

1 Timothy 3:14-4:5 “What Is God Doing in the Church?” (September 25, 2011)
Isaiah 10:5-11:16
Psalm 74

In the days of the prophet Isaiah, the northern kingdom of Israel (with its capital at Samaria) joined forces with the kingdom of Syria (with its capital at Damascus) against the kingdom of Judah (with its capital at Jerusalem).

But Isaiah says that Assyria is an axe in God’s hand –
God’s chosen instrument to bring judgment upon Israel/Samaria and Syria/Damascus,
as well as Judah/Jerusalem
And when God has finished his “all his work on Mt Zion and on Jerusalem,”
then he will turn against the axe – and destroy Assyria.

Psalm 74 connects with this theme of the axe.
Psalm 74 may, in this case, be speaking of Babylon rather than Assyria,
but that is because Babylon was the *next* axe in God’s arsenal.

Psalm 74 speaks of how their enemies “were like those who swing axes in a forest of trees.”
They profaned “the dwelling place of your name”
Your habitation has become “the habitations of violence”

But, as Isaiah said, after the axes finished their work –
after the forests are cut down –
even still, a root – a sprout will arise
and he will establish the kingdom of God –
and all the nations will come and inquire of *him*.

Psalm 74 pleads with God,
“Remember your congregation which you have purchased of old...
Remember Mount Zion, where you have dwelt.” (v2)
“Have regard for the covenant,
for the dark places of the land are full of the habitations of violence.” (v20)

But we sing Psalm 74 with the knowledge that God has done what the Psalmist plead for!
We sing Psalm 74 with the knowledge that all that Isaiah said of the stump of Jesse
has come to pass in Jesus Christ!

Sing Psalm 74
Read 1 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Paul writes so that you might know how to behave in the household of God.
We’ve been rather zeroed in on the particulars of men, women, bishops, deacons –
and Paul now moves back to the big picture.
The reason why I’m writing is so that you will know what is necessary in your conduct

as the household of God.
When Paul says “how one ought to behave”
he uses very strong language,
saying, this is essential for the church of the living God.

The *point* is that God has formed a new household.

1. The Church as Pillar and Buttress of the Truth/the Gospel (3:14-16)

¹⁴*I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, ¹⁵if 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.*

a. What Does It Mean to Be a Household? (v15a)

We saw in the discussion of bishops and deacons the importance of the household.
How a man governs his own household will suggest how he will govern the church.

A household – an “oikos” – can refer either to the physical structure (the house),
or to the members of the household.
And when you look at how Paul describes the household in verse 15,
you can see that he draws on both aspects.

The household of God is “the church” – the “ecclesia” – the assembly –
those who are gathered together.
In that respect it is “the people.”

But “the people” are themselves a physical structure!
The assembly – the ecclesia – is “a pillar and buttress of the truth.”

What Jesus has done is establish a new household –
a new family – drawn from both Jew and Gentile,
from every family on earth –
that comes together in the church of the living God.

When I was in China last year, I spoke to the International Fellowship
about the importance of the church as a household.

We live in a culture that values the nuclear family.

This is revealed in the way we structure our living space –
as well as our neighborhoods and cities.

We have organized space and time to express the centrality of the nuclear family.

Expats who go to China do not leave these assumptions behind!

My observation was that most of the westerners still operated as individual family units,
rather than as the household of God.

The solution is *not* to abandon the nuclear family,
but to expand it.

Paul still distinguishes between “your household” and the “household of God.”

We need to *live* as the household of God – as a part of one family.

b. What Does It Mean to Be a Pillar/Buttress? (v15b)

But the second question in verse 15,
is “what does it mean to be a pillar and buttress?”

The word “pillar” or “column” is a very common Greek word –
used frequently in the LXX to refer to the pillars of the tabernacle or temple,
and used of all temples in the ancient world!

Pillars were used for monumental architecture –
particularly for temples – for religious buildings.

And pillars are rather prominent features in temples.
(In Solomon’s temple, the two pillars appear to be free-standing columns –
not designed for supporting anything).

If you call someone a “pillar” you are saying that they are rather prominent
(Paul refers to Peter and James as “pillars” of the Jerusalem church).

So when Paul calls the church of the living God a *pillar* of the truth,
he points to the church’s public prominence.

He then refers to the church as a ‘buttress’ or ‘foundation’ of the truth.
This word is not nearly so common –
but it’s meaning is equally clear.
What does a buttress or foundation do?
It’s holds something up – and, if it is doing its job properly –
it holds it up immovably.

The temples of the ancient world were the pillars and buttresses of their religion.
“Great is Diana of the Ephesians” was the cry of the silversmiths against Paul
(as they fashioned their silver images of Diana and her temple!).
Paul replies, “great is the church of the living God” –
as he points to *you* and your conduct as the household of God.

If the church is a pillar and buttress of the truth,
then the church is firmly and prominently holding up the truth.

This may explain the connection between verse 15 and verse 16.
Because verse 16 is the truth of which the church is to be a pillar and buttress.

c. The Mystery of Godliness: Christ (v16)

¹⁶*Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:*

First, I should point out that a mystery, for Paul, is not something that is hard to understand – but rather, a mystery is something that was hidden.

So when Paul speaks of the *mystery* of godliness, he is saying that this truth was once hidden, but is now revealed.

And Paul says that the mystery of godliness is the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus.

*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.*

This may sound odd.

Paul has just said that he is writing to tell you how to conduct yourself in the household of God. And we usually think of “godliness” in terms of what *we* are supposed to be like. But then, Paul says that the mystery of godliness is Christ.

And reference to the Greek won’t help you!

The word here is *eusebeia* – which means “piety” or “godliness.” (“behavior reflecting correct religious beliefs and attitudes” – Louw-Nida)

If you would understand what Paul is talking about, you need to understand how “*eusebeia*” (godliness) was used in Paul’s day.

In the Jewish world of Paul’s day the word *eusebeia* focused on the faithfulness of an individual or a community.

People spoke of the good king Josiah as “*eusebeia*” – pious – because of his faithfulness in keeping Passover. Indeed *eusebeia* frequently meant an outwardly pious life – and Paul himself uses the word in this way in 2 Tim 3:5, when he speaks of those who have the form of godliness (piety), but deny its power.

So when Paul speaks of the “mystery of godliness” – you would expect Paul to speak of the secret to good conduct (piety).

And in fact, he does!

The key to understanding what Paul is doing is found in Isaiah 11:2

Isaiah speaks of how the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon the branch of Jesse –
a spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
The LXX translated “fear of the LORD” as “eusebeia” (piety).

The mystery of godliness is not some principle.
The secret of piety is not some set of rules.

The mystery of godliness is Jesus.
The secret of piety is the gospel – the good news of what Jesus has done.

“He was manifested in the flesh” – in the incarnation,
as he humbled himself and took our form – the form of a servant.

“manifested in the flesh is an awfully short form,
but then again, Timothy was Paul’s co-author in Philippians,
when Paul penned that glorious description of how *you*
are to have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus,
who though he was in the form of God,
did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped.

He was “vindicated” (literally, *justified* – he was declared righteous) “by the Spirit.”
(it is the same pronoun as “in the flesh” – so we could say “in the Spirit”)
We don’t normally talk about Jesus being justified,
but if you think about it, Jesus’ resurrection
was his justification.

Paul speaks in Romans 1:3-4 about the gospel of God, “concerning his Son,
who was descended from David according to the flesh
and was declared to be the Son of God in power
according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead.”

Now, in the case of Jesus, it was not the justification of the *ungodly*
but the justification of the righteous one!
The Spirit of God declared Jesus to be just – because Jesus *was* just!
That is why it is fitting to translate it “vindicated”!

But also, in light of our Trinity study yesterday,
I would point out that both in Romans 1 and 1 Timothy 3
Paul speaks of the resurrection of Jesus in terms of the Holy Spirit.
He was justified in the Spirit –
the same Spirit spoken of in Isaiah 11
who would come upon the branch of Jesse,
so that righteousness might come to all the earth!

But the mystery of godliness – the secret of piety –
was also “seen by angels” – the word “angel” means “messenger”,

so this may refer either to heavenly messengers or earthly messengers (or both!),
he was “proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory.”

The secret of piety has now been revealed in Jesus Christ.
And it is not some secret knowledge –
some hidden teaching that you have been missing all these years!

No, the mystery of godliness is Jesus.
In Jesus, God is forming this new household.
The same Spirit who vindicated (justified) Jesus,
now unites us to Jesus by faith, so that we might share in his justification.

The “secret of piety” is not “just try harder” –
the secret of piety is “believe in Jesus”!

Paul will go on in 1 Timothy to speak of the importance of godliness:

4:7 – “train yourself for godliness”

4:8 – “godliness is of value in every way,
as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.”

6:3 – he insists that all doctrine should agree with
“the teaching that accords with godliness”

6:5 – he warns that godliness is not a means to gain –
although there is “great gain in godliness with contentment” (6:6)
and exhorts Timothy to pursue “righteousness, godliness, faith, love,
steadfastness, gentleness.” (6:11)

So the mystery of godliness – the secret of piety – is Jesus.
And you are supposed to pursue godliness.

But if you pursue godliness without pursuing Jesus,
then you are like the Pharisees who were so focused on outward observance,
that they missed Piety when he was revealed in the flesh.

Now, the warning at the beginning of chapter 4
is simply a warning of what happens when you substitute *something else*
for the mystery of godliness.

2. The Spirit’s Warning against Teachings of Demons (4:1-5)

a. A Warning against Those Who Deny the Goodness of Creation (v1-3)

¹Now the Spirit [the same Spirit who vindicated Jesus] expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, ²through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, ³who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe

and know the truth.

Notice that we are immediately back in the category of “piety” (godliness) –
the outward actions that express right belief.

Paul says that there will be those who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods.
He says that such people have devoted themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons.

They themselves may be perfectly “sincere” – (i.e., well-meaning)
but they have departed from the faith –
they have followed *liars*.

They have left behind “the mystery of godliness” (namely, Jesus),
because they have a faulty view of creation.

At the root of these views are the “insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared.”
(their consciences do not function properly, because they have been “cauterized”;
or, the other way to translate the word “seared” would be as “branded” –
they have the devil’s “brand” on their conscience.

The difference “seared” and “branded” is pretty minimal.

Those whose consciences are seared by the teaching of demons
are in fact branded with his stamp.

Paul is saying that deviation from Christian teaching and practice is utterly destructive.

At the root of every sin is a lie.

At the root of every heinous sin is a conscience-searing lie.

And when you believe the lie, you become immune to all that follows –
and the result is destruction.

Paul says that forbidding marriage and requiring abstinence from certain foods
is a fundamental denial of the gospel –
a rejection of the mystery of godliness.

Remember the mystery of godliness?

What runs through the very heart of “the mystery of godliness”?

“He was manifested in the flesh.”

The Son of God himself came in the flesh –

in all the weakness and frailty of our humanity.

The one through whom the Father created all things, became a creature.

He who gave the law, was born under the law.

God’s purpose in the incarnation was to restore “the flesh”!

That is why the one who came in the flesh and was vindicated by the Spirit
was also proclaimed among the nations –
believed on in the world,

and taken up in glory.

At the heart of the OT food laws is the premise that the unclean can contaminate the clean.

At the heart of “the mystery of godliness” is the premise that the glory of Christ
is now radiating out from the church of the living God –
so that the power of the “clean” now cleanses the unclean.

Do you believe that?

Do you act like you believe it?

Or do you (like I have so often!)

act like your conscience has been seared by the lie

that the world is evil and corrupt and so we must simply avoid it?

b. A Reminder: The Word and Prayer Sanctifies Creation (v4-5)

*⁴For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with
thanksgiving, ⁵for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.*

Paul says that “everything created by God is good,
and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving,
for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.”

There is a modern revival of the old Judaizing heresy
that urges Christians to return to the Mosaic food laws.

Paul says that such teachers are “liars whose consciences are seared.”
They do not confess the mystery of godliness.
They do not believe that God has come in the flesh
to redeem and restore creation!

This is what Paul had said at the beginning of his epistle,
when he spoke of “certain persons” who had “wandered away into vain discussion,
desiring to be teachers of the law,
without understanding either what they are saying
or the things about which they make confident assertions.” (1:6-7)

Today, in our pluralist society,
we want to say that all that matters is that you are “sincere.”
All that matters is that you “mean well.”

But Paul says that these teachers are hypocrites and liars.
They are hypocrites because they “profess” Christ.
But their piety – their form of godliness – their “eusebeia” –
is *not* that of Christ.

If you say that you believe in Jesus – if you say you know the truth –
but you forbid marriage –
or you require abstinence from foods that God created
to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth,
then you are a hypocrite,
because you do not profess the truth as it is in Jesus.

Jesus came to restore the created order.

He was manifested in the flesh because *we needed a holy flesh and blood!*

He was justified in the Spirit – which is another way of saying,
he was raised from the dead – because the resurrection of Jesus
was his justification – his vindication.

He was seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world, taken up to glory –

all so that he might sanctify creation,
so that the church might be the household of God,
the pillar and buttress of the truth;

so that the church – *so that you* –
might be the place where this new creation takes shape

and is made known to the nations.

And how does this happen?

Through the word of God and prayer.

Paul says that “everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected
if it is received with thanksgiving,
for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer
[perhaps better, “and intercession.”]

While the particular issue here may be food (or marriage),
the principle applies to everything!

In the OT, the point of the food laws had to do with Israel’s separation from the nations.
In the NT, Peter learns that he should not call anyone unclean,
because God is bringing Jew and Gentile together in one new man.

The word of God and intercession cleanse that which is unclean.

Because of what Jesus has done –
because he humbled himself –
and because the Spirit has vindicated him in the resurrection –
therefore the church is the place where this glorious vision begins to take shape.