context of 1-2 Timothy. Commentator William Mounce says,

Paul's instructions about law, grace, his conversion, the opponents, the scope of salvation, men and women in church and in leadership, elders and deacons, all have one focus: to preserve the integrity of the gospel message.... But those in the Ephesian church, rather than supporting and protecting the gospel, are bringing it into disrepute because of their sin.... [They] are behaving so poorly that their sins are destroying the reputation of the church. The Ephesian church is failing.⁶

And so the gospel is put at risk.

Now the gospel will not fail, and that's because we have Jesus's own promise that the one church will not fail (Matt 16:18). We can rightly sing that song, "O Church of Christ, Invincible" because the "people of the Lord" are "empowered by the Spirit's breath, and nourished by His Word." The gospel is not entirely dependent on the church; the church is *a* pillar of the truth, not *the* pillar of the truth.

But, in the sovereign decree and wise counsel of God, each local church has been given a mission, a mission to support and protect the gospel message.

THE HERALD OF THE MYSTERY

And this leads us to our third way in which we ought to view the church, as the herald of the mystery. This is so important. If we miss this, we will expose the gospel to one of its greatest threats.

Community Mission

You see, there is a way to feel good about the "community" that exists in the church and yet be bringing great damage to the gospel. This is a terrifying reality. I think it's true that God has given to this church a vibrant sense of community. I've heard several people say that, both new members and former members. It encourages me when I hear it. But, brothers and sisters, community, or a sense of community, is not the goal here. It is important, and some need to be reminded of that. But it is not most important, and we all need to be reminded of that.

We do not protect the gospel by keeping it locked down, shared only among members of the family. Surprisingly, the gospel is supported and protected in the opposite way, by pulling it out, sharing it, proclaiming it. A healthy Christian community, or, as we say it here, a credible gospel community, must be a missional community, or again, as we say it here, a missional family. The gospel simply must get out. It must be heralded. Silencing it in the world is its greatest threat.

Remember the gospel story. God created the world, and gave to his world everything it needed. It was a good creation. Sin entered the world when we, as God's creation, decided to take the one

thing that God did not give. What does God do to fix this problem of sin? The answer to that question, is counterintuitive. It is the heart of the gospel message. Theologian Kelly Kapic writes,

One would think that in order to fix this God should take something back. He doesn't. Instead, he gives even more away. In fact, he gives everything away.⁷

The heart of the gospel is not "God so loved he took back what was stolen." The heart of the gospel is, "God so loved, he gave." Gave to whom? Gave to those who had already stolen from him.

So you see, the gospel is not served by keeping it away from sinners. The gospel is served, protected, supported, when we offer it to those who need it most.

The Confession of Faith

And so it is that in our text, immediately on the heels of verse 15 in which we find such a sweeping claim about the importance of the church, the gospel community, we are led to the words of an ancient Christian hymn. But before we read it again, notice what is said about it.

First, it is called "the mystery of godliness." The content of the hymn is centered on Christ. So the "mystery of godliness" is another designation for the gospel of Jesus, the "truth" of which the church is called to be a pillar and protector. "Mystery" refers to God's previously hidden but now disclosed plan achieved through Christ. But modified by "godliness," Paul wants us to see that the entirety of the Christian life involves the combination of faith in who Christ is and what he has done with the way we must live if we truly do believe in him.⁸

Second, so how must we live? In short, we must live out loud. We must be heralds. Paul says that the mystery of godliness is great indeed and that it is something we confess. Now don't miss this. This letter was written to Timothy who pastored in the city of Ephesus, and in that city the people would regularly proclaim, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians (Acts 19:28, 34; cf. 19:27, 35). It appears Paul is hijacking the city's creed and subverting it with a new confession: "Great is the mystery of godliness."⁹ The content of the mystery that follows in verse 16 is that new, subversive creed, quite like the Apostles' Creed. It is meant to be said out loud, together, a pledge of allegiance that is subversive to the creeds and confessions of the pagan culture in which we live.

Where Grace Is Found

So we, the church, are rebels against the loyalties of our neighbors. But what strange rebels we ought to be. We are supposed to gather together, to meet together often, to provoke one another—not to riot and boycott—but to love and good deeds. This "rebellion" is to be life-giving to our culture, and everyone is to be invited to come and drink from the life-giving water of the gospel we proclaim freely. As Kapic argues, "The normal means through which God extends the gift of his grace and love is his people, his church."¹⁰ So we are to conduct ourselves as the heralds of the mystery of grace and love as we live out loud the confession we make together.

So, do you believe in the holy catholic church, in the communion of saints? Kapic reminds us that to believe in the church "is always an act of faith, demanding not only our intellectual assent, but

also our time, our savings accounts, and most of all our love for people and places different from us.”¹¹ Yes, people get hurt in the church, for the church is a gathering of sinners. But a church is also *God’s* gathering of sinners, and where God calls sinners to himself, his grace is sure to be found there.

¹ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), [715](#).

² *Ibid.*, [724](#).

³ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol 46, eds. Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard, and Glenn W. Barker (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000), [214](#).

⁴ In other words, a hendiadys.

⁵ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, [222](#).

⁶ *Ibid.*, [231](#).

⁷ Kelly M. Kopic, *God So Loved, He Gave: Entering the Movement of Divine Generosity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 60.

⁸ Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), [277](#).

⁹ *Ibid.*, [277](#).

¹⁰ Kopic, *God So Loved*, 89.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 190.