

06. 1 Timothy 3:14-4:16



1 Timothy 3:14-15

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these instructions to you so that, if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God

Paul hopes to visit Timothy soon. He is writing in case something should happen to delay his coming. He summarises the central thrust of the letter which concerns ‘**how one ought to behave in the household of God**’. It is the disruption caused by erroneous teaching that accounts for Paul’s accent on good teaching and so on good teachers, who must concentrate on God’s providence (οἰκονομία, ‘house-law’, see 1:4) for ‘**the household (οἶκος) of God**’. This description of the church is especially fitting when we recall that the community assembled in a home (see 3:4-5).

In his Letter to the Galatians, Paul referred to Christians as the ‘family (οἰκεῖος, ‘members of the household’) of faith’ (Galatians 6:10). In his general letter to the Gentile churches he speaks of Christians as ‘members of the household (οἰκεῖος) of God’ (Ephesians 2:19). The church is ‘a dwelling place of God in the Spirit’ (Ephesians 2:22). As Paul wrote to the Corinthians: ‘we are the temple of the living God; as God said: I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people’ (2 Corinthians 6:16). The presence of God in the midst of his people places special demands on our behaviour.

1 Timothy 3:15

the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the column and pedestal of the truth

What sets the church apart from pagan religious assemblies is that it is ‘**the church of the living God**’. ‘**The truth**’ is the truth about who God really is and how God and God’s providence of salvation has been revealed. It is the ‘gospel of salvation’ (Ephesians 1:13), ‘the truth that is in Jesus’ (Ephesians 4:31). This is the truth, the gospel, that the church is to proclaim.

1 Timothy 3:15

the church is the column and pedestal of the truth.

Paul may be alluding to the honorary columns that were erected to celebrate a victory. In which case he is saying that the lives of Christians must demonstrate the victory of God's love, which is to be carved into their lives the way the victories of the emperors were carved into the columns (see Trajan's column in the forum named after him).

He may have in mind the pillar of cloud and of fire that led the people through the desert to the Promised Land (see Exodus 13:21). If so, then the point he is making is that the life of the church, including the behaviour of its members, is to be such as to guide the world on the way of salvation. The life of the Christian community is the necessary pedestal on which the column is to rest. If the world is to hear the gospel it must come from a community whose life witnesses to the word which it proclaims.

1 Timothy 3:16

Without any doubt, the **mystery** of our religion is great

Speaking of the church's mission to proclaim the gospel by the quality of its life, Paul presents a tightly structured creedal formula of what he calls '**the mystery of religion**' (εὐσέβεια). It is especially in his Letter to the Colossians that he develops the idea of 'mystery'. At the heart of the Christian gospel, and so at the heart of Christian living, is the revelation of something that is unexpected and always surprising. '**The mystery of faith**' (3:9) is that the saving power and love of God is revealed in the outpouring of love from the heart of the crucified Jesus.

1 Timothy 3:16

He was revealed in flesh

To know God we must look upon the ‘one mediator between God and humankind, the Messiah Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all’ (2:5-6). It is in him that ‘the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily’ (Colossians 2:9). It is in the life, and especially in the life-giving, of Jesus that ‘the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all’ (Titus 2:11). It is in Jesus, sharing the brokenness and vulnerability of our human condition, that ‘the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared’ (Titus 3:4).

1 Timothy 3:16

He was vindicated in spirit

What Jesus did ‘in his fleshly body through death’ (Colossians 1:22) was ‘**vindicated in spirit**’ by God who raised Jesus from death to life. These two opening formulas echo Paul’s address to the Romans in which he speaks of ‘the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord’ (Romans 1:3-4).

1 Timothy 3:16

He was seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world,

The revelation of the mystery of God in the crucified and raised Jesus is something that is ‘**seen by angels**’, and it is this mystery that is ‘proclaimed (κηγύσσω) among Gentiles’. This echoes Paul’s earlier statement: ‘**For this I was appointed a herald (κηγυξ) and an apostle, a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth**’ (2:7). The formula, ‘**believed in by the world**’ reinforces the accent Paul is placing here on the universal dimension of God’s saving providence (see 2:4) and so of the church’s mission.

1 Timothy 3:16

He was taken up in glory

Paul concludes his creed with a contemplation of Jesus in glory. His insistence on sound doctrine throughout this letter is so that the true gospel will be proclaimed, by word and deed, so that the world will come to know Jesus and to experience God's saving love in him and in the church. The church is to proclaim the mystery so that all 'would come to believe in the Messiah for eternal life' (1:16), and be 'taken up into glory' with him.

1 Timothy 4:1

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will renounce the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons.

Some have **renounced the faith** (see 1:19-20), and the church is being troubled by erroneous teaching (1:3-7). Paul reminds Timothy and those who will read this letter that this is something that they have been told to expect by **the Spirit**. It comes, therefore, within the providence of God. He could be referring to statements of Jesus himself, as when he warned his disciples: ‘Many false prophets will arise and lead many astray’ (Matthew 24:11). He could be referring to insights that he himself has received in prayer. This is something he noted in his correspondence with the Thessalonians: ‘The mystery of lawlessness is already at work’ (2 Thessalonians 2:7).

It would appear that the purveyors of error are claiming the authority of the Spirit for their teaching. Paul assures Timothy that they are ‘paying attention to deceitful spirits’.

We recall the warning Paul gave years earlier to the elders at Miletus: ‘I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them’ (Acts 20:29-30).

1 Timothy 4:2

through the hypocrisy of liars whose consciences are seared with a hot iron.

They practise ‘**hypocrisy**’. What they teach has the appearance of truth, but it is only a mask, hiding what is, in fact, false. They have ‘lost all sensitivity’ (Ephesians 4:19) to the truth, because their consciences are ineffective in condemning their immoral behaviour. They are callous, rendered insensitive as though by a ‘**hot iron**’.

1 Timothy 4:3

They forbid marriage

Paul names two of their errors. The first is that ‘**they forbid marriage**’. It may be that behind their teaching lay the idea that with baptism they entered into the risen life in which, as Jesus said, ‘they neither marry or are given in marriage’ (Matthew 22:30). It is likely, as we noted earlier, that this was one of the matters being taught by the women teachers whom Paul said should not teach in the public assembly (see 2:11-15).

1 Timothy 4:3-5

They demand abstinence from foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by God's word and by prayer.

1 Timothy 4:3-5

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Paul's allusion to the words of Genesis: 'God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good' (Genesis 1:31). 'The earth and its fullness are the Lord's' (1 Corinthians 10:26). There may be Jewish influence here (see Titus 1:14-15). Paul has had to face this issue many times before, and his response is similar to the one which he gave the Corinthians: 'If I partake with thankfulness, why should I be denounced because of that for which I give thanks? So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God' (1 Corinthians 10:30-31).

I Timothy 4:6

If you put these instructions before the brothers and sisters, you will be a good servant of the Messiah Jesus, nourished on the words of the faith

Paul is, in effect, telling the readers of the letter to expect this kind of instruction from Timothy, for it is what is required of him as a ‘**servant**’ (διάκονος) of Jesus. Like Paul himself, Timothy is on a sacred mission from Jesus whose will he is to carry out. Timothy himself has been richly nourished. The words that have nourished him are those ‘**of the faith**’: they have come from those who believe, like Paul himself; and they concern the object of faith, namely, God as revealed in Jesus.

I Timothy 4:6

nourished on the sound teaching that you have followed

The teaching that has nourished him has been ‘**sound**’ (καλός), in that it has expressed the beauty of reality and has issued in virtue. Furthermore, the words and teaching have not only been heard, but Timothy has ‘**followed**’ them (παρακολουθέω), a word used regularly in the gospels for the following of Jesus.

1 Timothy 4:7-9

Have nothing to do with profane myths and old wives' tales. Train yourself in godliness. While physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance.

Timothy is to avoid getting caught up in what Paul referred to earlier as 'myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine providence that is known by faith' (1:4). Having used the metaphor of good nourishment, Paul now uses the metaphor of good physical exercise. Timothy is to 'train himself' in 'godliness' (εὐσέβεια). Physical training (γυμνασία) is important if we wish to keep a healthy body. 'Godliness' is concerned with the only life that ultimately matters: a sharing in the life of communion with God enjoyed by the risen Christ. This discipline is something for 'the present life'. It is also something that transcends physical death: something we can enjoy in 'the life to come'.

1 Timothy 4:10

For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe.

We recall Paul's words to the Corinthians: 'Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one' (1 Corinthians 9:25). As he said to the Colossians: 'to present everyone mature in the Messiah I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me' (Colossians 1:29). Throughout the constant striving and fatigue of the 'race', he keeps his eye on the goal which he has just mentioned: fullness of life with 'the living God' in whom he has placed his hope. The race continues for 'God our Saviour desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (2:4). Paul strives to bring everyone to the faith which consists in the welcoming of the salvation that God is offering.

1 Timothy 4:11-12

These are the things you must insist on and teach. Let no one despise your youth.

The preaching of the gospel in Ephesus began in the synagogue (see Acts 18:19). The first converts came from among the Jewish community and from the Gentiles who were associated with the synagogue. It is to be expected that, as the numbers of Gentiles in the Christian community increased, and because the community assembled in homes for the eucharist, it experienced the need to develop its own form of organisational leadership. The most natural thing was to follow the pattern that the early converts were accustomed to from the synagogue: leadership by a group of the older men ('elders', presbyters', see Acts 20:17). Timothy is not old enough to be an elder. His authority is as Paul's delegate and Paul is encouraging him not to hold back because of his age. As he wrote to the Corinthians: 'Timothy is doing the work of the Lord, just as I am; therefore let no one despise him' (1Corinthians 16:10-11).

1 Timothy 4:12

Set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.

Timothy's position of authority puts a special obligation on him to be an example in his speech and in his conduct. Not surprisingly, Paul singles out love and faith, mentioned together also in 1:5, 1:14 and 2:15. He is, of course, speaking of 'the faith and love that are in the Messiah Jesus' (1:14). To these he adds 'purity' (ἀγνεία), for Timothy is to live always in the presence of God, conscious of the sacred nature of his ministry (see also 2 Corinthians 6:6; Philippians 4:8).

1 Timothy 4:13

Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting, to teaching.

By saying ‘until I arrive’, Paul is reminding the readers that Timothy is acting on his behalf and that they are to respect and obey him as they would Paul himself. Verse thirteen gives us an interesting glimpse into some aspects of what happened when the community assembled. In keeping with the key thrust of the letter, Paul focuses on matters of teaching. First there is the public reading of the sacred scriptures. This is followed by ‘exhorting’ (παράκλησις): communicating the call of the risen Jesus. In the present context he may well be referring to prophecy in which the congregation is open to the inspiration of Jesus’ Spirit. Having read the scriptures, and having listened for Jesus’ living word, those responsible for teaching are to base their teaching on God’s word, as found in the Scriptures, and as interpreted in the Spirit.

1 Timothy 4:14

Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders.

The laying on of hands is a gesture used in many and varied situations in the New Testament, as in the Old. In essence it demonstrates a recognition of communion in the blessing of God.

Jesus lays his hands on the children as a sign of the blessing which God communicates to them through him (see Mark 10:16).

When he lays his hands on the sick, it is God's healing Spirit that flows through him (see Mark 6:5).

When Paul lays his hands upon a group of people who had just been baptised: 'the Holy Spirit came on them; and they spoke in tongues and prophesied' (Acts 19:6; see 8:14-17).

At other times hands were laid on people in recognition and acknowledgment of the fact that they have been chosen by Christ and endowed by his Spirit with gifts for special ministry in the community. When the church in Jerusalem recognised the need to provide for the Greek-speaking Christians, ‘they had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them’ (Acts 6:6).

Similarly with Paul himself and Barnabas we read: ‘While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off’ (Acts 13:2-3).

1 Timothy 4:14

Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders.

So it was that one day words of prophecy were pronounced in the assembly, and the ‘**council of the elders**’ (πρεσβυτέριον) laid hands on Timothy, recognising that Christ had chosen him and given him a special ‘**gift**’ (χάρισμα) for leadership in the community.

As Paul assured the Romans, ‘the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable’ (Romans 11:29).

1 Timothy 4:15-16

Put these things into practice, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress. Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; continue in these things, for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers.

Paul reminds us that though God does will that everyone be saved, and though all we need for salvation is offered us unconditionally through Jesus, salvation is a gift offered in love. Our receiving of it is conditioned upon our welcoming it in faith. There are people who say that once we have accepted Jesus as our Lord and Saviour we are assured of salvation. Paul's words here to Timothy should give us pause.

It is true that we do not earn salvation by doing what the law commands. It is also true that genuine faith is more than an intellectual consent. It bears fruit in deeds; it is 'faith working through love' (Galatians 5:6). It is true that the Messiah has set us free', but it is essential that we 'stand firm and not submit again to a yoke of slavery' (Galatians 5:1); that we 'do not use this freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence' (Galatians 5:13). If we fail in this we 'will not inherit the kingdom of God' (Galatians 5:21). To 'reap eternal life from the Spirit', it is necessary that we 'sow to the Spirit ... so let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time if we do not give up' (Galatians 6:8-9).

In his correspondence with the Thessalonians, Paul speaks of the pleasure it gave him when Timothy brought him ‘the good news of your faith and love’ (1 Thessalonians 3:6). However, he goes on to speak of the necessity of their ‘continuing to stand firm in the Lord’ (1 Thessalonians 3:8), and he goes on to give them many practical directions about the kind of lives that they must live if they are to be vindicated before God at the judgment. He also assures them that they can live good lives because God has given them his Holy Spirit (1 Thessalonians 4:8). He wants them to be ‘blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this’ (1 Thessalonians 5:24). He will do it, but we must welcome the grace we are offered and allow the Spirit to bear fruit in our lives.

In his second letter he warns them that ‘those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord’ (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9). There is nothing automatic about salvation, and so Paul adds: ‘to this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfil by his power every good resolve and work of faith’ (2 Thessalonians 1:11). We will not be saved if we ‘refuse to love the truth’ (2 Thessalonians 2:10). ‘All who have not believed the truth but took pleasure in unrighteousness will be condemned’ (2 Thessalonians 2:12). The Christians of Thessalonica must ‘stand fast and hold firm to the traditions that you were taught’ (2 Thessalonians 2:15). They must not ‘be weary in doing what is right’ (2 Thessalonians 3:13).

Paul’s teaching on salvation is unambiguous. He refers to himself and his fellow believers as those who are ‘being saved’ (1 Corinthians 1:18; 15:2). It is a process requiring constant vigilance, repentance and renewal of faith which welcomes grace and bears fruit in love.

‘Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God’ (1 Corinthians 4:5). He is speaking to believers when he lists the kind of behaviour that ‘will not inherit the kingdom of God’ (1 Corinthians 6:10). We have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit; we have been ‘bought at a price’; we must, therefore, glorify God in our bodies (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). We must believe; we must ‘lead the life that the Lord has assigned, to which God called you’ (1 Corinthians 7:17). We must not ‘sin against Christ’ (1 Corinthians 8:12).

Paul knew the cost of discipleship as he disciplined himself ‘so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified’ (1 Corinthians 9:27). He warns the Corinthians: ‘If you think you are standing watch out that you do not fall’ (1 Corinthians 10:12). The welcoming of what God offers in love requires of us that we heed Paul’s words: ‘work out your own salvation with fear and trembling’ (Philippians 2:2).