

THE MYSTERY OF GODLINESS

(1 Timothy 3:14-16) and the LOCAL ASSEMBLY of Believers

I. The Problem of the Context

As the interpreter reads 1 Timothy 3:15, the greatness and grandeur of the local assembly looms large before his eyes. The church is said to be the house of God, the assembly of the living God, the pillar and base of the truth! And yet, as he comes to verse 16, there is an apparent shift in thought. The Apostle Paul is there revealing a great mystery. Moreover, this mystery obviously relates to the Lord Jesus Christ: His incarnate life and ministry.

What then is the connection between the church (v. 15) and the mystery (v. 16)? Why did Paul write verse 16 after he wrote verse 15? Why does Paul's theme seemingly shift from the church (v. 15) to Christ (v. 16)? What is the relationship between the local assembly of believers and "the mystery of godliness"? In what way does this great mystery relate and apply to the church?

II. The Solution to the Problem As Generally Understood

Those commentators who deal with the contextual problem (and many do not), including dispensational commentators, are nearly universally agreed that the solution is found by equating the "mystery of godliness" (verse 16) with "the truth" (verse 15). By this interpretation "the mystery" consists of the truth concerning Christ as expressed in the six phrases of "the hymn" (v.16), especially the truth of His Incarnation. Thus they would say that verse 16 refers exclusively to Christ and applies to the church only indirectly in the sense that the church, as the pillar and ground of the truth, is responsible to uphold and support the glorious facts of the incarnate Christ.

III. The Solution to the Problem As Dispensationally Interpreted

In four passages (Eph. 3:4-5; Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:26-27; Rom. 16:25-26) the Apostle Paul has clearly and carefully defined a New Testament "mystery." The definition that may be derived from these four references is as follows:

A New Testament mystery is that which has been hidden, kept secret, and not made known to men in previous ages but has now been made manifest and revealed and made known in this present Age by the New Testament apostles and prophets.

In view of this Biblical definition, how can the great mystery of 1 Timothy 3:16 be the Incarnation of Christ since the fact of the Incarnation was clearly revealed in the Old Testament? The fact that the Messiah would be manifested in the flesh was no secret to those who understood and believed their Old Testament (Isa. 7:14; 9:6; Jer.23:5-6; Micah 5:2; Matt. 2:4-5; etc.). But the fact that in this present Age Christ is now manifesting Himself in a body is the truth that thrilled the heart of the Apostle Paul (Col. 1:27; Eph. 1:22-23). The Incarnation of Christ as it applies to the Church is a great mystery indeed!

There are at least six reasons for suggesting that the statements concerning Christ in 1 Timothy 3:16

apply directly to the Church:

1. The immediate context (verse 15) seems to demand application to the Church. Paul's theme there is the greatness and grandeur of the local assembly. In light of verse 15, the mystery of godliness must somehow pertain to the Church. Verses 15 and 16 are grammatically connected by the word "AND" (first word in v. 16).
2. Since a New Testament mystery cannot consist of truths that were revealed in the Old Testament, the "mystery of godliness" must refer to more than the mere objective facts of the Incarnation of Christ as set forth in verse 16. Certainly the Incarnation of Christ was not a hidden truth in Old Testament times. Note also that if Paul were merely setting forth the objective facts of the Incarnation, then he apparently make a serious omission. In declaring the chief purpose of the Incarnation, Dr. Alva McClain make this statement: "God became incarnate in Christ in order that He might die for sinners." And yet, in verse 16 nothing is said concerning the death of Christ. Would we omit such a tenet from our doctrinal statements?
3. The term "mystery" as used by Paul almost always involves some aspect of Church truth (see Eph. 3:4-6; 5:32; Col. 1:24-27; 1 Cor. 15:51; etc.). 1 Timothy 3:16 should be no exception, especially in view of the preceding verse which is all about the church and how believers should conduct themselves in the church.
4. The term "godliness" (v. 16) relates to the immediate context of verse 15. The term "godliness" always involves the ideas of piety, reverence and respect which result in God-fearing conduct. The term describes the conduct of believers as they obey God's Word (see 1 Tim. 2:2; 4:7-8; 6:3,5-6,11; etc.). Thus the "mystery of godliness" in 1 Timothy 3:16 could accurately be paraphrased as "the mystery of God-fearing conduct." The obvious reference is to the previous verse where Paul's purpose in writing is stated: "that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to **behave thyself** [conduct thyself] in the house of God." How should men conduct themselves in the house of God (v. 15)? The answer is found in verse 16—in a godly way ("godliness"). In other words, the great mystery of godliness must somehow relate to proper conduct and behavior in the local assembly.
5. The Apostle Paul, in setting forth great Christological truths, almost always applies them to believers (compare Phil. 2:5-11). The doctrine of the resurrection and exaltation of Christ in Ephesians 1:18-23 is applied directly to the Church (compare also Eph. 2:6). In Colossians 1:15-18, Paul declares that Christ is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Again direct application is made to the Church (Col. 1:18). It would therefore be most unlike Paul to set forth such great statements concerning the Incarnation of Christ in 1 Timothy 3:16 without making *direct* application to believers, even to the Church.
6. The great mystery of which Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:32 concerned not Christ alone, but "**Christ and the Church.**" Could not the great mystery of 1 Timothy 3:16 also have reference to Christ *and the Church*? We can assume that Timothy was quite familiar with the contents of the Ephesian letter (see 1 Tim. 1:3). In this connection, we would also note the Great Commission according to John: "As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you" (John 20:21 *and see John 17:18*). The Father sent Christ into the world and that ministry is delineated in 1 Timothy 3:16. Has not Christ also sent us (the Church) into the world to fulfill a similar ministry? The Church has been sent into the world *in the same way* that Christ was sent into the world. Therefore, we can learn about our mission from what we learn about the mission of Christ in 1 Timothy 3:16. This same principle is seen in Acts 1:1-2. This interesting passage tells us that the Gospel of Luke covers the Lord's deeds and teaching until He ascended into Heaven. This is only what Jesus **BEGAN** to do and to teach! The continuation of the Lord's deeds and teaching is carried on by the Church! The ministry of Christ on earth is carried on by the Church! This is exactly what we find in 1 Timothy 3:16.

IV. How the Mystery of Godliness Applies to the Church

The six phrases found in verse 16 may be analyzed as follows:

1. Christ was manifested in the flesh. The living God became flesh (John 1:14) and made Himself known in and through a body (John 1:18). Likewise, God the Son is today manifesting Himself in and

through His Body which is on the earth (Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:24-27). As the visible and local body of Christ stays healthy (Eph. 4:12-16), conducts itself in a godly way, and functions according to the Biblical pattern (1 Tim. 3:1-15), then the following will be true:

- a. God's LIFE will be manifested in and by the Church (Col. 1:27).
- b. God's WISDOM will be manifested in and by the Church (Eph. 3:10).
- c. God's POWER will be manifested in and by the Church (Eph. 3:20).
- d. God's GRACE will be manifested in and by the Church (Eph. 2:7).
- e. God's TRUTH will be manifested in and by the Church (1 Tim. 3:15).
- f. God's LOVE will be manifested in and by the Church (John 17:23).
- g. God's GLORY will be manifested in and by the Church (Eph. 3:21).

2. Christ was justified (declared righteous, vindicated) **in the Spirit**. Throughout His earthly ministry Christ was vindicated by the Spirit of God. His miracles and signs were performed by the power of the Spirit (Matt. 12:28), giving unmistakable evidence that Christ was all He claimed to be. The ultimate vindication of Christ took place when He was raised from the dead (Rom. 1:4). Likewise, God the Holy Spirit is today vindicating the Resurrected Christ in and through the Assembly, convicting the world that He indeed is the Righteous One (John 16:7-11; *note especially verse 7 which associates this convicting and vindicating ministry with the Spirit's coming on the day of Pentecost*).

3. Christ was seen of angels. Throughout His earthly life and ministry the God-man was the very center of angelic interest, attention and curiosity! They marveled at their holy Lord (Isa. 6:1-4; cf. John 12:41) as He humbled Himself (Phil. 2:5-8) and was made even lower than the angels so that He might taste death for every man (Heb. 2:9). And yet today, it is the Church that has become the theater of the universe and the center of angelic observation! Unto the principalities and powers God is now making known His manifold wisdom and grace *by the Church* (Eph. 3:10; 2:7; cf. 1 Cor. 4:9; 11:10). The living God is using the Church to teach angels concerning Himself!

4. Christ was preached among the nations and the responsibility and privilege of making known the unsearchable riches of Christ has been committed to the Church! Although the gospel was known in previous ages (Rom. 1:1-4; Gal 3:8), there is a "mystery" aspect of the gospel which was unknown in other ages, but which now forms the very core of the gospel preaching of this Age. The passages which delineate the "mystery of the gospel" are as follows: Romans 16:25-26; Ephesians 3:5-8; 6:19; and Colossians 1:27; 4:3. Our distinctive message today is that Jews and Gentiles alike may believe the gospel and be united together into **one Body** (1 Cor. 12:13) for the purpose of manifesting and bearing witness to Christ who is the sovereign Head of this unique organism!

5. Christ was believed on in the world and it is the glorious privilege of the Church to bear witness to Christ as the sole object of faith! The Lord Jesus prayed for the unity of the Church for the purpose "that the world may believe that Thou sent Me" (John 17:21). As the church functions according to godliness (1 Tim. 3:15) and edification (Eph. 4:12-16), then unbelievers will be convicted as they see the living God being manifested **IN** the assembly (see 1 Cor. 14:24-25; *cf. Col. 1:27 and John's purpose as a witness in John 1:7*).

6. Christ was received up into glory when He was taken up into Heaven at the Ascension. This marked the termination of the Lord's earthly ministry and witness. Likewise, the earthly ministry and witness of the Church also has a terminal point: "When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with Him **in glory**" (Col. 3:4; *see also the "mystery" discussed in 1 Cor. 15:51-52 and compare Rev. 12:5 with 1 Thess. 4:17 where the same word for the Ascension of Christ is used for the Rapture of the Church*). Actually, according to Acts 1:1-2, the Ascension of Christ did not mark the termination of our Lord's ministry and witness, but rather it marked only the **beginning**! It is the Church that *continues* the witness (Acts 1:8) and teaching (Matt. 28:20) of the resurrected Lord who is the Head of the Body, God blessed forever!

The six phrases found in 1 Timothy 3:16 when applied to the Church may be briefly summarized as follows:

1. **MANIFESTED IN THE FLESH** → God the Son manifesting Himself in and through His Body which is on the earth (Col. 1:24-27; Eph 1:22-23).
2. **JUSTIFIED IN THE SPIRIT** → God the Holy Spirit vindicating the resurrected Christ in and through the Assembly (John 16:7-11).
3. **SEEN OF ANGELS** → God the Father making known His manifold wisdom and grace unto the principalities and powers by means of the Assembly (Eph. 3:10; 2:7).
4. **PREACHED AMONG THE NATIONS** → The Assembly making known the mystery of the gospel among all nations (Eph. 3:5-8; Rom. 16:25-26).
5. **BELIEVED ON IN THE WORLD** → The Assembly functioning as a godly witness before the world (John 17:21; 1 Cor. 14:24-25).
6. **RECEIVED UP IN GLORY** → The Assembly being received up in glory at the Rapture of the Church (Col. 3:4; 1 Cor. 15:51-52).

Thus Paul in verse 16 traces the purpose, witness, message and destiny of the Church. Understood properly, 1 Timothy 3:16 provides the most comprehensive summary of the “mystery” aspects of church truth that can be found in the New Testament. It should also be noted that this section (1 Tim. 3:14-16) is the key passage in the book of 1 Timothy and gives the very reason why the letter was written. And remember, the dominant theme of 1 Timothy is the **LOCAL CHURCH**—its doctrine, its worship, its organization, its officers, its discipline, its enemies and its conduct.

This interpretation solves the chronological problem. That is, why did Paul mention the “preaching” and “believing” before the Ascension of Christ? Christ was not “preached among the nations” until after the Ascension.

All six phrases in 1 Timothy 3:16 have “GOD” (or “Christ”) as the subject, but the significance of these phrases has direct bearing and application to the **LOCAL CHURCH**! Thus, what we have is a series of six parallelisms in which the present tenure of the local church is analogous to that of our Lord Jesus in the days of His flesh! This is in complete harmony with the very clear statements of John 20:21; 17:18 and Acts 1:1-2, which indicate that our Lord’s witness and ministry on earth was to be continued by a similar ministry on the part of the Church.

The death of Christ is not mentioned in 1 Timothy 3:16. Certainly the death of Christ was of utmost significance to the Church because God purchased the Church with His own blood (Acts 20:28). But the emphasis in 1 Timothy 3:16 is upon the life and witness of the Lord Jesus, and by application, the life and witness of the Church; and thus the omission of any statement concerning the death of Christ is easily explained.

DOES CHURCH TRUTH THRILL YOUR HEART?

Do we see the Church as God sees it? Does church truth thrill your heart as it did the Apostle Paul? Do you pray fervently that the Lord might open the eyes of your understanding so that you might see how precious the Church is to Christ (Eph. 1:18)? Have you discovered what are the **riches** of the **glory** of this mystery (Col. 1:27)? Are you a healthy cell and a healthy member of a local body of believers (Eph. 4:12-16)? Is the indwelling Christ being manifested in your assembly (1 Cor. 14:25)? Oh may we see the assembly as God sees it! May we agree and confess with Paul: “GREAT IS THE MYSTERY OF GODLINESS!”

(George W. Zeller, 1975; revised 1998)



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