

# INTRODUCTION

Correct Biblical interpretation is possible only as God's Word is studied in total dependence upon the Spirit of Truth (Jn. 16:13; 1 Cor. 2:9-16) and as the text of the Bible is examined in light of the grammar, the syntax, the original languages, the usage of words, the historical background, the cultural background, the context of the passage and the overall teaching of the Scripture (2 Tim. 2:15). Also the Bible is interpreted correctly only when dispensational distinctions are recognized, such as the difference between Israel and the Church (1 Cor. 10:32). The student of the Scriptures must recognize fully the distinctive and parenthetical and mysterious character of the present church age from the day of Pentecost to the rapture of the church in which God is visiting the nations to call out a people for His name (Acts 15:14-16; Eph. 3:1-11; Col. 1:24-27; Rom. 16:25-27).

In 1 Timothy 3:16 the Apostle Paul has set forth "the mystery of godliness", consisting of six terse poetic phrases, each being rich in theological significance:

1. Was manifested in the flesh.
2. Was justified in the Spirit.
3. Was seen of angels.
4. Was preached among the Gentiles.
5. Was believed on in the world.
6. Was received up in glory.

The greatness of this mystery is to be acknowledged and confessed (ὁμολογουμένως) by all who understand its significance and application (1 Tim. 3:16). In fact, this verse could not have been placed in a more strategic section of the letter. It forms the very climax of the passage in which Paul explains his purpose in writing (3:14-16) and it follows a most amazing description of the grandeur and glory of the local church (3:15).

To this writer's knowledge, apart from the published writings of a relatively unknown pastor in Massachusetts<sup>1</sup>, 1 Timothy 3:16 has never been interpreted from a consistent, dispensational point of view. Even dispensational commentators have failed to maintain dispensational distinctives in interpreting this portion of

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<sup>1</sup> Carlton Helgerson, New Testament Church Truth (Burlington, Massachusetts: The Church of the Open Bible, 1971), p. 48, and New Testament Church Truth -- Articles on the Local Church as they Appeared in the Voice Magazine (Burlington, Massachusetts: The Church of the Open Bible, n.d.), pp. 3, 13-14.

Scripture. In general, what the commentators say is correct, but they do not go far enough. They fail to make the application that was intended by Paul and which was certainly understood by Timothy as he read the Apostle's words concerning this great mystery. In short, they fail to see "the mystery of godliness" as having direct application to the local assembly of believers.

By applying 1 Timothy 3:16 to the local church, this thesis sets forth a position that differs from the way the verse has been universally interpreted in the past. The writer is fully aware of the danger of seeking to be novel and different in handling God's Word. The church does not need novel interpreters, it needs Biblical interpreters! In fact, Paul wrote to Timothy and told him to command some that they teach no different doctrine (1 Tim. 1:3). The man who constantly introduces new doctrines and unusual interpretations should be held suspect, to say the least.

On the other hand, there are some aspects of God's Truth which have been hidden for centuries, only to be rediscovered and defined and clarified in recent years. It has only been in the last century that the church has developed a Biblically correct system of eschatology, namely, premillennial pretribulationism. The systematizing and promoting of dispensationalism also took place within the past century, especially under the leadership of John Nelson Darby, C. I. Scofield, Lewis Sperry Chafer and others. Therefore it would not be unreasonable to assume that further refinements of the dispensational system are needed in our day. It is the conviction of this writer that dispensational interpreters have not applied consistent hermeneutic principles when dealing with 1 Timothy 3:16, and as a result, they have lost the glorious truths that were on the heart and mind of Paul as he wrote to young Timothy.

As 1 Timothy 3:14-16 is rightly understood, God's people will better see the church as God sees it and they will better appreciate the priority, preeminence and preciousness of the local church in God's program for this age. Furthermore, they will feel a sober responsibility to harmonize and function according to the New Testament standard for godly conduct in the assembly so as not to hinder the expression and manifestation of the "mystery of godliness" before men and angels during this church age. May God make known to His saints what is the riches of the glory of this mystery!