

“A Pillar and Buttress of the Truth”
 Sermon for 9 October 2016
 Texts: Galatians 3:11-14; 1 Timothy 3:9, 13 & 4:1

We find **faith**, truth and godliness in very close proximity in 1 Timothy 3 & 4. We also have faith referred to as “the mystery of the faith” (3:9); a qualification “faithful in all things” (3:11); a reward **For those who serve well gain good standing for themselves and also great “confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.** (3:13) and in 4:1 we find the phrase “depart from the faith.” So, this selection of scripture is “faith dense,” that is faith is both “of” and “faithful” and “in” and “from.” Besides this, the word “mystery” is applied to both **faith** and godliness—which I take to mean, the usage is practically synonymous—or, at the least, has a similar meaning. (It may have the same reference point.) Paul wants to instruct the church in Ephesus **how to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.** (v15)

A pillar and buttress of the truth. Is that how we conceive of our church? East Wintrop Baptist Church do we think of our church as *the guardian of great mysteries*? Is that part of our invitation to friends to **come and see**, to visit church with us we have great truth stored there for you—like weapons at the armory, or gunpowder in a magazine?

Or, if you happened to have a friend who is big on mysteries, what a great lead-in it would be to say, “We at EWBC are really into mystery—the greatest mystery ever is what we are all about: yes, we are guardians of the truth, a pillar and buttress of the truth. You should come find out! Are you busy Sunday?”

Today I want us to think about that **buttress of the truth**, or the “truth thing,” a bit with each other. In particular I want us to think about “truth” as it relates to our world and to a particular text: Galatians 3:11 **Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.”** There’s that “**faith**” word again. Our passage, Galatians 3:11-14 to remind you, begins with an assertion (**The righteous shall live by faith**) and it closes with a declaration (**we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.** (v. 14)). So, to four: “of faith,” “faithful in,” “in faith,” “from faith” in 1 Timothy, Galatians adds two more: “by faith” and “through faith” in Gal. 3:11-14.

How does all this **faith** stuff come together? That’s the compelling question, isn’t it? How can it be all that stuff, and relate to so many different things so differently? How do we establish what **faith** is, what **faith** means?

We have, and you have probably heard it said before here, an axiom: *Scripture interprets Scripture*. It does do that. However, there is some distance to be covered between the assertion and the actual doing of it!!

So, having raised a bunch of questions, we should attempt to answer a few of them. One, note that if we are **a pillar and buttress of the truth** (1 Timothy 3:15), there must certainly be some content, some truth content *that corresponds to faith* that we are upholding, supporting. And, Paul being the anointed teacher that he is, places very near to

*the claim of who we are (pillar and buttress), the stuff of our **faith**.* It is found in a six part summary, a poetic piece, found in the very next verse (v. 16)! It is to be exact: 16b,c,d,e,f & g. It has been conjectured that this decidedly *non-Pauline* verse/passage (a citation by the apostle?) may have been taken from a very early Christian hymn! It was memorable because it was singable, and, most likely, it was sung in worship in Ephesus (Paul may have counted on its familiarity to connect him with his intended audience.) I will cite it, initially, in whole:

1. **He was manifested in the flesh**
2. **vindicated by the Spirit,**
3. **seen by angels,**
4. **proclaimed among the nations**
5. **believed on in the world**
6. **taken up in glory.**

The mystery of godliness is the direct antecedent of this hymn stanza (v. 16a). I think that **Great indeed, we confess/ is the mystery of godliness** may even be the first two lines of an eight-line song. Whether that is the case, or not, **The mystery of godliness** is definitely the subject matter of what follows in the rest of the verse. Each line is cross-referenced to elemental apostolic teaching—the apostolic faith as it was known, as it was used in worship long before the councils of the second and third centuries. And maybe it reflects a genuine first generation consensus; the hymn is an early Gentile Christian confession. It has a distinctively historical flavor; its theology is anchored to the essential facts!

(1.) **He was manifested in the flesh** is found in John 1:14, in 1Peter 1:20 and Hebrews 1:1-4. This sentence is a very basic way to introduce the concepts of the “incarnation” and of fundamental Christology. The Son of God was manifested in human flesh. **The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,** and we have seen His glory. When John revisits this theme in 1John 1:1 he fills this out auditorily (**we heard**), visually (**saw with our eyes**) and sensually (**touched with our hands**) **concerning the Word of life**. The Lord was thoroughly examined and experienced physically so as to make it very clear what **manifested in the flesh** actually meant. ! Peter 2:20: **foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in these last times**. To which Hebrews 1:1-4 adds **God spoke long ago through prophets and otherwise . . . now though His Son. the hear of all and agent of all creation . . . the radiance of (divine) glory, the exact imprint (replication) of His being . . . who after making sacrifice through Himself has sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high . . . superior to the angels and possessing the Name above all names.**

(2.) **Vindicated** (justified) **by the Spirit** (or “in the Spirit”) is found in the earliest preaching of Peter (Acts 2:30-36) and is echoed in Stephen (Acts 7:49-53). Peter’s argument is that God promised a descendant of David to sit upon David’s throne—that promise related to physical descent was kept in Jesus! God would raise this king from the dead (**not abandoning Him to Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption** (Acts 2:30-31)). **God raised Him up.** (vv.24, 32) and thus honored and exalted Him. **Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God and having received from the Father, the promise of the Spirit** (v. 33) is the essence of the claim of vindication by the Spirit!

(3.) **Seen by angels** is explicit in Luke 2:9-20 and 22:43. Not merely at His nativity, but also in His passion in the Garden of Gethsemane: the presence of witnessing angels is asserted. **And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them . . . saying, Unto to you is both this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.** At the opposite end of the life of Jesus, just after He surrendered His will to the plan and purposes of God (no light thing!), saying **Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done. and there appeared to Him an angel from heaven, strengthening Him.** (vv. 42-43) Now while the first angelic sighting was observable by many potential witnesses—it is hard to keep a sky full secret—the second occurrence must have been related by Jesus Himself to the disciples *afterwards* because when He returned to the disciples **he found them sleeping for sorrow** (v. 45).

(4.) **Proclaimed among the nations/the Gentiles** occurs in Acts 11:1 (with Peter) and was Paul's commission (Galatians 2:3, 7 & 9) In Galatians 2:9 Paul refers to James, Cephas and John as **pillars of the apostolic ministry!** Acts 11 relates Peter's experience in Caesarea, at the household of Cornelius, a Gentile belonging to the Italian Cohort. In verse 18 we read: **And they glorified God, saying, then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.** The content of Peter's sermon in Cornelius' house is summarized in Acts 10:34-43 *if there should be any doubt as to Christ being proclaimed among the Gentiles!* The Gentile mission itself is the focus of attention in the Galatians passage cited: **the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles . . . I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter was entrusted with the circumcised.** Paul attributes the apostolic ministry of himself and of Peter to the workings of the same Spirit! And the pillar metaphor is used explicitly by Paul to describe the place, by grace, of other apostles, too: of James and John.

(5.) **Believed on in the world** is a result of apostolic ministry testified to in the earliest of New testament writings, 2Thess.1:10 **among all who have believed** carries worldwide implications! On the day of Judgment all who have believed, worldwide, will be present—without exception.

(6.) **Taken up in glory** is found in both Acts 1:2 and at the conclusion of Luke's gospel (Luke 24:51). The chronology of these affirmation is admittedly odd, as line 6 should precede lines 4 & 5. But, be that as it may, in this memorable hymn, the gospel elements, the historical and factual *essentials* of our faith are preserved in a worship song. And, that is both the truth and the gospel and the content of our *faith*. It is belief, or trust in Jesus' historical life, this factual mission and this designated Savior that saves us because, by faith in this, we are justified, vindicated, reconciled to the Father—that is, we are made entirely right with God and assured of eternal life through **saving faith!**

When we connect the various lines in the hymn to the passages of scripture, as we *have just done*, we have completed a very necessary exercise. *We have exposed the content of the apostolic faith!* Furthermore, that is what we mean by scripture interpreting scripture. The meaning of 1Timothy 3:16 is exposed by, brought to the light by the cross references. The doctrines touched on are: the incarnation, Christology and divine condescension, the resurrection (God defeating death, honoring the atonement and vindicating Jesus by raising Him from the dead!), the existence of angels, the resumption of divine glory (in right order), the Gentile mission and evangelism. It is as if this were the skeleton upon which the flesh of truth is to be added . . . they stand as crib

notes, to insure that we leave nothing vital out! And we haven't. As the guardian of all truth in and to this present age, we are indeed **the pillar and buttress of truth.**
Amen.