

CHAPTER I

THE CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

The Assembly--Its Prominence in 1 Timothy

The dominant theme of 1 Timothy is the local church--its doctrine, its worship, its organization, its officers, its responsibilities, its discipline, its preservation, its enemies and its conduct. It was written to a young man who was responsible to care for the Ephesian assembly during the Apostle's absence (1 Tim. 1:3). Paul wrote the letter as one having a great concern for the church at Ephesus, for he himself had spent years laboring on behalf of this flock (Acts 20:26-31). And therefore, as Paul wrote to his beloved child in the faith, he desired only God's very best for Timothy and for the local assembly at Ephesus.

The Assembly--Its Godly Conduct

Paul's purpose in writing this letter is stated clearly in 1 Timothy 3:14-15:

These things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly; but if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.

These instructions for proper conduct in the church are directed not to Timothy alone but to all the members of

the local church.² The impersonal verb *Sei* is used with the infinitive *ἀναπτύγεσθαι* which means to "act, behave, conduct oneself or live."³ Thus the expression may be rendered, "in order that you might know how it is necessary for men to conduct themselves in the house of God. . . ." The Apostle's concern was for godly conduct in the assembly.

The Assembly--Its Greatness

Its Greatness As The House Of God

The Ephesian assembly is described in 1 Timothy 3:15 as "the house of God." By implication, Paul used the same expression in 1 Timothy 3:5: "For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?" The comparison is between the overseer's house and God's house, which is the church. The expression *ἐκκλησίας Θεοῦ* in 1 Timothy 3:5 can only refer to the local church because elders are not responsible to rule over the universal church!⁴ Therefore it would be most reasonable to see the phrase

² W. E. Vine, An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1966), p. 112.

³ William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 60.

⁴ Walter Lock, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Pastoral Epistles (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), p. 42.

$\delta\imath\kappa\omega\ \theta\epsilon\omega$ in 1 Timothy 3:15 as also being a reference to the local assembly. Men ought to know how to conduct themselves, not in the universal church, but in the local Ephesian assembly to which Paul was writing.

It is also clear that $\delta\imath\kappa\omega\ \theta\epsilon\omega$ is not a reference to any church building, because church buildings as such were never used in the days of the early church. To say that the church is God's house simply means that it is the special dwelling place of God. The Most High God dwells in His assembly. It is the "habitation of God through the Spirit" (Eph. 2:22). Believers are the house of God because God dwells in them.⁵ In his letter to the Corinthian assembly Paul wrote, "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?" (1 Cor. 3:16). The truth that thrilled Paul's heart as he wrote to the Colossians was that Christ indwelt the assembly: "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27). Such a unique relationship was predicted by the Lord Jesus: "At that day ye shall know that I am in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you" (Jn. 14:20; cf. Jn. 17:23). This glorious truth ought to be a great incentive for godly living, because according to Psalm 93:5, the leading characteristic of God's house must be holiness:

⁵ William Hendriksen, New Testament Commentary--Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1965), p. 150.

"holiness becometh thine house, O LORD, for ever." The indwelling presence of the living God is a forceful reminder of the awesome greatness of the church!

Its Greatness As The Church Of The Living God

The grandeur of the local church is further indicated in 1 Timothy 3:16 by its description as "the church of the living God." The Ephesian assembly was a body of believers, a living organism pulsating with the very life of God. The church is composed of "living stones" (1 Pet. 2:5) and indwelt by the living God.

Also located in the city of Ephesus was the "church of the dead god," the great Ephesian temple of Diana, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The personal working of the living God in the midst of the Ephesian assembly formed a strong contrast to that "well-known graven image of the Diana of Ephesus, throned in that fair temple which glittered in its white and lifeless beauty over the roofs of the city where Timothy's charge lay."⁶ In honor to their shrine of the lifeless god, the pagan Ephesians cried out, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians" (Acts 19:28,34). After describing the greatness of the assembly of the living God, Paul echoes another cry, "Great is the mystery of godliness" (1 Tim. 3:16).

⁶ Charles John Ellicott, ed., Ellicott's Commentary on the Whole Bible, Vol. VIII (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), p. 44.

Its Greatness As The Pillar And Ground Of The Truth

The final description of the local assembly, as recorded in 1 Timothy 3:15, is remarkable indeed. The church is "the pillar and ground of the truth." Paul first pictures the church as a great assembly with the living God dwelling in its midst; and then the same church is painted as a massive pillar, holding up and displaying before men and angels the truth. ⁷

Some commentators, such as John Peter Lange, have objected to such a lofty description of the church.⁸ In order to solve this alleged problem they have elected to punctuate verses 15 and 16 as follows:

A pillar and ground of the truth, and confessedly great is the mystery of godliness.

They thus place the phrase, "a pillar and ground of the truth," in apposition not to "the church" but to "the mystery of godliness." Such a construction is artificial, forced and cumbersome, and as Rowland states, it has been proposed due to the bias of the Protestant interpreter:

This is unnatural, abrupt, and unfair, and has been resorted to chiefly by Protestant commentators because they object to the statement that the church is the foundation of truth.⁹

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ John Peter Lange, Commentary on the Holy Scriptures, translated and edited by Philip Schaff (Grana Rapias: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), p. 44.

⁹ Alfred Rowland, Paul's Ideal Church and People--A Popular Commentary on the First Epistle to Timothy (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1893), p. 149.

To avoid the alleged embarrassment of taking the text as it would most normally read, they adopt a construction that is singular and hard. It is true that the Roman Catholic Church has claimed to be the sole depository of the truth, but Paul exposes this false religious system in the following chapter by declaring that those who forbid marriage and abstain from meats are really propagating doctrines of demons (1 Tim. 4: 1-5). There is no way to detract from the import of Paul's statement in 1 Timothy 3:15. The church is the pillar and ground of the truth.

The word $\sigma\tau\omega\lambda\sigma\varsigma$ means "pillar, column."¹⁰ It occurs elsewhere in Galatians 2:9 and Revelation 3:12; 10:1. The function of a pillar is to support, to hold up and to display. The church is thus to support, uphold and display the truth of God. Hundreds of $\sigma\tau\omega\lambda\sigma\varsigma$ were visible to the Ephesian believers as they would pass by the great temple:

The temple of Diana, at Ephesus, was adorned with more than a hundred columns of stupendous size. They were mostly of Parian marble, and were either furnished by the various cities of Asia as offerings to the goddess, or were contributed by wealthy men and princes. These pillars are said to have been immense monoliths: single stones of sixty feet in height.¹¹

The precise meaning of the term $\epsilon\delta\pi\iota\omega\mu\alpha$ is

¹⁰ Arndt and Gingrich, p. 779.

¹¹ Joseph S. Exell, The Biblical Illustrator--First Timothy, Vol. 49 (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, n.d.), p. 141.

more difficult to determine. Etymologically the word is derived from *έστος*, "a sitting-place, a seat, abode, dwelling place, a foundation, base," and from *έσπα*, "a sitting-place, a seat, a chair, stool, bench."¹² The term *έσπα* was also used to designate the back of a horse on which a rider would sit.¹³ This may suggest that *έσπαιρα* would refer to the ground or foundation upon which the pillar sits or rests.

The kindred adjective *έσπαιος* is found three places in the New Testament (1 Cor. 7:37; 15:58; Col. 1:23) and is usually rendered "steadfast." In secular Greek this adjective meant "seated, settled" and then it came to denote what is as fixed as a cube (*κύβος*)--thus, "steadfast, immovable."¹⁴

The exact meaning of *έσπαιρα* is difficult to discern because there are no examples of its usage in secular Greek writings and it occurs only once in the New Testament in the passage under consideration. Since usage

¹² George Henry Liddell and Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, seventh edition revised and augmented (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1889), pp. 423-4.

¹³ Ibid., p. 424.

¹⁴ Gerhard Kittel, ed., Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, vol. II, Translated and Edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), p. 362.

determines meaning, this word poses an exegetical problem.

Some writers suggest the word means "bulwark, stay, support, prop, mainstay."¹⁵ If this meaning is correct, then the term is hardly distinguished from $\sigmaτόλος$. Both would represent supporting structures:

By giving to $\epsilon\deltaριψα$ the sense of stay or prop, the use of the two words for the same general idea is readily explained. The church is the pillar of truth, and the function of the pillar is to support.¹⁶

Others prefer the meaning of "basis, foundation" which concurs with the rendering of "ground" in the Authorized Version.¹⁷

This latter meaning would make $\epsilon\deltaριψα$ the base by which all is upheld, and on which the entire building rests.¹⁸

Until more lexicographic light is shed on this noun, it may be well to adhere to the meaning of "foundation" or "base." In Paul's second letter to Timothy, he described God's elect as the solid foundation ($\thetaεκέλως$) of God.

¹⁵ James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), pp. 180-81. See also G. Abbott-Smith, A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament, Third Edition (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937), p. 129.

¹⁶ M. R. Vincent, Word Studies in the New Testament (Wilmington, Delaware: Associated Publishers and Authors, 1972), p. 1030.

¹⁷ Edward Robinson, A Greek and English Lexicon of the New Testament, revised edition (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1868), p. 203. See also Arndt and Gingrich, p. 217.

¹⁸ C. G. Barth, ed., An Expository and Practical Commentary on the Books of Scripture (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1875), p. 958.

Not only is the church the pillar of truth, but it is the base and foundation of the truth as well.

As a pillar supports the roof structure, so the real foundation supports the pillar:

As the pillar supports the roof, even better (note the climax!) as the foundation supports the entire superstructure, so the church supports the glorious truth. 19

If this interpretation is correct, then the $\sigma\tau\delta\lambda\oslash$ is the intermediate support and the $\xi\sigma\pi\omega\mu\alpha$ is the final support of the building.²⁰ The verse could be thus paraphrased as follows: "The living God's church is the pillar, yea more, even the foundation of the truth."²¹ The church is one massive foundation-pillar, supporting and displaying God's truth. Illustration of this fact could again be found in the city temple of Diana:

The pillars were set upon a basement which was elevated ten steps above the surrounding area. Diana had her pillar and her basement, but she had no pillar or basement of truth, hers was all imposture throughout.²²

The local church is in the midst of a crooked and perverse world to hold forth the Word of life by manifesting

¹⁹ Hendriksen, p. 136.

²⁰ Henry Alford, The Greek Testament, Vol. III-IV, revised by Everett F. Harrison (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), p. 330.

²¹ R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1951), p. 606.

²² Exell, p. 141.

the truth in practice and in message. "Each local church has in its power to support and strengthen the truth by its witness to the faith and by the lives of its members."²³ Today God is manifesting His truth by means of His church! This does not mean that the truth of God or the authority of the Scriptures depends upon the church, as the papists would like to believe. Alfred Plummer has correctly discerned the meaning of the passage:

Truth in itself is self-evident and self-sustained; it needs no external support or foundation. But truth as it is manifested to the world needs the best support and the firmest basis that can be found for it. And it is the duty and privilege of the Church to supply these.²⁴

How great is the responsibility of the church to uphold the whole counsel of God! This is especially true in view of the great apostasy predicted by Paul in the following chapter (1 Tim. 4:1). In the latter times some shall apostatize from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons. Carlton Helgerson clearly describes the danger facing the church at this present hour:

The same Devil who hates God's truth will surely try to destroy the pillar and the base. He always attacks the local assembly, its pastor, its elders and its constituents. He hopes to weaken or destroy the torch bearer. The light of Divine Truth, proclaimed and exemplified, in any given area is the local church. It cannot fulfill its purpose

²³Lock, p. 44.

²⁴Alfred Plummer, The Pastoral Epistles, Volume VI of An Exposition of the Bible (Hartford, Connecticut: S. S. Scranton Co., 1910), p. 419.

if disorganized or lacking in dogmatic doctrine. The more determined the local assembly's leaders are to adhere closely to this revealed truth, the more vehement will be the Enemy's determination to destroy that pillar. He may work subtly from within or launch an attack from without, but he will never cease to try to bring about disruption, confusion, mismanagement, or corruption of doctrine.²⁵

The local church is to uphold and display the truth of the Word of God before a lost and dying world. As the pillar and the base of God's truth, how great a responsibility is upon the assembly of the living God!

²⁵ Helgerson, p. 20

The Church as "the pillar and base of the truth"
1 Timothy 3:15

