

Conduct in the church of the living God

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 29 April 2018

Preacher: Benjamin Wilks

[0 : 00] Well, my question for you to reflect on as we turn to this passage this evening is how would you describe the church?

How would you define the church? If somebody asked you what is the church, what would your answer be? How do you think of the church in your head? If you ask somebody out on the streets, they'll probably give you the description of the church of a large building with a nice spire and what have you and a big cross on the top of the spire and, you know, it'll be a nice old building and so on and they'll describe the building for you.

Many of us, of course, will know that we want to move beyond talking about the building and see the church more as the people within it or the people who gather wherever they may be, a group of people gathered in God's name.

Well, our passage this evening answers some of that question of what the true nature of the church is. So I hope that by the time we come to the end of this evening's time together that we will have a clearer answer to that question.

As our passage this morning set out the paradigm for Jesus' ministry, as that kind of functioned as a heading over what was coming in Luke's gospel, well, so too our passage this evening is absolutely pivotal for the book as a whole.

[1 : 33] If we want to understand 1 Timothy, we need to understand this passage because this is where Paul explains his reason for writing this letter. He tells us here what he is doing and why he's doing it.

I think three headings will help us this evening, I hope, as we consider first the reasons for writing and then the nature of the church and then the mystery of godliness.

So first of all then, why is it that we have this letter? Why has Paul put pen to paper? It was a pretty expensive undertaking at that point. You know, it wasn't just type out your email and hit send at no cost whatsoever, not even, you know, the 60p or whatever it is for a stamp.

No, we're talking the equivalent of probably hundreds of pounds to send this letter by the time you've bought the supplies and paid somebody to take it or, you know, taken up somebody's time to go and take it.

This is a big undertaking, so why bother? Well, Paul gives us his answer. Paul's desire, his intent, is to go and talk to the church in person.

[2 : 44] He wants to go and be there and lay things out for them and help them and bring them along. Numerous times in his letters, he expresses this same desire to go and be with the church.

But Paul is all too aware of his own finite nature. He knows he can't be everywhere at once. He knows that even when he has a plan for what he's going to do, that that isn't always what turns out to happen, that sometimes the Holy Spirit has other ideas and sends him off in a different direction.

So Paul knows that it may be that he will be delayed or even never come to Ephesus with these instructions. And so he writes them down for us, or rather writes them down for the church in Ephesus.

Now, he writes this letter to Timothy. It's addressed to him as the one kind of directing and encouraging the church in Ephesus.

But that doesn't mean that we need to assume that everything that Paul is writing here in this letter is new to Timothy. Timothy is an experienced person who's been following Paul around for a while.

[3 : 51] He knows what he's about. And most likely, Paul has already given him verbal instructions when he sent him to Ephesus in the first place or when he left him there. So Timothy knows what it is that he's supposed to be doing.

And so this letter functions more as kind of official corroboration of that. The letter is designed to be overheard by the rest of the church. So as Paul tells Timothy this is how things should be, the rest of them are supposed to hear that and know how they should themselves be, and therefore listen to Timothy when he tells them, go and do it this way.

So it's sort of the official confirmation. I don't know if you're like me, but any time I arrange something over the phone, I always want it to be followed up in writing afterwards.

I always say, you know, could you send me that in an email? Sometimes that's just because I know I'll have forgotten it if I don't get it in writing. Sometimes it's because I don't quite believe that it's going to happen if it's not officially there in writing.

You know, you go and negotiate a price for something, and well, who knows whether that's still going to be the price in a week's time when it was just on the phone. So you want it in writing. You want it official, don't you?

[5 : 02] That kind of written-down confirmation, this is what it's going to be. And I think that is something of what we have from Paul to Timothy here. It's the official concrete version.

And what a blessing to us 2,000 years later that Paul felt the necessity to do that for Timothy because it means that we have the record of it ourselves.

We don't have a record of what Paul said to Timothy in person, but we do have this letter. And that means that we have Paul's instructions, Paul's description of what the nature of the church is and how people should live in it.

So Paul continues in this section by explaining why the people in Ephesus, why their conduct matters so much.

Paul is concerned with how people behave in their lives. He's concerned particularly with how they behave in the church. That is, he's concerned particularly about how they act when they gather together to worship as the church in its official capacity, as it were.

[6 : 07] Of course, that kind of overflows into the rest of what they do the rest of the time. But his first concern in this letter is, what are they doing when they gather together? And Paul gives them three reasons why their conduct ought to match up with what he's been setting out in the chapters before, and indeed what he will continue to set out in the chapters ahead.

Three reasons why they ought to behave this way. Firstly, he expects this kind of behavior in the church because the church is God's household.

It's there in the middle of verse 15, isn't it? How people ought to conduct themselves in God's household. An attitude of my house, my rules seems to be going out of fashion somewhat in our increasingly individualistic society.

But let me tell you, that is exactly God's attitude. God's attitude is my house, my rules. God gets to make the rules. He gets to decide what goes on and what doesn't.

He gets to set the rules, whether that's no tigers in the kitchen, as I am constantly telling Zechariah, or whether that's no ball games indoors, or no guests after 10 p.m., or whatever it might be.

[7 : 24] God gets to set the rules. God gets to say, only men should be elders in the church. God gets to say, men, you need to learn how to pray without arguing and fighting with one another.

He gets to say, what are you doing coming here dressed like that young lady? The church is God's household, so God makes the rules. But the image here isn't a kind of negative dictatorial imposition of this is what will be.

No, as God pictures Himself here as the head of the family, as the head of the household, the image isn't of a kind of distant authoritarian leader, but rather this is the same God who tells fathers not to exasperate their children.

This is the God who claims the church as His beloved bride. So to be God's household means He gets to make the rules, but it also means that we're family.

It means that we have the intimate closeness with God and with one another that goes on with that family nature, to be the household of the church.

[8 : 32] So the church, of course, is not about a building. The church is a household. And that also means that the church isn't about an institution. It isn't kind of an abstract idea.

It isn't primarily this kind of massive authoritarian structure. No, there might be rules, but they're family rules, not the imposition of a distant imperial overlord, rules for harmonious family life, instructions set down for our good by our God.

So the church is the household of God. Secondly, their conduct should be this way because this household is the church of the living God.

And again, there's kind of the positive dimension of the living God and the negative dimension to it as well, much as there's kind of the positives and negatives of being the household, if you want to talk about it that way.

Well, the same is true of God as the living God. If this is the church of the living God, then that means He is living and He is active. It means He's alive. He's involved.

[9 : 45] He cares what's happening in His church. God is the living one. That's in contrast to the dead idols. When the other inhabitants of Ephesus are off worshiping at the temple of Artemis, worshiping a statue, worshiping a beautifully carved statue, no doubt, but still a God of stone, not a living God.

In contrast to those other people in Ephesus, the Christian church is worshiping a living God, a God who is moving in the midst of His church.

The picture here is the same as that in the first chapter of Revelation, of the one who is the first and the last and the living one, the one who cares for His churches, who is not distant but close at hand.

So to worship a living God is a wonderful thing, is a great blessing. But also, to worship a living God is a terrifying thing, because that phrase of the living God is also reminiscent of Old Testament passages where God takes an oath of punishment.

If you've got your Bibles there, turn back with me to Numbers chapter 14, and we'll have a look at a couple of verses there. Numbers 14. Numbers 14 and verse 20.

[11 : 17] The Lord replied, There in the book of Numbers and a few other places, you've got Deuteronomy 32, 40 as well.

God invokes this formula, So the image of the living God is not just cute and cuddly.

This isn't a light, comfortable thing. Hebrews 10 tells us it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

And so part of what Paul says by referring to the church as the household, the church of the living God, part of what he says there is, This isn't comfortable.

This isn't anything goes. He's saying, I will not allow these false teachers in Ephesus to destroy my household.

[12 : 46] The living God declares that they will not be allowed to prosper. We read in our reading through into the beginning of chapter 4, because I wanted to remind you there that there is this false teaching rife in the church in Ephesus as Paul writes to them.

These instructions for conduct in the church that he's giving through this letter, these aren't instructions for minor improvements to a thriving church. This is dramatic surgery for a seriously unhealthy church.

The church is of the living God. And thirdly, their conduct is key, because the church is to be the pillar and foundation of the truth.

We're coming here to the end of verse 15, the pillar and foundation of the truth. Now, don't get too tied up in the word foundation here. Paul isn't saying that the truth is kind of built on top of the church in the sense that the truth depends on the church to validate it and create it.

It's not that the church creates the gospel. Really, the reverse of that is true. The church doesn't create the truth. Without the truth, the church itself would crumble.

[14 : 08] But what Paul is saying is, the church is the pillar and foundation. But in that, the church upholds the truth. The mission of the church is to serve the truth, to hold the truth fast, to hold it firm and secure, to keep it stable and unassailed by outside forces that come in to attack the truth, but rather to be a defense against that.

The church has a responsibility to guard the truth. I saw a quote during the rounds on Facebook and a few other places this week that said, that the unity of the church is more important than doctrinal correctness.

That it's more important that we be united in the face of, you know, those enemies out there than that we get all of our doctrine correct. Now, it is true that the fragmentation of the church is a great travesty.

It ought not to be so that there are denominations without number around the world. We ought to be more united than we are.

But our response to that disunity cannot be to just throw our hands up in the air and say, well, anything goes. We need to join together regardless of what we believe.

[15 : 34] Because the only true ground of unity for the church is the fact that we are united to Christ. If we are not ourselves linked to Christ, if we are not in union with Him, if we are not believing what He has said, then there is nothing to unite us to one another.

So the true test of unity is adherence to the existing truth of the gospel. It is precisely our doctrinal correctness that ought to be our unity.

So why should the Ephesian believers conduct themselves in the way that Paul is setting out? They should conduct themselves this way because they are to defend the truth. That is their role as the church.

Because the proclamation of the gospel is at stake. The church cannot be a credible witness to the world outside, cannot declare the gospel if their own lives show it to be a lie, if the way that they are behaving shows that they do not really believe the things that they're supposedly saying, or that the things that they're saying have drifted away from what they're supposed to be saying.

They cannot be a witness to the gospel unless they live in the manner that Paul is setting out. And so we come to the mystery of true godliness.

[17 : 05] And I think in the flow of Paul's writing as he's going through this chapter and the letter as a whole, as he comes to verse 16 here, I think the purpose of verse 16 is to explain and to expand on the last word of verse 15.

What is the truth at the end of verse 15 that is to be guarded and defended? What does the church of the living God uphold?

Great is the mystery of true godliness. Now remember that word mystery. This is the same mystery, the same faith, the same revealed mystery that we saw a couple of weeks ago in verse 9.

This is the fundamentals of the faith, the deep truths of the faith, the mystery revealed. And so to explain that mystery, to explain the fundamentals of the faith, Paul here takes up what's likely a fragment of an early hymn or a creed, and he uses that to expound what it is to have faith.

Again, there are a few things that we could draw out from these brief lines. Firstly, if you're looking in the NIV, you've got the word he there at the beginning of the poetic section.

[18 : 25] More literally, that's actually the word who. So it's a relative pronoun. It's a word that refers back to a noun that's come before.

It says, okay, I'm returning to something that I've previously talked about. And of course the word who, you expect that thing that's been previously talked about to be a person, right?

And so you cast your eye back through these verses, and we're struggling to come up with one, aren't we? There isn't one there in the rest of verse 16.

In fact, there is no person mentioned. And it seems to be that what's happening is that word who is being used to refer back to the mystery.

So the mystery is the noun that we've got, and the word who, so if you want to refer back to the mystery, you really want the word which, but Paul uses the word who. And what seems to be happening is Paul is saying the answer to the mystery, the nature of the mystery, is not an abstract idea.

[19 : 31] The mystery is a person. And so the which becomes the who. The mystery is a person. And so to a culture that is entranced with the idea of mystery religions, to those things that have the deep truth, the secret truth, that are known to just the select few, the mystery.

Into that context of a culture fascinated with mystery, into that context comes Christianity. And Paul says, you want to know the hidden things?

You want to know the secret? Well, here, let me tell you the secret. One word. Jesus. Jesus, the man who was God.

Jesus, who came and revealed the Father. He came and unveiled the mystery. Jesus, who appeared in the flesh. Jesus, who was incarnate in the world.

The secret. Now, for people in Greece, in that kind of whole area of the world at the time, the idea of any divine being making an appearance in human form, that's pretty exciting.

[20 : 46] That would have been exciting enough for most people in the ancient world. But Christianity goes further than that. It's not just a divine being making an appearance in human form, but rather that the one that we worship actually became flesh, became genuinely human, became capable of laughter and tears, became capable of suffering and dying.

And that's amazing enough, isn't it, to have the God who becomes flesh, who becomes true humanity. But the story doesn't end there, does it? Because Jesus was not just a man.

Jesus' story didn't end in weakness and in death. But rather, the story continues with His resurrection. And so, He is vindicated in the Spirit.

And the angels now worship Him in awe and wonder. The first three lines here, it would seem, are probably describing, in brief summary, the life of Jesus, His incarnation, His resurrection, and His ascension into glory as He's worshipped by the angels.

And then the next group of three lines describes the results of Jesus' work. And so, as a result of His being incarnate and of His death and resurrection and ascension, as a result of that, Jesus is then preached among the nations.

[22 : 19] The church's response to Jesus' life, death and resurrection was and is to go and preach. And to preach not an abstract idea, but to preach a person, to preach the mystery, to preach the one who is the mystery revealed.

To go and proclaim what Jesus had done. And to preach not only in Jerusalem and not only in Judea and Samaria, but to go and preach to the ends of the earth.

The gospel exploded outwards after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. And the result of that proclamation, fifth line here, belief.

Jesus was believed on in the world. The result of proclaiming Jesus ought to be belief. Faith should be trust. The purpose of preaching should always be faith.

Not dry intellectual theory. Not an abstract understanding, but a living dependent faith. A belief. I mean, not that that's what we believe will happen 100% of the time.

[23 : 28] Not that we think that every time we preach of Jesus that people will come to believe in him. But that that should be our goal. That should be our reason for preaching and for proclamation.

That we don't hide that away. We don't pretend that our objective is anything other than that people will come to faith. That they will come to know Jesus for themselves.

And indeed that is what was happening. People were giving him their believing allegiance. And rightly so.

That is what they should do. Because as the final line tells us, he was taken up in glory. Jesus, having been vindicated, is now glorified.

He now rules the world as the one true genuine Lord. So of course these six short lines are not an exhaustive explanation of the Christian faith.

[24 : 28] But they lay out the core. They lay out the essentials of faith. Because the essentials of faith is not an abstract idea. But the person who is described in these lines.

Beyond all question. The mystery from which true godliness springs is great. He appeared in the flesh. Was vindicated by the Spirit.

Was seen by angels. Was preached among the nations. Was believed on in the world. Was taken up in glory. So why is this letter being written?

Well, so that in Paul's absence. The church may nevertheless learn what it is. To be united around the truth. To be joined together as a body of believers.

What it is to have a common life. Grounded in the mystery. That is Christ Jesus. And in order that the world looking on. Might see who is the rightful Lord of all.

[25 : 35] Lord God. Let's pray. Lord God.

We thank you for that mystery revealed. For that mystery revealed. Not to be an abstract idea. But to be a person. To be a man who we can know.

Who we can call our brother. Who we can call our Savior. And who we must call our Lord. Lord we thank you that you have shown that to us.

And we pray that you might keep it. Central in our minds. As we depend on him. In whose name we ask. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.