

APPENDIX IV

REVISED ABSTRACT

The original abstract was misleading and even confusing in many respects, as indicated by the objections that were raised by the dispensationalists who responded to the letter. In the first abstract the writer sacrificed clarity for the sake of brevity. The emphasis was placed upon the application of 1 Timothy 3:16 to the church, and as a result several of the men thought that this interpretation failed to see Christ as the subject of the six phrases of the hymn. Obviously it was Christ who was manifested, justified, seen, preached, believed on and received up! But each of these truths concerning Christ has direct application to the church, which is His body!

To clarify these matters, a revised abstract was prepared as part of a series of chaplaincy notes that were distributed to the students of Grace Theological Seminary during the school year of 1974-75. This revised abstract was placed into the hands of the Seminary men and women so that they might be able to see the local assembly as God sees it and so that they might know what is the riches of the glory of this mystery.

This revised abstract appears on the following pages:

George Zeller
 Student Body Chaplain
 Grace Theological Seminary

THE MYSTERY OF GODLINESS
 ITS APPLICATION TO THE LOCAL ASSEMBLY

1 TIMOTHY 3:14-16

I. The Contextual Problem

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 contextual relationship between these two verses? Why did Paul write verse 16 after he wrote verse 15? Why does Paul's theme seemingly shift from the church to Christ? What is the relationship between "the mystery of godliness" and the local assembly of believers? In what way does this great mystery apply to the church?

II. The Contextual Solution As Universally Interpreted

Those commentators who deal with the contextual problem, including dispensational commentators, are 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 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 Contextual Solution As Dispensationally Interpreted

In four passages (Eph. 3:4-5; Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:26; Rom. 16:26) the Apostle Paul has carefully defined a N.T. 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 made known and revealed in this present church age by the N.T. 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 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; Mic. 5:2; Mt. 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 context of verse 15 seems to demand application to the church. Paul's theme there is the greatness of the local assembly. 2) Since a N.T. 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: If Paul were merely setting forth the objective facts of the incarnation, then he apparently made a serious omission. In declaring the chief purpose of the incarnation, Dr. Alva McClain made 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.) and 1 Timothy 3:16 should be no exception, especially in view of the context of verse 15, which describes the grandeur of the local church. 4) The term "godliness" (v.16) relates to the immediate context of verse 15. The term "godliness" always involves the idea of piety, reverence and respect which results in God-fearing conduct. 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." The answer to the question how men should conduct themselves in the church (verse 15) is answered by the term "godliness" (verse 16). 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 (cf. Phil. 2:5-11). The doctrine of the resurrection and exaltation of Christ in Ephesians 1:18-23 is applied directly to the church. 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? (Note: We can assume that Timothy was quite familiar with the contents of the Ephesian letter--cf. 1 Tim. 1:3)

IV. The Contextual Solution As Dispensationally Applied

The six phrases of "the hymn" in verse 16 may be analyzed as follows:

1. Christ was manifested in the flesh! The living God became flesh (Jn. 1:14) and made Himself known in and through a body (Jn. 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:

- 1) God's life will be manifested in and by the church (Col. 1:27).
- 2) God's wisdom will be manifested in and by the church (Eph. 3:10).
- 3) God's power will be manifested in and by the church (Eph. 3:20).
- 4) God's grace will be manifested in and by the church (Eph. 2:7).
- 5) God's truth will be manifested in and by the church (1 Tim. 3:15).
- 6) God's love will be manifested in and by the church (Jn. 17:23).
- 7) 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 (Mt. 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. Jn. 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 now forms the very core of the gospel preaching of this age. The following passages delineate the "mystery of the gospel": Rom. 16:25-26; Eph. 3:5-8; 6:19; Col. 1:27; 4:3. Our distinctive message today is that Jew and Gentile 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" (Jn. 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 in 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 it marked only the beginning! It is the church that continues the witness (Acts 1:8) and teaching (Mt. 28:20) of the resurrected Lord who is the Head of the body, God blessed forever!

The mystery of godliness as it applies to the church may thus be briefly summarized as follows:

1. God the Son manifesting Himself in and through His body which is on the earth (Col. 1:24-27; Eph. 1:22-23).
2. God the Holy Spirit vindicating the Resurrected Christ in and through the assembly (Jn. 16:7-11).
3. 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. The assembly making known the mystery of the gospel among all nations (Eph. 3:5-8; Rom. 16:25-26).
5. The assembly functioning as a godly witness before the world (Jn. 17:21; 1 Cor. 14:24-25).
6. The assembly being received up in glory at the rapture of the church (Col. 3:4; 1 Cor. 15:51-52).

Thus Paul traces the purpose, witness, message and destiny of the church! If this interpretation is correct, then 1 Timothy 3:16 provides the most comprehensive summary of the "mystery" aspects of church truth that can be found in the New Testament!

This interpretation solves the chronological problem (Why did Paul mention the "preaching" and "believing" before the ascension of Christ?). It also offers a reasonable solution as to why Paul used the ambiguous relative pronoun, ὅς. Certainly the logical antecedent of this pronoun is "Christ" and the nearest antecedent in the context would be "God" (v.15, referring of course to God the Son, because it's His church!),

but the very fact that Paul did not make the subject explicit permits the possibility of a wider application to Christ and the church. In other words, all 6 phrases have "Christ" (or "God") 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!

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.

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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 is 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!"