

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Proclamation of the Faith (1 Timothy 3:15-16): Preached among the nations and believed on in the world

Welcome to *Truth for Today*, where we are continuing with our series entitled “The Proclamation of the Faith” based upon 1 Timothy 3:15-16. The first section, comprising of three talks, was broadcast in April, so to refresh our memories I will read the two verses on which the talks are based: *“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 truth. 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”* (1 Timothy 3:15-16).

Today I am using the English Standard Version of the Bible yet, whatever version is used, the power and wonder of such a proclamation cannot be lost.

Last week my colleague, Jonathan Hughes, gave some thoughts on : *“...vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels...”* while today, I shall be concentrating on *“...proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world...”* leaving Ernie Brown to conclude the series next week, by talking of the Lord Jesus being *“taken up in glory.”*

A commentator upon Scripture, FB Hole, whom I respect, has written that “[1 Timothy 3:16], then, is a condensed summary of the way God has revealed Himself in Christ” (Hole FB: *Galatians to Philemon* ISBN: 978-0901860446), which means it is the subject of profoundest meditation, yet still remains, and must remain, a mystery that baffles even the most spiritual of Christians. Paul has taken up the thought of the mystery at the heart of the Gospel in others of his letters. A good example is the doxology in Romans 16:25-26, *“Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith...”*

Notice that this extract, from the Roman letter, mentions making the mystery known to all nations to bring about faith, a statement which is similar to our portion from 1 Timothy.

So let us consider what is meant by the clause *“...proclaimed among the nations”* (1 Timothy 3:16). Obviously, to proclaim something means to announce, or make known, a message or an item of news. I used to work at a Fine Art auction gallery, where items for sale were held up by a porter, who shouted out the lot number. It was no use employing somebody with a quiet voice, as he would not be heard, and the sale would come to a halt. Earlier in his first letter to Timothy in 1 Timothy 2:7, Paul writes: *“For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.”*

He uses similar words in 2 Timothy 1:11, where again he describes himself as *“a preacher of the Gospel.”* The New International Version translates “preacher” as “herald”, which again gives us the sense of Paul’s task. A herald was a messenger who gave the public summonses and messages of kings or magistrates. So when Paul wrote that the mystery of godliness would be “proclaimed”, this is exactly what he meant. He and the other evangelists were acting as heralds, proclaiming God’s great grace in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Do we, as servants of the Lord, seek to pass on the tidings of the salvation that is in Christ? One of the basic elements of the Gospel is that *“God was manifest in flesh”*, even though some of the sermons preached today may ignore this. It is supposed, by some, that the incarnation is something that the modern mind finds impossible to accept. Evangelical Christians are not simpletons, for they know that, even in the time of Christ, people found it impossible to believe that Jesus is divine. In Matthew 16:15-17 Peter was commended by the Lord for his declaration that *“Jesus was the Son of the living God”*. It is also stated, in Matthew 16:15-17, that only God could reveal that truth to Peter, not flesh and blood. Consequently, we at *Truth for Today* are convinced that in our age belief in Jesus as the Son of God is revealed to us by the Spirit of God.

Paul was ever conscious of the grace behind the revelation of the mystery of God. Having received this knowledge through grace, he was convinced that he was appointed to preach the gospel, as we read a few minutes ago from 1 Timothy 2:7. Dating from his conversion experience on the road to Damascus, Paul would impart the tidings of

salvation in Christ to all who would listen, as Acts 9:15 makes clear. He was also very keen that others, too, would tell forth the Gospel, whenever and where ever they could.

We must move on now from considering “proclamation” to examine where, and to whom, the proclamation is made. Our clause states *“proclaimed among the nations”*, which the King James Version translates as “Gentiles”. Whether Gentiles, or nations, the meaning is that the proclamation has transcended national barriers to reach out to those furthest from God. This wide proclamation of the Gospel had negative implications in New Testament times, as there were those who objected to all and sundry being offered the opportunity to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is well known, to any student of the New Testament, that Paul had to meet the opposition of certain Jews, who insisted that all converts from a Gentile background should be circumcised, and made to obey Jewish law and customs (e.g. Acts 15:1-29, Galatians 5:1-15). The abuse, opposition and harassment that Paul received because he preached justification by faith alone, without the need for works of the law, can be gleaned from a careful study of the Acts and Paul’s letters.

Acts 11:11-24 records an occasion when a great number believed at Antioch. Obviously, among these were some Gentiles, so Barnabas was commissioned by the church at Jerusalem, to investigate and report back. Acts 11:23 discloses in beautiful words what he discerned: *“When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.”*

When Barnabas witnessed people believing in Jesus, he attributed this to the grace of God. Proclamation of the glad tidings to the nations was a matter of rejoicing for Barnabas, not a cause for concern. So vigorous were the missionary endeavours of the early church that, by the end of the first century, Christianity had spread over the Roman world to such cities as Corinth, Ephesus, Antioch and Rome. Paul even had plans to travel up to Spain (see Romans 15:24-28).

The onus now falls on us, in our age, to proclaim the mystery of God manifest in flesh. Most of us will not have to travel many miles, as Paul did, nor will we have to travel to other lands. We should be able in our small way, however, to add our voices to the proclamation of the Gospel. When I was a small boy my sister took me to a Sunday School in the town, where I still live. I didn’t realise it at the time, but the man who lead the activities had been there since the morning service ended. He and his wife would take a packed lunch to eat after the morning service had finished, because they had no car and could not reach home and return before the Sunday School commenced. This meant they never ate a cooked Sunday lunch for many years. It might not seem a great imposition to us, but it is indicative of a deep desire to proclaim the tidings of God’s love to youngsters.

It is time for us now to consider the next statement that we have been allocated for our subject today, though before we do can I tell any who have just joined us that you are listening to a broadcast from *Truth for Today*. We are considering the statement from 1 Timothy 3:16, where it says that the truth of God was *“proclaimed among the nations and believed on in the world.”* We have just finished thinking about *“proclaimed among the nations”*, so now we shall look at the clause, *“believed on in the world.”* At first glance the meaning seems obvious, in that when the Gospel is preached then people have the opportunity to believe. This is certainly true yet, even so I think there is a little more to it than that.

We have to go back to the first stanza to find out just what is proclaimed and what is believed. I have an evangelical tract to hand which states in its closing sentences that: *“...You can respond to this message in one of two ways rejecting or accepting the fact that Jesus died for you. The Bible says that we are all sinners with an urgent need to have our sins forgiven. If you want peace with God, ask for God’s forgiveness and let Jesus into your heart.”*

I am not criticising this, for it may well be the form of words used, on occasions, by evangelists and preachers in your church or fellowship. Perhaps it was the form of words used to help you into belief in *“...accepting the Lord as your Saviour”*, but it is not what is emphasised in 1 Timothy 3:15-16 that we are now looking at. If we glance again at 1 Timothy 3:16, the truth emphasised is that *“God was manifest in flesh”*, a statement which is often missed out of what has become known as “the sinner’s prayer”. Some might question why I mention this. My answer would be that the belief that Jesus is God incarnate is a foundation truth essential to Christian belief.

Many years ago a book was written with the title *“The Myth of God Incarnate”*. Although I read the book carefully, I was not moved away from the truth of John 3:16, where it states that *“God so loved the world that He sent His only Son...”* It is a most humbling, yet thrilling message, that God identified Himself with us by appearing in flesh. We, at *Truth for Today*, believe in *“the faith once delivered to the saints”* (see Jude 3). Unbelief and disbelief are not factors of the modern age alone. When Paul mentioned the resurrection of the Lord to the crowd, listening to him at Athens, (see Acts 17:18) they laughed (Acts 17:32). People still scoff when we mention the resurrection and divinity of Jesus. Romans 10:9 demands that we believe that Jesus is Lord and that God has raised Him from among the dead.

This brings us to the act of believing which I am persuaded is impossible without the inspiration of the Spirit of God. Paul's questions in Romans 10:14-15 help us to grasp the truth of proclaiming and believing: *"How will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!'"*

Though the recipients of the preaching in this passage are primarily the Jews, I would judge that all people can be included without straining the meaning of the Scripture. Consequently, preaching must take place before someone can hear which makes it imperative for us to acknowledge the impossibility of hearing if no preaching takes place. I am convinced of the centrality of preaching in our age, though I gladly acknowledge the invention of the printing press and the manufacture of books. We can read the good news of Jesus today yet I repeat that the biblical injunction of preaching still stands. In my judgment, contemporary music, and other modern methods, cannot replace the preaching of the mystery of the God manifest in flesh, who died and rose again.

If we had time, we could look again at the thought of being sent, that we have already touched upon, with the illustration of the herald proclaiming the message of a king or magistrate. We have that again in Romans 10:14-15 where it is mentioned that the preacher was sent. He came in the employ of a higher authority. The message was not derived from his own mind; it was the message he was trusted to deliver. Let us remember that we preach Christ as revealed in Scripture, not a philosophy of our own making.

Now, we must quickly consider the closing statement of our passage this morning, which is, *"believed on in the world."* It has been pointed out many times that the Scripture says *"believed on in the world"* **not** "believed on by the world." In this erring and sinning mass of unbelieving humanity, of which we are a part, some of us have the privilege of faith. The person who knows by faith the historic Christ, the living and true God manifested in flesh, who as Man was crucified for our salvation, raised and ascended into glory, has a wondrous treasure in an earthen vessel (see 2 Corinthians 4:7). Such a person has the secret of a life of godliness. As another has written, "no unbeliever can possibly be godly, though they may be of most kindly and amiable disposition as a natural man" (Hole FB: *Galatians to Philemon* ISBN: 978-0901860446).

In our day and age, we cannot minimise what reaction being a believer might bring from the world. In the liberal, tolerant, any-thing-goes United Kingdom, being a Christian is not likely to bring much in the way of persecution. This is not so in other parts of the world, where confessing belief in Christ can generate a vicious reaction, such as loss of employment, being ostracised, physical violence and even death. Believing that God was manifest in flesh brought death for Paul, Peter and some of the other apostles. Over the years countless believers have suffered for their faith. Belief in Christ in a world that is indifferent, even opposed to Him, can bring violent conflict. I quote directly from a prayer letter I have received for the first week in May 2018: "[He] is one of many isolated Christians deprived of fair employment, water and education for his children because of their faith in Jesus."

I have omitted the name of the person and the country for security reasons, but this excerpt, from a regular monthly letter, is one of many similar that I could have cited. Such reports would illustrate the wonder of the statement; *"believed on in the world"*, for the world has not changed.

Paul, the beloved apostle to the Gentiles, had to suffer as a Christian, as the list of his trials in 2 Corinthians, 11:23-30 makes clear. Though we, in the UK, might not have to fear fierce persecution, it is still a matter of wonder that we have been won for Christ, from the secular activities that seem to dominate our society. Many years ago, a supposedly Christian organisation pushed a leaflet through my door, which, among other things, asked if my religion required me to believe things that I could not accept. If it did, I was to go to a named hall where I would hear things which I could believe. Anything supernatural would be rejected. Whatever they were preaching, it was not New Testament Christianity, for that asks us to believe that *"God was manifest in flesh"* (1 Timothy 3:15-16). According to the apostle's teaching, we only believe when the Spirit of God leads us into all truth (see John 14:26 and John 16:13).

Sometimes, as a preacher of the Christian Gospel, I arrive at a point where I am not expecting anyone in the congregation to indicate their belief or signify their intention of becoming a Christian. This ought not to be my attitude, for I should always be looking for evidence of "believed on in the world." I read now from a Primitive Methodist local preacher's diary covering one week in 1835:

"May 3	Preached three times, some souls found liberty;
May 4	Labouring until midnight, eventually five souls won;
May 5	Praying with a widow. She was wondrously converted;
May 6	Three souls plucked from the burning tonight. Praise be to God;
May 12	Have not seen any fruit lately. Am getting very concerned."

I don't know about you, but if I saw that much interest in even a year of ministry I would be very pleased! Not so with some preachers two hundred years ago. They expected to witness belief in the world when they preached and if there was no response they were concerned. If we are concerned about negative results, we must never, ever think about changing the message. It must ever be: "*God manifest in flesh ... proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world*".

May God bless you all and thank you for listening.

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