

## CHAPTER IV

### THE CONTEXTUAL SOLUTION – AS DISPENSATIONALLY INTERPRETED

#### The Significance of μυστήριον

##### Its Meaning

The term **μυστήριον** is possibly derived from the root **μυ** which conveys the idea of closing the lips. Compare the English word, “mute”. Even in this primitive monosyllabic root the idea of secrecy is conveyed. The person who keeps a secret is the person who can keep his lips sealed!

In classical Greek usage **μυστήριον** is generally found in the plural to describe the “mysteries” which characterized the ancient mystery cults. These ancient religions engaged in secret rites and celebrations that were understood and practiced only by those who had been initiated:

These are among the most interesting, significant, and yet baffling religious Phenomena in the Gr-Rom world, esp. from the 6th cent. BC onward. The most famous were the Mysteries celebrated in Eleusis, under the patronage and control of the Athenian state, and associated with the worship of Demeter and her daughter Persephone. But there were many others of a more private character than the Eleusinian, e.g. the Orphic Mysteries, associated with the name of Dionysus? Besides the Gr Mysteries, mention should be made of the Egypt cults of Isis and Serapis, and of Pers Mithraism, which in the 3d cent. AD was widely diffused over the whole empire.<sup>51</sup>

Integral to the concept of the mysteries is the fact that those who wish to take part in their celebration must undergo initiation; the uninitiated are denied both access to the sacred actions and knowledge of them. By entrance qualification and dedication the candidate is separated from the host of the uninitiated and enters into the fellowship of initiates who know each other by confessional formulae or symbolical signs. This society forming element is of the very nature of the mysteries.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> D. Miall Edwards, “Mystery”, The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Vol. III (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1939), p. 2104.

<sup>52</sup> Kittel, Vol. IV, p. 804.

The idea of secrecy was very much a part of these mystery religions. The initiates were not allowed to divulge their secrets to others:

In all the mysteries the distinction between initiates and non-initiates finds expression not only in the ritual of the celebrations but also in the vow of silence laid on the devotees. This is essential to all the mysteries.<sup>53</sup>

This is not to say that the content of the mysteries was obscure or incomprehensible. These were not “mysterious” truths in the modern sense of going beyond the capacity of human understanding and explanation. But rather they were religious secrets that could be easily understood by those who were initiated:

Lobeck opposes the common notion that the mysteries were revelations of a profound religious secret. They certainly were always secret; but all Greeks without distinction of rank or education, nay, perhaps even slaves, might be initiated, and in later times foreigners.<sup>54</sup>

Thus the mysteries were secrets that were hidden and unrevealed to most men, but were known and understood by those who were initiated. A mystery remains unknown until it is revealed. It is a secret known only to the initiated:

It refers to that which is hidden and secret, what can be known only to those who are specially initiated or taught. The word does not necessarily mean something incomprehensible to the human mind, but rather that which hitherto has been unrevealed.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 806.

<sup>54</sup> Liddell and Scott, p. 987.

<sup>55</sup> Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Brethren Missionary Herald Books, 1959), p. 324.

## Its New Testament Usage

The word **μυστήριον** occurs 27 times in the New Testament. The term is used almost exclusively by Paul, the only exceptions being a single occurrence in each of the synoptic gospels (Mt. 13:11; Mk. 4:11; Lk. 8: 10) and four times by John in Revelation (1:20; 10:7; 17:5,7). It bears its classical meaning of a revealed secret, not its modern sense of something which is obscure or incomprehensible, difficult or impossible to understand.<sup>56</sup> And yet it differs strikingly from the classical usage in that the emphasis is no longer upon secrecy. Indeed, the very opposite is true. The New Testament emphasis is upon making known, revealing and speaking forth the mystery: “it is a secret which God wills to make known and has charged His Apostles to declare to those who have ears to hear it”.<sup>57</sup>

Perhaps no one has summarized the New Testament usage of **μυστήριον** as precisely as J.B. Lightfoot:

There is this difference however; that, whereas the heathen mysteries were strictly confined to a narrow circle, the Christian mysteries are freely communicated to all. There is therefore an intentional paradox in the employment of the image by St Paul.

Thus the idea of secrecy or reserve disappears when **μυστήριον** is adopted into the Christian vocabulary by St Paul: and the word signifies simply 'a truth which was once hidden but now is revealed', 'a truth which without special revelation would have been unknown.' Of the nature of the truth itself the word says nothing. It may be transcendental, incomprehensible, mystical, mysterious, in the modern sense of the term (1 Cor. 15:51, Eph. 5:32): but this idea is quite accidental, and must be gathered from the special circumstances of the case, for it cannot be inferred from the word itself. Hence **μυστήριον** is almost universally found in connection with words denoting revelation or publication.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Edwards, I.S.B.E., p. 2104.

<sup>57</sup> J. Armitage Robinson, St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians (Greenwood, South Carolina: The Attic Press, n.d.), p. 240.

<sup>58</sup> John Barber Lightfoot, Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), p. 168.

It is interesting to categorize the various terms that occur in connection with **μυστήριον** involving ideas diametrically opposed to secrecy or concealment. Such terms may be listed as follows:

1. **ἀποκαλύπτειν** – to reveal, to uncover, to unveil.  
(Rom. 16:25; Eph. 3:3,5; 2 Th. 2:7)
2. **γνωρίζειν** – to make known, to declare, to reveal, to inform.  
(Rom. 16:26; Eph. 1:9; 3:3,10; 6:19)
3. **φανερῶν** – to make manifest, to reveal, to make known, to show openly.  
(Col. 4:3; Rom. 16:26; 1 Tim. 3:16)
4. **λαλεῖν** – to speak, to talk, to utter words.  
(Col. 4:3; 1 Cor. 2:7; 14:2)
5. **λέγειν** – to say, to speak, to tell, to show.  
(1 Cor. 15:51)

Today the only hindrance to a full understanding of the New Testament mysteries is the obvious limitation that is upon the natural man who cannot understand the things of God, neither can he know them, because he is totally blind (Mt. 13:11-15; 1 Cor. 2:14; 2 Cor. 4:3-4). But for those who have eyes to see, God's once hidden secret is now made visible. What was once concealed has now been revealed! That which was once locked up in the mind and purpose of God is now made known and preached among the nations: "to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God" (Eph. 3:9). God's great desire and delight is to make known mystery truth to His saints (Col. 1:27)!

Actually the New Testament provides its own definition for the word **μυστήριον**, and this definition is clearly set forth by the Apostle Paul in four passages: **1)** Ephesians 3:4-5, **2)** Ephesians 3:9, **3)** Colossians 1:26, **4)** Romans 16:25-26. These passages reveal the essential characteristics of a New Testament mystery:

1. the mystery of Christ which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit (Eph. 3:4-5).
2. the mystery which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God (Eph. 3:9).
3. the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but is now made manifest to his saints (Col. 1:26).
4. the mystery which was kept secret since the world began, but now is made manifest, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations (Rom. 16:26).

From these four passages the following definition of a New Testament mystery may be derived:

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 New Testament apostles and prophets.

According to this Biblical definition, a New Testament mystery was not previously disclosed to the prophets of the Old Testament. It involves distinctive, church age, New Testament truth. The fact that a New Testament mystery was hidden and unrevealed in the Old Testament has long been recognized by dispensational interpreters:

The word mystery is found twenty-seven times in the New Testament and is used to describe a divine secret not revealed in the Old Testament but now revealed at least to some extent in the New. The descriptive definition given in Colossians 1:26 brings this out.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> John F. Walvoord, The Church in Prophecy (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1964, p. 96.

His very use of the word mystery plus the direct statements such as Colossians 1:25-26 do indicate that in his mind the mystery . . . was completely unknown in Old Testament times.<sup>60</sup>

This term is properly used throughout the New Testament to describe truth revealed in the New Testament which was hidden from view as far as Old Testament revelation is concerned. It is specifically New Testament truth.<sup>61</sup>

Thus we arrive at a definition of a New Testament “mystery”. It is a secret of God that is revealed in the New Testament and not until then.<sup>62</sup>

The idea of a mystery being something secret in Old Testament times but revealed in the New Testament is clearly seen in a passage like Colossians 1:26.<sup>63</sup>

The mysteries then of the New Testament are truths not revealed by God in the Old Testament but are revealed by the Holy Spirit in the New Testament.<sup>64</sup>

Further proof that a New Testament mystery is a divine truth not found in the Old Testament is seen by studying the actual content of the various New Testament mysteries.

“Mystery truth” was first declared by the Lord Jesus Himself. In Matthew 13 He revealed to His disciples “the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” in a series of parables. The Lord did not set forth these parables until it was obvious that His offer of the mediatorial and Messianic kingdom had been rejected (Mt. 11 and 12). Although the Old Testament had much to say about the kingdom of heaven, the Lord's teaching in Matthew 13 revealed an aspect of the kingdom that had never previously been revealed.

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<sup>60</sup> Charles Caldwell Ryrie, Biblical Theology of the New Testament (Chicago: Moody Press, 1959), p. 189.

<sup>61</sup> Walvoord, The Church, pp. 26-27.

<sup>62</sup> Willard Maxwell Aldrich, “How Long, Lord?”, Bibliotheca Sacra, Volume 94, Number 374 (April-June, 1937), p. 220.

<sup>63</sup> Charles Caldwell Ryrie, “The Mystery in Ephesians 3”, Bibliotheca Sacra, Volume 123, Number 489 (January-March, 1966), p. 26.

<sup>64</sup> Willis W. Virtue, “The Mystery of God in Christ”, Bibliotheca Sacra, Volume 93, Number 371 (July-September, 1936), pp. 336-37.

The Old Testament knew nothing of an interadvent period, and yet in Matthew 13 the Lord describes the character of this present age from His rejection to His second advent:

Among the mysteries of the Kingdom revealed here privately to the disciples by the Lord, the most important has to do with the mystery of an interregnum which is to follow the arrival of the King and continue until His second coming. Though implicit there, this is something not revealed in Old Testament prophecy, and it could not be made known clearly until the King's rejection had become historically certain.<sup>65</sup>

Christ announced to His disciples an aspect of the kingdom of God which was hitherto unknown. The mysteries of the kingdom of heaven concern the conditions during the course of time during which the King is absent from the earth – the time between the first and second comings of Christ.<sup>66</sup>

Lewis Sperry Chafer has discovered a significant correspondence between the “mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” as delineated in Matthew 13 and the mysteries revealed by Paul in the New Testament epistles:

In Matthew 13 there is given by Christ Himself, and under seven parables, the characteristics of this age. In this scripture this age is itself declared to be a mystery, or sacred secret (13:11), and the parables develop the truth that there are three major features present throughout this age, namely, **(a)** that which is acceptable – the wheat, the pearl, and the good fish; **(b)** that which represents blinded Israel (vss. 14-15), who are the treasure hid in the field – the field is the world – and **(c)** the presence of evil – the tares, evil birds, leaven, and bad fish. It should be observed that, in the New Testament, each of these three factors is itself declared to be a mystery, or sacred secret: **(a)** the Church composed of Jews and Gentiles in one Body (Eph. 3:4-6), **(b)** Israel blinded until the Church is called out (Rom. 11:25; cf. Acts 15:13-18), and **(c)** the presence and character of evil in this age (2 Thess. 2:7).<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> McClain, pp. 324-25.

<sup>66</sup> Ryrie, Biblical Theology, pp. 88-89.

<sup>67</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, Vol. IV (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1946), p. 44.

Ephesians 3 is the passage which most clearly unfolds the significance of the mystery that was revealed to the Apostle Paul. In fact, Chafer derives a complete definition of a New Testament mystery from this chapter alone:

No better definition of a New Testament mystery will be found than that set forth in this context. A New Testament mystery is a truth hitherto withheld, or “hid in God” (vs. 9), but now revealed. The sum total of all the mysteries in the New Testament represents that entire body of added truth found in the New Testament which is unrevealed in the Old Testament. On the other hand, the New Testament mystery is to be distinguished from the mystery of the cults of Babylon and Rome, whose secrets were sealed and held on penalty of death; for the New Testament mystery, when it is revealed, is to be declared to the ends of the earth (vs. 9), and is restricted only to the extent of the limitations of the natural man (1 Cor. 2:14).<sup>68</sup>

Amillennialists differ from dispensationalists in that they believe the New Testament mysteries were partially revealed in the Old Testament, though not fully. They appeal to Ephesians 3:5 to support this interpretation, insisting that the word “as” shows that this mystery was partially revealed in Old Testament times and therefore is not unique to this present church age.<sup>69</sup> Although this is a grammatical possibility it is by no means a grammatical necessity. The “as” need not be qualifying, but may be purely descriptive. Also the parallel passages (Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:26; Rom. 16:25-26) prove this interpretation false.

Ephesians 3 also exposes the error of the ultradispensationalists who claim that the mystery was revealed exclusively to Paul. And yet verse 5 declares that the mystery was revealed by the Spirit to the New Testament apostles and prophets. This would include Paul but it would not exclude others.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>69</sup> Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), p. 1). See also the footnote on page 134.

<sup>70</sup> Ryrie, “The mystery in Ephesians 3”, p. 31.

The content of the mystery is set forth in Ephesians 3:6: “That the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs, and of the same body and partakers of his promise in Christ by the Gospel”. J. Dwight Pentecost explains that this mystery contained the glorious truth that Jews and Gentiles would find an equal position in the new and unique body of Christ:

It was no mystery that God was going to provide salvation for the Jews, nor that Gentiles would be blessed in salvation. The fact that God was going to form Jews and Gentiles alike into one body was never revealed in the Old Testament and forms the mystery of which Paul speaks in Ephesians 3:1-7.<sup>71</sup>

The central feature of this mystery is that Gentiles should have an absolute equality with the Jews in the body of Christ.<sup>72</sup> This obviously is a truth directly relating to the church, God's unique organism. Jew and Gentile alike are fellow-members of Christ's body! Such organic unity was never realized in Old Testament times and will never again be repeated, even under millennial conditions.

Ephesians 3 is paralleled by another key passage found in Colossians 1:24-27. The mystery is here said to be, “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27) . The Old Testament spoke of the coming of the Messiah both in suffering and in glory, but it never once anticipated such a situation as “Christ in you”.<sup>73</sup> The Lord Jesus predicted this new and unique relationship in John 14:20 and John 17:23. The glory of this mystery is that the living Christ is today indwelling a body:

The other aspect of the distinctiveness of the character of the Church as the Body of Christ is the indwelling presence of Christ in the members of that body. This is the mystery revealed in Colossians 1:27 . . . The immediate context speaks of the Body of Christ three times (vv. 18,22,24), leaving no doubt that it is the members of the body who are indwelt by the living Christ. This is what makes the body a living organism, and this relationship was unknown in Old Testament times.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, Things to Come – A Study in Biblical Eschatology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), p. 201.

<sup>72</sup> John F. Walvoord, “Premillennialism and the Church as a mystery”, Bibliotheca Sacra, Volume 111, Number 441 ( January, 1 954), p. 3.

<sup>73</sup> John F. Walvoord, The Rapture Question (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham Publishing Company, 1957), p. 32.

<sup>74</sup> Ryrie, Dispensationalism Today, p. 135.

An organism must possess life and the church is animated by the very life of God:

God was to do a new thing, a wonder and a miracle. He was to form a body, the church. The heavenly life of the risen and ascended Saviour was to indwell each believer and thus indwell the church.<sup>75</sup>

In 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 the Apostle Paul announces another mystery, the content of which is again a distinctive New Testament revelation. The mystery here described is not the bodily resurrection of the saints, because this was a doctrine that was taught in the Old Testament Scriptures:

It should be clear to all careful students of the Word of God that it is not a mystery that saints who die will be raised again. The doctrine of resurrection is taught in both the Old and New Testaments and is not a hidden truth.<sup>76</sup>

The mystery here revealed is not the resurrection of the saints, but rather it is the rapture of living saints. Paul reveals the amazing secret that “we shall not all sleep” (1 Cor. 15:51). That a whole generation of living believers will be changed and caught up into heaven in glorified bodies is a truth that is not found in the pages of the Old Testament.

The term “mystery” as it is used in the New Testament epistles almost always relates to some aspect of church truth. In previous ages and generations distinctive church truth was kept a secret. Church truth was absent from predictive prophecy until the days of Christ (Mt. 16:18; cf. Mt. 3:11) and was not fully revealed until the days of the New Testament apostles and prophets (Eph. 3:5-6; col. 1:26; Rom. 16:25-26). This fact is acknowledged only by dispensational interpreters who make the proper distinction between Israel and the church.

It is not correct to say that the church is a mystery. The two cannot be so equated. It is better to say that the New Testament mysteries generally convey some aspect of church truth:

While the church is never expressly called a mystery in the New Testament, the term is used of the distinctive elements of truth which concern the church.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Helgerson, Church Truth, p. 5.

<sup>76</sup> Walvoord, The Rapture Question, p. 35.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. p. 28.

Paul uses the word in reference to the basic features of the Church . . . That there would be both Jews and Gentiles in one body in the Church was unknown and is a mystery (Eph. 3:1-12) . . . The living, organic nature of the people of God, the church, is also called a mystery (Col. 1:24-27; 2:10-19; 3:4,11). The relationship of the Church as the Bride of Christ is characterized by the same word (Eph. 5:22-32), and the fact that some who belong to this Body will not have to die but will be translated is also a mystery (1 Cor. 15:51-57).<sup>78</sup>

The New Testament usage of the term “mystery” as it relates to church truth may be summarized as follows:

1. The mystery that Jews and Gentiles alike would be co-members of the same body, the church (Eph. 3:4-6).
2. The mystery that the gospel would be preached without discrimination to Jew and Gentile alike and that all men may believe the gospel and be united together into one body, which is the church (Rom. 16:25-26; Eph. 6:19; Col. 4:3).
3. The mystery of the living Christ indwelling a body, which is the church (Col. 1:26-27).
4. The mystery of the church as the bride of Christ, organically united with its Head and Groom (Eph. 5:32).
5. The mystery of the rapture (translation) of the living members of the church (1 Cor. 15:51-52).
6. The mystery of Israel's partial blindness during the out-calling of the church (Rom. 11:25; cf. Acts 15:13-18; Mt. 13:10-15).
7. The mystery of lawlessness in this present age culminating in the revelation of the man of sin following the removal of the church (2 Th. 2:6-8).

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<sup>78</sup> Ryrie, *Biblical Theology*, pp. 188-89.

## Its Usage In 1 Timothy 3:16

In harmony with its New Testament usage, the term **μυστήριον** as used in 1 Timothy 3:16 must signify a secret that was unknown, hidden and kept secret in Old Testament times, but has now been made manifest and revealed in this present church age. Also it would seem most probable that the “mystery of godliness” should relate to some aspect of church truth, especially in view of Paul’s preceding context (verse 15) in which he has set forth the greatness of the church under three figures as discussed in Chapter I.

Non-dispensational interpreters insist that “the mystery of godliness” was partially revealed in the Old Testament but not fully revealed until New Testament times. They believe that the facts about Christ in 1 Timothy 3:16 could be found in germ form in the Old Testament: “Moses spake of him, the Psalms speak of him, the prophets speak of him; but all of them spake darkly”.<sup>79</sup>

This interpretation is fraught with problems. The Lord Jesus knew that the Old Testament spoke concerning Himself and He expected men to search the Scriptures to understand the Messianic predictions (Jn. 5:39; Lk. 24:44-46). He even rebuked His disciples for their failure to believe all that the prophets have spoken concerning the sufferings and glory of the Messiah (Lk. 24:25-27). The Old Testament Messianic predictions were “dark sayings” only to those with unbelieving hearts who refused to receive the prophetic testimony that God gave concerning His Son. A New Testament mystery can only refer to something totally unrevealed in the Old Testament. The sufferings and glory of Christ cannot therefore be rightfully considered under that term.

Vincent believes that the truths set forth in 1 Timothy 3:16 are called a mystery because they were historically hidden in previous ages and only fully understood after the first coming of Christ:

The truth is called a mystery because it was, historically, hidden, until revealed in the Person and work of Christ; also because it is concealed from human wisdom, and apprehended only by faith in the revelation of God through Christ.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> A.C. Hervey, *1 Timothy*, Volume XXI of *The Pulpit Commentary*, edited by H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950), p. 55.

<sup>80</sup> Vincent, p. 1031.

Van Gorder, a dispensational writer, also describes the mystery of 1 Timothy 3:16 as being “historically hidden”:

This unquestionably has to do with the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. You may wonder how this can be called a mystery, when the Old Testament is filled with predictions of Christ. Admittedly, the Old Testament speaks of Him, but does so in such a way that only the coming of Christ himself could make that revelation clear.<sup>81</sup>

The error in this interpretation is exposed by the New Testament definition of a mystery. Not only is a mystery “historically hidden” but it is “prophetically hidden” as well. A New Testament mystery was not revealed to the Old Testament prophets, nor did it find any place in their writings. It was made known only to the New Testament apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20; 3:3-5; Rom. 16:25-26). If the Old Testament spoke of this mystery, as Van Gorder asserts, then it could not properly be called a mystery, at least not according to the Pauline definition of that term.

Since the content of the hymn in 1 Timothy 3:16 obviously refers to Christ, most commentators identify the mystery as being the incarnation. This is not unreasonable since the first phrase declares that Christ “was manifested in the flesh”. This interpretation is almost universally accepted by interpreters and may be represented as follows:

The incarnation is “the mystery of godliness”.<sup>82</sup>

The contents of this mystery are stated in six short propositions, which relate to the incarnation, the sufferings, the death, the resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus Christ.<sup>83</sup>

In this rhythmical formula is briefly but pregnantly comprised the revealed truth of the Incarnation, of which the Church is to be the pillar and basis, and which Timothy was to maintain in the face of all the heresies which were soon about to arise.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Paul R. Van Gorder, New Testament Mysteries, a Bible study booklet (Grand Rapids: Radio Bible Class, November 1973), p. 2.

<sup>82</sup> James Orr, “Godliness”, The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Vol. II (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1939), p. 1270.

<sup>83</sup> Barth, p. 938.

<sup>84</sup> F. C. Cook, ed., The Bible Commentary, Vol. III (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1881), p. 779.

It is somewhat surprising that leading dispensational theologians have likewise equated the mystery in 1 Timothy 3:16 with the incarnation. Lewis Sperry Chafer, in the first volume of his Systematic Theology, lists nine passages in support of the doctrine of the incarnation including 1 Timothy 3:16 which he says is a direct assertion of the incarnation.<sup>85</sup> In referring to this same verse he gives a lengthy discussion of the “Six Features of Christ's Incarnate Ministry”:

These six great assertions are divinely distinguished subdivisions of the entire scope of the incarnate manifestation.<sup>86</sup>

Obviously Chafer is correct when he says that 1 Timothy 3:16 is a direct assertion of the incarnation. But is the incarnation really the great mystery that is disclosed in this verse?

J. Dwight Pentecost also identifies the mystery of 1 Timothy 3:16 as the incarnation: “The incarnation itself is called a mystery (1 Tim. 3:16)”.<sup>87</sup> But on the same page he states that the New Testament mysteries “constitute a major portion of God's program for the present age, which was not revealed in other ages, but is now known by revelation from God”.<sup>88</sup> The only way such statements can be reconciled is to assert that the incarnation was a hidden and unrevealed doctrine in the Old Testament. But can such an assertion be made?

Willis W. Virtue, in a study on the mystery of God in Colossians 2:2, has demonstrated conclusively that the incarnation itself cannot be considered a mystery. Before giving his Scriptural evidence he made these introductory remarks:

In presenting this thesis of the Mystery of God in Christ I am quite aware of the differences of opinion upon the subject. Since there is in the minds of many of God's people, and even influential leaders in Christendom the idea that the fact of the incarnation constitutes Christ as the mystery of God, I am taking considerable space to show that this cannot be the case. Christ was sufficiently revealed in the Old Testament that there need never have been any mistake as to His identity.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Chafer, Systematic Theology, Vol. I, p. 351.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., Vol. III, p. 21.

<sup>87</sup> Pentecost, p. 135.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Virtue, p. 337.

In demonstrating that the incarnation of Christ was never a secret kept from God's people, Virtue has presented in outline form the basic facts of the incarnate life of Christ which are clearly revealed in the Old Testament:

1. Seed of the woman:  
Gen. 3:15 . . . . Gal. 4:4; 1 John 3:8.
2. Through Abraham:  
Gen. 17:7; 22:18 . . . . Gal. 3:16; John 11:51,52.
3. Through Isaac:  
Gen. 21:12 . . . . Heb. 11:17-19.
4. Through Jacob and Judah:  
Gen. 28:14 . . . . Heb. 11:20; Rev. 5:5.
5. Through David:  
2 Sam. 7:12,13; Psa. 132:11; Jer. 23:5; Luke 1:32; Acts 2:29-30; 13:23; Rom. 1:3-4.
6. As to His birth:
  - a. Time:  
Gen. 49:10 . . . . Lk. 2:1,2.
  - b. Place:  
Micah 5:2 . . . . Matt. 2:1.
  - c. Born of a Virgin:  
Isa. 7:14 . . . . Matt. 1:18; 1:21-23.
  - d. Great persons come to adore Him:  
Psa. 72:10 . . . . Matt. 2:2,11.
7. Boyhood life:
  - a. Children slain:  
Jer. 31:15 . . . . Matt. 2:16-18.
  - b. Called out of Egypt:  
Hosea 11:1 . . . . Matt. 2:15.
  - c. Coming into the Temple:  
Haggai 2:7,9 . . . . Lk. 2:27,32.
8. Preceded by John the Baptist:  
Mal. 3:1; Isa. 40:3 . . . . Lk. 1:17; Matt. 3:1,3.
9. Anointed with the Spirit:  
Isa. 11:2 . . . . Acts 10:38.

10. Offices:
  - a. Prophet:  
Deut. 18:15 . . . . Acts 3:20-22.
  - b. Priest:  
Psa. 110:4 . . . . Heb. 5:5,6.
  - c. King:  
Psa. 2:6 . . . . Lk. 1:32.
11. Humiliations and sufferings:
  - a. Poverty:  
Isa. 53:2 . . . . Lk. 9:58.
  - b. Bearing reproach:  
Psa. 69:9 . . . . Rom. 15:3.
  - c. Rejected by His brethren:  
Psa. 69:8 . . . . John 1:11.
  - d. Hated:  
Psa. 69:4 . . . . John 15:24,25.
  - e. Smitten on cheek:  
Micah 5:1 . . . . Matt. 27:30.
12. Death on the Cross:  
Psa. 22:16 . . . . John 19:18.
13. Resurrection:  
Psa. 16:10 . . . . Lk. 24:6,31,34.
14. Ascension:  
Psa. 68:18 . . . . Acts 1:9.
15. Second Coming:  
Dan. 7:13 . . . . Acts 1:11.<sup>90</sup>

Yes, the Old Testament clearly taught that God would be manifested in the flesh. A child would be born who would be called the mighty God (Isa. 9:6). A virgin would bring forth a child who would be called, "God with us" (Isa. 7:14). A babe would come out of Bethlehem, whose goings forth have been from everlasting (Mic. 5:2). Out of David would come a righteous Branch who is called, "THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS" (Jer. 23:5-6). The Old Testament prophets clearly revealed that Messiah would be manifested in the flesh and this revelation was clearly understood by those who studied the writings of the prophets (Mt. 2:4-5; Lk. 2:25-33,36-38). The incarnation of Christ was no mystery!

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<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 337-38.

Some interpreters insist that the mystery in 1 Timothy 3:16 is Christ: “the mystery of Christianity, the person of Christ: cf. Col. 1:27”.<sup>91</sup> But the verse cited in support of this interpretation does not equate the mystery with Christ. The mystery in Colossians 1:27 is not Christ, but it is “Christ in you”. Christ today is indwelling a body which is His church!

No, the “mystery of godliness” is not the Person of Christ and it is not the incarnation of Christ. The incarnation of Christ was no mystery. But the incarnation of Christ as it applies to the church is a great mystery indeed! Concerning the application of the incarnation to the local assembly of believers, the Old Testament is silent! The fact that the Messiah would be manifested in the flesh was no secret. 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). Today God is incarnate in a body! And every believer who sees the riches of the glory of this mystery must confess with Paul, “Great is the mystery of godliness”!

There are at least four reasons for suggesting that the statements concerning Christ in 1 Timothy 3:16 apply directly to the church. First, the context of verse 15 seems to demand application to the church. Paul's theme there is the greatness of the local assembly.

Second, 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. In this connection it is interesting to note that if Paul were merely setting forth the objective facts of the incarnation, then he apparently made a serious omission. Theologians will agree that the chief purpose of the incarnation was that 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! Such a tenet would hardly be omitted from a doctrinal statement today!

Third, the term “mystery” as used by Paul almost always involves some aspect of church truth, 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.

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<sup>91</sup> Lock, p. 44. See also Martin O. Massinger, “The Mystery of Godliness”, Bibliotheca Sacra, Volume 96, Number 384 (October-December, 1939), p. 481.

Fourth, the Apostle Paul, in setting forth great Christological truths, almost always applies them to believers. The great Christological passage in Philippians 2:5-11 was written so that believers might have this same mind of Christ in them (Phil. 2:5). The doctrine of the resurrection and exaltation of Christ in Ephesians 1:18-23 is applied directly to the Church (Eph. 1:19, 22-23; cf. 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.

Finally, something should be said about the common interpretation that equates the “truth” of 1 Timothy 3:15 with the “mystery” of 1 Timothy 3:16. According to this view the responsibility of the church is to uphold the “mystery of godliness” which consists of the six objective statements concerning Christ as contained in the hymn. And yet, as the hymn is studied an amazing discovery is made. There is nothing in this hymn that would be objectionable to the Roman Catholic Church or the Greek Orthodox Church. These apostate churches would both be able to endorse a doctrinal statement containing the words, “Christ was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory”. Even these false religious systems are holding forth these basic Christological truths. Can it then be said that the Roman Catholic Church is the pillar and ground of the truth? Hardly! It is much better to understand “truth” (verse 15) as a reference to all of God's revealed truth in the scriptures (Jn. 17:17; Phil. 2:16; Eph. 1:13). The true church, by life and by message, is to uphold all the truth of God's Word from Genesis to Revelation! It is the awesome responsibility of the church to manifest the truth of God before a dark and wicked world (Phil. 2:15-16).

As the interpreter reads 1 Timothy 3:15 it is the church that looms large before his eyes. It is the greatness of “the church” that is under consideration, not the greatness of “the truth”. The connecting link between verse 15 and verse 16 is “the church”, not “the truth”. Therefore the mystery of godliness relates not to “the truth”, but to the “church of the living God”.

God's great desire in this present age is to make known to His saints what is the riches of the glory of this mystery (Col. 1:27)! And as this mystery is understood by God's people they will acknowledge and confess its greatness! The living God is manifesting Himself before men and angels in a body!

### The Significance Of εὐσέβεια

#### Its Meaning

The noun εὐσέβεια is derived from the monosyllabic stem σεβ which originally meant “to fall back before” in the sense of shrinking from something because of intense fear or awe. Thus σεβ “always denotes awe whether at a great mistake or at something lofty and sublime”.<sup>92</sup>

Several Greek words are derived from this original stem and they all to some degree convey this primary significance of reverential awe and respect:

The broader development of the group σεβ- was in association with the latter. The bodily movement expressed an inner attitude of respect, of being impressed by something great and lofty.<sup>93</sup>

It is helpful to study some of the cognate terms. The noun σέβας means “reverential awe, a feeling of awe and shame which rises to prevent one doing something disgraceful”.<sup>94</sup> The meaning of the verb σέβω has been carefully defined by Hermann Cremer:

At its root is that of reverential fear, profound respect, chiefly applied to the bearing of men towards the gods; = to honour them reverentially with holy awe. It seems to denote the religious character of moral reverence, so that it is not strictly intransitive, but only without object = God-fearing, to be God-fearing as to doing something. To this view the N.T. use of the absolute σέβεσθαι leads, σέβεσθαι being = to be God-fearing, used of proselytes, οἱ σεβόμενοι, Acts 13:43,50, 17:4,17.<sup>95</sup>

Liddell and Scott basically concur with Cremer by saying that the verb means “to feel awe or fear before God and man, esp. when about to do something disgraceful”.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Gerhard Friedrich, ed., Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol. VII, translated and edited by Geoffrey W. Bromily (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), p. 169.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Liddell and Scott, p. 1378.

<sup>95</sup> Hermann Cremer, Biblico-Theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek, translated by William Urwick, Fourth English Edition (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1895), p. 522.

<sup>96</sup> Liddell and Scott, p. 1378.

Arndt and Gingrich agree that the verb **σέβω** involves “a reverent attitude toward human beings; show reverence or respect for”.<sup>97</sup>

The adjective **σεβαστός** means “revered, worthy of reverence, august”, and was a Greek translation of the Latin “Augustus”, the designation of the Roman emperor.<sup>98</sup> For those living in the Roman empire, all reverence and respect was to be directed towards this man: “the imperial name Augustus was rendered **Σεβαστός**; Augusta by **Σεβαστή** or **Σεβαστία**”.<sup>99</sup> The Latin term “Augustus” was a surname of Octavius Caesar after he attained to undivided authority and after him it was applied to all of the Roman emperors; being equivalent to majesty or imperial majesty.<sup>100</sup>

The adjective **ἀσεβής** is composed of the negative alpha prefix and carried the following meaning:

godless, without fear and reverence of God, not = irreligious, but positively, he who practices the opposite or what the fear of God demands.<sup>101</sup>

The ungodly man is the man who has no reverence. There is no fear of God before his eyes.

The positive prefix **εὖ**, meaning “well, good, rightly”, is added to the original stem **σεβ** to indicate a good and healthy and proper fear and awe before men and God. Thus the adjective **εὐσεβής** means “God-fearing, full of holy and devout reverence”, and it is used of one who is ruled in what he does and avoids by reverence and godly fear.<sup>102</sup> It involves a reverence for God which shows itself in actions.<sup>103</sup> The godly man is known by his godly life. The man who fears God will fear doing anything that will displease the Lord. His reverential fear and profound respect for God can only result in proper conduct. “Fear the LORD, and depart from evil” (Prov. 3:7). Abraham feared God, that God was so great that to disobey Him was unthinkable (Gen. 22:12)!

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<sup>97</sup> Arndt and Gingrich, p. 753 .

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Liddell and Scott, p. 1378.

<sup>100</sup> E. A. Andrews, A Copious and Critical Latin-English Lexicon (London: Sampson Low & Son, n.d.), p. 177.

<sup>101</sup> Cremer, p. 523.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 524.

<sup>103</sup> Ethelbert W. Bullinger, A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament, ninth edition (London: Samuel Bagster and Sons Limited, 1969), p. 335.

In classical Greek usage, the noun *εὐσέβεια* referred especially to “reverence towards the gods”.<sup>104</sup> In the New Testament and Septuagint it is used only of the duty which man owes to God.<sup>105</sup> Cremer defines *εὐσέβεια* as “the good and careful cherishing of the fear of God”.<sup>106</sup> The usage of this term in the Septuagint illustrates its close affinity in meaning to the Old Testament concept of the fear of the Lord. In Proverbs 1:7 *εὐσέβεια*, is paralleled with *φόβος κυρίου*. Also *εὐσέβεια* is found directly associated with *φόβος θεοῦ* in Isaiah 11:2-3. The noun occurs elsewhere in Proverbs 13:11 and Isaiah 33:6.

It can be said, therefore, that the man who feared God in the Old Testament corresponds very closely to the godly man of the New Testament. The emphasis of both is upon a reverence and awe for God that results in proper conduct and behavior. The godly man is the man who fears doing anything that would displease the Lord. He is a man who manifests a God-consciousness, a God-awareness and a God-dependence (Gen. 17:1). He is a man who conducts himself in a manner worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing!

#### Its New Testament usage

The noun *εὐσέβεια* occurs commonly in the Pastoral letters and in the writings of Peter. The term always involves Christ-honoring conduct as the believer walks in close fellowship with the Lord:

Its area of meaning emphasizes godly conduct, suggesting reverence and loyalty. This aptly stresses Paul's major emphasis in the Pastorals: sound doctrine and faithful living.<sup>107</sup>

Timothy was told to exercise himself unto godliness (1 Tim. 4:7-8). The word is always found in the highest contexts of Christian virtue and behavior (1 Tim. 2:2; 6:11; Tit. 2:12).

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<sup>104</sup> Liddell and Scott, p. 615.

<sup>105</sup> Arndt and Gingrich, p. 326.

<sup>106</sup> Cremer, p. 524.

<sup>107</sup> Wilbur B. Wallis, “1 Timothy”, *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, edited by Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), p. 1375.

## Its Usage In 1 Timothy 3:16

In light of the meaning of **εὐσέβεια**, the expression “the mystery of godliness” in 1 Timothy 3:16 might be accurately 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 (to conduct thyself)”. The answer to the question how men should conduct themselves in the church (verse 15) is answered by the term “godliness” (verse 16).<sup>108</sup> Alfred Plummer also mentions the contextual connection between “godliness” (verse 16) and “behave thyself” (verse 15).<sup>109</sup> In other words, the great mystery of godliness must somehow relate to proper conduct and behavior in the local assembly. As the local body of Christ manifests godliness and functions according to the Biblical pattern (1 Tim. 3:1-15; Eph. 4:11-16), then the mystery of godliness will be realized and God will make Himself known in and through the assembly!

Some interpret “godliness” in verse 16 as referring to Christ who is our perfect example of a godly man. Although this is certainly true, the term **εὐσέβεια**, is never used with reference to God or Christ: “It is a term not used of God, but of men”.<sup>110</sup> In the seven other places where the word is used in 1 Timothy (2:2; 4:7,8; 6:3,5, 6, 11) it always refers to God-fearing conduct on the part of believers. 1 Timothy 3:16 should be no exception, especially in light of the significance of the verb **ἀναστρέφεισθαι** in the preceding verse.

Others, when dealing with this verse translate **εὐσέβεια** as “religion”. Thus they interpret the “credal hymn” of verse 16 as being a brief summary of “the mystery of our religion” that is, a brief statement concerning the fundamental truths of Christianity.<sup>111</sup> For example, Hiebert describes the credal hymn as being “a majestic summary of the substance of Christian truth”.<sup>112</sup> The problem with this interpretation is that **εὐσέβεια** does not mean “religion”. The English term “religion” occurs rarely in the New Testament (Acts 26:15; Jas. 1:26-27) and is a translation of the Greek term **θρησκεία** which also occurs in Colossians 2:18. Bullinger argues that **εὐσέβεια** is actually the opposite of **θρησκεία** in meaning:

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<sup>108</sup> Eugene Stock, Plain Talks on The Pastoral Epistles (London : Roxburghe House, 1914), p. 63.

<sup>109</sup> Plummer, p. 419.

<sup>110</sup> Kenneth S. Wuest, Wuest’s Word Studies From the Greek New Testament, Vol. II (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), p. 118.

<sup>111</sup> Arndt and Gingrich, p. 326. See also Buttrick, p. 421.

<sup>112</sup> Hiebert, p. 72.

Eusébeia (εὐσέβεια) relates to real, true, vital, and spiritual relation with God: while thrēskeía (θρησκεία) relates to the outward acts of religious observances or ceremonies, which can be performed by the flesh. Our English word “religion” was never used in the sense of true godliness. It always meant the outward form of worship.<sup>113</sup>

Actually the term “godliness”, as used in the New Testament and elsewhere, never refers to the “Christian faith” but rather it refers to the Christian's conduct. It is impossible to translate εὐσέβεια as “religion” in any other place where the term is found in the New Testament or in the Septuagint. Why then do interpreters translate it so in 1 Timothy 3:16?

If the hymn in 1 Timothy 3:16 speaks only of the objective facts of the incarnate life of Christ, then why did not Paul introduce this section as follows : “Great is the mystery of Christ”. But Paul wrote concerning the great mystery of godliness, which can only refer to the God-fearing life and conduct of believers. Paul's stated purpose in writing the book of 1 Timothy was that such godly conduct might be realized in the Ephesian assembly (1 Tim. 3:15). This great mystery must in some way relate to the conduct of the church.

### The Significance Of μέγας

Great is the mystery of godliness! The Apostle Paul used almost identical terminology in his epistle to the Ephesians, a document that would have been well known to Timothy who was at that time responsible for the assembly at Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3). In speaking of the husband and wife relationship Paul writes: “This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:32).

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<sup>113</sup> Bullinger, p. 335.

Many commentators, in discussing μέγας in 1 Timothy 3:16, have cited Ephesians 5:32 as a parallel passage:

The nearest parallel to the present passage is Eph. 5:32.<sup>114</sup>

The phrasing parallels closely Ephesians 5:32.<sup>115</sup>

The language resembles that of Ephesians 5:32, “this mystery is great”.<sup>116</sup>

Great (μέγας) means important, weighty, as Eph. 5:32.<sup>117</sup>

The epithet “great”, which is here applied to “the mystery of godliness”, is the same as in Eph. 5:32.<sup>118</sup>

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? As Timothy read “great is the mystery of godliness” he could have easily remembered the familiar words, “but I speak concerning Christ and the church”.

Exactly what is it that Paul calls great in 1 Timothy 3:15-16? Obviously the mystery is great! But verse 15 also declares that the church is great: “his purpose here is to unfold the greatness of the church and its mission”.<sup>119</sup> In fact, verse 15 describes the church in such great terms that it has embarrassed some Protestant interpreters who are seeking to guard against Roman Catholic perversions. That the church could be called the pillar and base of the truth seems almost inconceivable to some! But Paul in no uncertain terms sets forth the grandeur of the local assembly. In response to the pagan cry, “Great is Diana of the Ephesians” (Acts 19:28,34), Paul could have answered, “Great is the assembly of the living God at Ephesus!” Now, if the assembly is great (1 Tim. 3:15) and if the mystery is great (1 Tim. 3:16), is there no relationship between the two?

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<sup>114</sup> Robertson W. Nicoll, ed., The Expositor's Greek Testament, Vol. IV (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956 ), p. 118.

<sup>115</sup> Allen, p. 321.

<sup>116</sup> Ronald A. Ward, Commentary on 1 & 2 Timothy & Titus (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1974), p. 63).

<sup>117</sup> Vincent, p. 1031.

<sup>118</sup> J. Armitage Robinson, p. 239.

<sup>119</sup> Harvey, p. 46.

The Significance Of ὅς

If it is true that the mystery of godliness applies both to Christ and the church, then there would be a reasonable explanation for Paul's use of the ambiguous relative pronoun which introduces the substance and content of the mystery. If Paul were speaking of Christ only, it would have been natural for him to make the subject explicit: "Christ was manifested in the flesh". The way the text reads, however, permits the possibility of a wider application.<sup>120</sup> "Christ" is still the logical antecedent and thus "Christ" is clearly the implied subject for each of the six phrases of the hymn. But it is quite possible that as Timothy read this verse he was reminded of Paul's familiar words, "This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church". And thus as Timothy read the expression "who was manifested in the flesh", he could have thought to himself, "I know that Christ was manifested in the flesh, but how does that apply to the assembly?" God the Son became incarnate in a body! How does that apply to the church of the living God?

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<sup>120</sup> The only commentator who seems to be in agreement with this writer's interpretation of the reason for Paul's use of the relative pronoun is Henry Alford. See page 333.

