

CHAPTER V

THE CONTEXTUAL SOLUTION – AS DISPENSATIONALLY APPLIED

1. Manifested In The Flesh

Its Meaning With Respect To Christ

Christ was manifested in the flesh: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn. 1:14). God the Son became incarnate and manifested Himself in a human body (cf. Heb. 10:5). The Lord Jesus was the perfect Revealer of the Invisible God (Jn. 1:18). To see Christ was to see the Father (Jn. 12:45; 14:9). Christ was sent into the world to represent His invisible Sender (Jn. 5:37). Men could not see the Father, but they could see the incarnate Christ. And in seeing Him they saw the Father! Christ's purpose was to manifest God in a world of sin and darkness. Yes, the living God became flesh so that He might make Himself known in and through a body!

It should be noted that the godly Jews in Old Testament days had the assurance that someday God would dwell with them (Isa. 7:14) and that the Mighty God would be born as a child (Isa. 9:6). The incarnation, in itself, was no mystery!

Its Meaning As Applied To The Church

Today God is also manifesting Himself in a body, namely His church, which is “the fulness of Him that filleth all in all” (Eph. 1:23). Christ now has a body on the earth in addition to His resurrected body in heaven – a living organism indwelt by the very life of God:

It is not the objective fact of God being manifested, of which the Apostle is speaking, but the life of God lived in the church.¹²¹

That local body of called-out ones exists to manifest God; its internal function is the development of Christ-like saints; its outreach is in the diffusion of its members into all of the areas of normal, temporal pursuits – people who by their manner, attitude, charity, and spoken word manifest and represent their blessed Lord Jesus.¹²²

¹²¹ Alford, p. 333.

¹²² Helgerson, p. 82.

God's purpose is “the perfecting of the saints”, i.e. producing Christ-likeness, and thereby manifesting Himself through the church to the world.¹²³

Christ was sent into the world to represent His invisible Sender (Jn. 5:37). And so reads the commission that was given to the church: “As the Father has sent Me, so send I you” (Jn. 20:21; cf. Jn. 17:18). Therefore, the church is to represent its invisible Sender, namely Christ. The world can no longer see the ascended Christ but they can see His church. The Head is in heaven and the body is on the earth! As the body is healthy (Eph. 4:11-16), Christ will be manifested! John 1:18 may thus be applied to the church: No man has seen Christ at any time (at least not since the ascension), but the church exists to declare Him! The purpose of the church is to make Christ known and to manifest the living God.

God desires to manifest His life in and by the assembly. The church is the assembly of the living God, a living organism animated by the very life of God (1 Tim. 3:15). The glorious and precious mystery of Colossians 1:27 is declared to be “Christ in you”. The pronoun ὑμῖν is plural indicating that the mystery is Christ indwelling the assembly.¹²⁴ Such a unique relationship was predicted by the Lord Jesus in John 14:20 and John 17:23. The purpose of the indwelling is that Christ might manifest His life in and through the assembly: “Because I live, ye shall live also; at that day ye shall know that I am in My Father, and ye in Me, and I in you” (Jn. 14:19-20). This is the very truth that thrilled the heart of the Apostle Paul:

Christ in you, the hope of glory (Col. 1:27).

When Christ, Who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with Him in glory (Col. 3:4).

As the members of the church are well fed (Col. 1:28; Eph. 4:11-12) the assembly will be healthy, and as the assembly is healthy the body will be healthy, and as the body is healthy the life of Christ will be manifested, and as the life of Christ is manifested God will be glorified! So may it be! The world cannot see Christ directly, but they can see a living organism manifesting the heavenly, resurrected life of Christ!

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹²⁴ The mystery in Colossians 1:27 is Christ indwelling His body, the church. Note in the immediate context the emphasis upon “the body” (1:18, 24).

God desires to manifest His wisdom in and by the assembly. As Paul unfolds the great mystery of Ephesians 3, he makes this remarkable statement in verse 10:

To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God.

The angels are learning of God's many-faceted wisdom by means of the church. How precious the assembly must be to the Lord!

God desires to manifest His power in and by the assembly. The same power that was employed in raising Christ from the dead is made available to His church (Eph. 1:19-20) so that the individual members of the body might be His witnesses (Acts 1:8; Lk. 24:49; cf. Isa. 43:10-12). It was this truth that caused Paul to burst forth in doxology and praise to God:

Now unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us (Eph. 3:20).

God desires to manifest His grace in and by the assembly:

The church as the assembly of undeserving sinners redeemed in Christ is therefore the crowning display of God's grace for all eternity.¹²⁵

The Apostle Paul was gloriously saved in order that he might display the mercy and grace and longsuffering of God (1 Tim. 1:12-17). Throughout the eternal ages the church will be a showcase of the overflowing and superabounding grace of God:

That in the ages to come He might shew the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us through Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:7).

God desires to manifest His love in and by the assembly. As the Lord Jesus anticipated the unique church age program following Pentecost, He prayed these words:

I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that Thou hast sent Me, and hast loved them, as Thou hast loved Me (Jn. 17:23).

¹²⁵ Robert L. Saucy, The Church in God's Program (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), p. 90.

As the church harmonizes according to truth (Jn. 13:35) and functions in unity (Jn. 17:20-22; Eph. 4:13), the world will know the love of God.

God desires to manifest His truth in and by the assembly. The church is the “pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15), and as such is responsible to hold forth the Word of Life before a wicked and perverse world (Phil. 2:15). It is thus the responsibility of the members of the body not only to speak the truth (Eph. 4:15) but also to be continually walking in truth (2 Jn. 4:3; Jn. 3-4)!

As believers in any given locality exercise themselves unto godliness and live according to the Word of God, the truth of God will be upheld and displayed before the world!

God desires to manifest His glory in and by the assembly. The glory of God is the demonstration and manifestation of all that God is! God is glorious in every way, and the living God desires to make His total Person known as He indwells the assembly. The Apostle Paul exulted in this truth as he wrote his great doxology in Ephesians 3:21:

Unto Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages,
world without end. Amen.

It is helpful to summarize these stupendous facts. As the visible and local body of Christ stays healthy (Eph. 4:12-16) and functions in a godly way 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 love will be manifested in and by the church. (Jn. 17:23)
6. God's truth will be manifested in and by the church. (1 Tim. 3:15)
7. God's glory will be manifested in and by the church. (Eph. 3:21)

Indeed, Christ is today incarnate in a body (Col. 1:27)! May God's saints realize what is the riches of the glory of this mystery and may they confess with Paul, “Great is the mystery of godliness”!

2. Justified In The Spirit

Its Meaning With Respect To Christ

Christ was justified in the Spirit. The Scriptures rarely speak of God or Christ being justified. Usually the term is used to describe the work of God whereby He declares the believing sinner to be righteous in His Son (Rom. 3:24; 5:1). The child of God is thus declared to be just as righteous as Christ (1 Jn. 3:7)! But there are a few passages that use the verb $\delta\iota\kappa\alpha\iota\acute{o}\omega$ in the sense of “proved or pronounced or recognized to be right or righteous”:

But wisdom is justified of her children (Mt. 11:19; Lk. 7:35).

And all the people that heard Him, and the publicans, justified God (Lk. 7:29).

That thou mightest be justified in thy sayings (Rom. 3:4).

In 1 Timothy 3:16 Christ is said to have been justified in the Spirit. This is not to imply that He was a sinner, needing to be declared righteous. He was righteous, He is righteous and so shall He ever be (cf. Heb. 13:8). But He was declared righteous in the sense of being recognized as righteous. In other words, all His claims were perfectly vindicated:

Its import is the opposite of being mistaken or misjudged, to be proven or recognized to be the very person which one actually is.¹²⁶

Christ was justified. He was shown to be righteous. He was vindicated and proved to be the very Person He truly was! Benson has carefully explained the necessity for Christ's vindication:

The Lord Jesus appeared on earth in all the infirmity and frailty of mortal flesh, poor, despised, persecuted, and at last put to death as a blasphemer; yet He professed and maintained a high claim, the highest possible, even that of being the Messiah, the Son of God in a peculiar sense, and one with His Father, John 8:58, and 10:30,36. Now how could He be justified in making this claim?¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Edmund J. Wolf, First Epistle to Timothy in Vol. X of The Lutheran Commentary, edited by Henry Eyster Jacobs (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1847), p. 57.

¹²⁷ Joseph Benson, The New Testament of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ – Benson's Commentary, Vol. II (New York: T. Carlton & J. Porter, n.d.), p. 432.

How was the Lord Jesus vindicated? The consistent testimony of the Scriptures is that the Holy Spirit was the agent of Christ's vindication:

By the presence of the Spirit in Christ's ministry He was vindicated and proved true in all His claims (Rom. 1:4; Lk. 4:18,19; 10:21; Mt. 12:18,28; and especially Rom. 8:10,11).¹²⁸

His divine Sonship was demonstrated by the Holy Spirit, given to Him and working in Him. He was approved as righteous when, in token that the Father was in Him "well-pleased", the Holy Spirit descended on Him at the baptism (Matt. 3:16). The Father gave "not the Spirit by measure" to Him, but in unbounded fullness. He was "led by the Spirit" to His temptation (Matt. 4:1); His mighty works were effected "through the Spirit" (Matt. 12:28); and this presence and power of the Holy Spirit divinely attested Him as righteous and authenticated His claims as the Son of God.¹²⁹

If πνεύματι is understood as a reference to God the Holy Spirit, then the preposition ἐν is used to express agency. A.T. Robertson says that the normal way to express agency is by the use of ὑπό (direct agent) and διά (intermediate agent) as illustrated by Matthew 1:22. But he also states that ἐν can serve this function and he cites Colossians 1:17 as an example.¹³⁰ Dana and Mantey also agree that ἐν often is used in an instrumental sense – "by means of".¹³¹ Applying this usage to 1 Timothy 3:16 would make the expression "justified in the Spirit" mean that Christ was vindicated through or by means of the Holy Spirit:

en could be understood instrumentally in which case the Holy Spirit would be declared as agent in vindicating the cause of a crucified, rejected Messiah.¹³²

¹²⁸ Wallis, p. 1375.

¹²⁹ Harvey, p. 46.

¹³⁰ A.T. Robertson, A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), p. 534.

¹³¹ H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament (Toronto: The MacMillan Company, 1955), p. 105.

There are many interpreters who do not understand πνεύματι as a reference to the Holy Spirit, but rather as a reference to Christ's human spirit¹³³ or to the “higher principle of spiritual life” that was in Christ:

The meaning however seems fixed by the antithesis σαρκί, especially when compared with other passages in which the higher and lower sides of that nature which our Lord was pleased to assume are similarly put in contrast.

The πνεῦμα of Christ is not here the Holy Spirit, but the higher principle of spiritual life, which was not itself the Divinity, but especially and intimately united (not blended) and associated with it.¹³⁴

The problem with this view is that the consistent testimony of the scriptures is that the Holy Spirit is the agent of Christ's vindication, not only throughout His earthly ministry (Mt. 12:28) but especially in the ultimate vindication of the resurrection (Rom. 1:4; 1 Pet. 3:18). Also the supposed antithesis between σαρκί and πνεύματι cannot really prove that the Holy Spirit is not the agent of Christ's justification. In the context of John 1 these two terms are employed in a similar “antithesis”. But in this passage “flesh” is used to describe the incarnation (verse 14) and “spirit” is a clear reference to the Holy Spirit who was sent to vindicate the fact that Jesus was indeed the Son of God (verses 32-34). Likewise it is not unreasonable to understand “flesh” and “spirit” in 1 Timothy 3:16 as a reference to the incarnation of Christ and His vindication by the Holy Spirit.¹³⁵

¹³² Donald Guthrie, The Pastoral Epistles (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), p. 89.

¹³³ Nicoll, p. 119.

¹³⁴ Charles John Ellicott, The Pastoral Epistles of St. Paul, fifth edition (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1883), p. 53.

¹³⁵ Hendriksen argues well for the interpretation that the Holy Spirit is the Agent of Christ's justification in 1 Timothy 3:16. See p. 140.

1 Peter 3:18 and Romans 1:4 are often cited as parallel passages to 1 Timothy 3:16 by interpreters of all persuasions. If “spirit” in these verses can be shown to be a reference to the Holy Spirit, then it is almost certain that the same meaning is intended for πνεύματι in 1 Timothy 3:16. These passages do not lend themselves to easy interpretation, but it seems most fitting to see them both as a description of the work of the Holy Spirit in relationship to the resurrection of Christ. Christ was raised again from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit. The “spirit of holiness” in Romans 1:4 appears to be a direct reference to the Holy Spirit, and so it was understood by Calvin.¹³⁶ Walvoord offers excellent argumentation for understanding 1 Peter 3:18 as a reference to the Holy Spirit as well.¹³⁷ Also, Ephesians 1:19-20 clearly teaches that the great power that was operative in raising Christ from the dead is today made available to believers. In Luke 24:49 and Acts 1:8 such power in the life of the believer is predicted to be the result of the work and ministry of the indwelling Holy Spirit. In other words, the mighty power that energized the resurrection is the same power that now energizes the believer (Eph. 1:19-20; 3:20), enabling him to bear witness unto Christ (Lk. 24:48-49; Acts 1:8) and to manifest the resurrected life of the Saviour (Rom. 8:1-16). It is the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit that today energizes the believer (Acts 1:8; Rom. 8:2-16), and therefore it would seem most probable that it was also the power of the Holy Spirit which worked mightily in the resurrection of Christ. If this is true then it is quite natural to understand Romans 1:4, 1 Peter 3:18 and 1 Timothy 3:16 as referring to God the Holy Spirit as the agent of Christ's resurrection and vindication.

Throughout His earthly ministry Christ was vindicated by the Spirit of God. His miracles and signs were performed by the power of the Spirit, giving unmistakable evidence that Christ was all He claimed to be. And yet, the ultimate vindication of Christ took place when He was raised from the dead:

And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead (Rom. 1:4).

The resurrection provided the final proof that Christ was all that He claimed to be:

Then followed the more decisive vindication in his resurrection from the dead. Here the work of the Spirit is distinctly recognized by Paul, Rom. 1:4.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ John F. Walvoord, The Holy Spirit, third edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), p. 103.

¹³⁷ Ibid., pp. 102-03.

¹³⁸ Vincent, p. 1032.

When and how was Jesus declared righteous by God? In and by the act of raising Him from the dead. Men had nailed Him to the cross, condemned Him to the cross as one accursed of God, for to be hung on wood meant to be accursed of God; Him God raised from the dead, Him God thereby declared righteous.¹³⁹

But it was especially by means of His resurrection from the dead that the Spirit fully vindicated the claim of Jesus that He was the Son of God (Rom. 1:4).¹⁴⁰

Finally it should be noted that the Old Testament Scriptures clearly taught that God would not fail to vindicate His Holy One (Ps. 16:10):

For thou wilt not leave My Soul in Sheol, neither wilt thou permit Thine Holy One to see corruption.

Peter reaffirmed this prophetic truth in Acts 2:31-32:

He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see corruption. This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses.

The resurrection and vindication of God's Messiah was in and of itself no mystery! Indeed, the incarnation of Christ and His justification in the Spirit formed part of the gospel message that was promised afore by the Old Testament prophets (Rom. 1:1-4).

Its Meaning As Applied To The Church

It is obvious that the main responsibility of the church is to manifest the resurrected life of the Lord Jesus Christ (Col. 1:27; Gal. 2:20; 4:19) by allowing the Spirit of God to produce the fruit of the Spirit in the life of the individual believer (Gal. 5:22-23; Jn. 16:14). The result is that the righteous character of Christ will be reproduced in the life of the godly believer.

¹³⁹ Lenski, p. 611.

¹⁴⁰ Hendriksen, p. 140.

It must be noted in this connection, that the special ministry of the Spirit of God in this dispensation is to cause the world to recognize the righteousness of Christ (Jn. 16:8,10). This vindication in the Spirit, as taught by Christ in John 16:7-11, is accomplished by means of the church. The Bible is clear to point out that this particular convicting work of the Spirit did not begin until the day of Pentecost:

Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: It is expedient for you that I go away; for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send Him unto you; and when He is come, He will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment (Jn. 16:7-8).

The Lord here predicted that two things must be true before this new program could be inaugurated: **1)** Christ must ascend into heaven (cf. Jn. 16:10); **2)** The Holy Spirit must come to indwell a body of believers. Helgerson has properly discerned the uniqueness of this convicting and vindicating ministry of the Spirit:

God's way, so clearly given, is that by the Holy Spirit's indwelling "He will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment" (Jn. 16:8).¹⁴¹

The world no longer sees the Righteous Christ because He has gone to the Father (Jn. 16:10; cf. 1 Jn. 2:1). And yet, the world can see the local and visible manifestation of Christ's body which is His church, made up of believers who have been made the righteousness of God in Christ (2 Cor. 5:21). Therefore, as believers live soberly, righteously and godly in this present church age by the power of the indwelling Spirit, they will be giving forth evidence that the Lord Jesus is all that He claimed to be!

It was the Holy Spirit who enabled the early church to bear witness to the life-changing fact of the resurrection (Acts 5:30-32). Christ was "justified" by the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the apostles and disciples, who bare witness to His resurrection and ascension into heaven.¹⁴² As the church drew attention to the resurrected Christ by godly living and faithful verbal testimony, they were proving Him to be the only God and the only Saviour (Isa. 43:10-12; cf. Acts 4:12). And likewise today, as local churches conduct themselves properly (1 Tim. 3:15), God the Holy Spirit will convince the world that the resurrected and exalted Lord Jesus Christ is indeed the Righteous One!

¹⁴¹ Helgerson, Church Truth, p. 56.

¹⁴² Thomas Scott, The Holy Bible, Vol. VI (Boston: Samuel T. Armstrong, and Crocker and Brewster, 1831), p. 434.

3. Seen Of Angels

Its Meaning With Respect To Christ

The angels viewed the incarnation with deep and constant attention (1 Pet. 1:12). For them it was a most astonishing and instructive spectacle. They witnessed their High and Holy Lord (Isa. 6:1-3; cf. Jn. 12:41) as He humbled Himself by taking the form of a servant (Phil. 2:5-8):

With what tremulous interest must these lieges of His have followed the steps of His humiliation from the throne of awful majesty to the cross of agonizing shame!¹⁴³

His descent from the realms of infinite glory to the dark sphere and confines of human existence was the occasion of the deepest interest to the angels.¹⁴⁴

Angelic involvement and interest were characteristic of the entire incarnate life and ministry of the Lord Jesus:

They recognized Him even in His lowly birth. (Luke 2:9-14.) They ministered to Him in the wilderness temptation, and in Gethsemane. Had he chosen to avoid arrest, “more than twelve legions of angels” would have come to defend Him. (Matt. 26:33) When He had suffered death, these glorious beings were present to witness His resurrection and to grace His triumphant ascension (Acts 1:10-11.) He thus, in all the vicissitudes of His earthly life, stood fully revealed before the angelic world as the God-man, and, with adoring wonder, they watched around His path from the manger to the tomb.¹⁴⁵

Some interpreters take the expression “seen of angels” as referring to a post-resurrection appearance of Christ to angels and they would thus prefer to render the phrase as “appeared unto angels”, on the analogy of the parallel construction in 1 Corinthians 15:5-8: ὡφθη is usually used of the post-resurrection appearances of Christ”.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ E. K. Simpson, The Pastoral Epistles (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1954), p. 62.

¹⁴⁴ Chafer, Vol. III, p. 2 2.

¹⁴⁵ Harvey, p. 47.

¹⁴⁶ Nicoll, p. 119. See also Plummer, p. 420.

While this is certainly a grammatical possibility, it is not a grammatical necessity, and this view lacks general scriptural support. For example, those who hold this view admit that the Bible says nothing about a post-resurrection appearance to angels. If Christ appeared to angels, then when and where did this happen? No answer can be given: “It is impossible to determine the precise occasion to which this refers”.¹⁴⁷

There is no reason why the dative ἀγγέλοις cannot be instrumental in meaning. A. T. Robertson cites the use of ἀγγέλοις in 1 Timothy 3:16 as a “possible instrumental”.¹⁴⁸ Lenski likewise argues for an instrumental usage:

Since it occurs in a series of six passives, ὤφθη should not be understood in the middle sense: “appeared to angels” but as a true passive with the dative of the agent: “was seen by angels”.¹⁴⁹

Therefore it is most natural to take the expression ὤφθη ἀγγέλοις as simply referring to the intense angelic interest and observation that surrounded the entire incarnate life of Christ:

The general manifestation of Christ to Angels through His incarnation,
– not, inversely, the specific appearances of them during some scenes
of His earthly life, nor any (assumed) specific manifestation in heaven,
– is here alluded to.¹⁵⁰

Christ indeed was a spectacle to angels. He was the center of angelic interest and attention throughout His earthly life. Christ by His lowly incarnation was teaching the angels eternal lessons. The earth was the theater of the universe!

¹⁴⁷ Plummer, p. 420.

¹⁴⁸ Robertson, p. 534.

¹⁴⁹ Lenski, p. 2280

¹⁵⁰ Ellicott, The Pastoral Epistles, p. 53.

Its Meaning As Applied To The Church

Although Christ has returned to heaven, the earth continues to be the theater of the universe! It is clear from the teaching of the New Testament epistles that the church has now become the very center of angelic attention and observation. Perhaps the clearest passage is Ephesians 3:10:

To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God.

God is teaching the angels by means of the assembly:

Angelic beings had seen the wisdom of God displayed in the creation of the material universe, but God's work in the church is the masterpiece by which He instructs the inhabitants of the heavenlies concerning His Incomprehensible wisdom.¹⁵¹

It is the church that will eternally display the riches of God's grace before the heavenly hosts (Eph. 2:7). Church age believers are a spectacle to angels (1 Cor. 4:9). Also godly church order is necessary "because of the angels" (1 Cor. 11:10).

That Christ should be the object of great angelic interest is no great mystery. He was their Creator (Col. 1:16; cf. Job 38:4-7) and their Holy Lord (Isa. 6:1-4) and it should be expected that they should attend with great curiosity and interest the incarnate life of the God-man. But who would ever expect that the angels would learn of God by the church? Why should the focus of attention now be upon the redeemed of this age? The New Testament revelation provides the only answer. Christ, who is superior to the angels (Heb. 1), was made a little lower than the angels (Heb. 2:7-9) for the purpose of bringing many sons into glory (Heb. 2:9) who themselves would then enjoy a position and standing higher than the angels (compare Eph. 1:20-21 with Eph. 2:6-7)! Without controversy the angels are learning of the grace of God by means of the church!

¹⁵¹ Saucy, p. 91.

4. Preached Among The Gentiles

Its Meaning With Respect To Christ

Christ was preached among all nations. His gospel was proclaimed throughout the world. The message of salvation went boldly forth:

Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

Ellicott believes that the phrase “preached among the nations” was the splendid fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy in Isaiah 49:6.¹⁵² And yet the fulfillment of this Old Testament prediction cannot comprise the mystery of which Paul speaks. In fact, even the glorious truths of the gospel cannot be considered a “mystery” because they were clearly revealed in the Old Testament (Rom. 1:1-4). The fact that God would justify the heathen through faith cannot be considered a mystery because the Old Testament Scriptures revealed this truth also (Gal. 3:8; cf. Gen. 12:3). What then comprises the mystery?

Its Meaning As Applied To The Church

Obviously the responsibility of preaching the gospel rests upon the church of Jesus Christ (Rom. 10:14-17; Mt. 28:18-20). And yet, 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 following passages delineate this mystery:

Now unto Him that is of power to stablish you according to My gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of 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 for the obedience of faith (Rom. 16:25-26; see the contrast of Rom. 1:1-4).

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; that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ by the gospel . . . that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ (Eph. 3:5-8).

¹⁵² Ellicott, Commentary, p. 195.

That I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel (Eph. 6:19).

Even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to His saints: to whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory (Col. 1:27).

That God would open unto us a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in bonds (Col. 4:3).

In this age, therefore, there is a distinctive element to the content of the gospel which is called “the mystery of the gospel”. This new revelation is that the Gentiles are fellow-heirs and fellow-members of the body, and fellow-partakers of the promise (Eph. 3:6, NASV). Such equality – Jew and Gentile united together in one body – was previously unknown. And yet it is now the glorious proclamation of the church that “whosoever will may come” whether Jew or Gentile, male or female, bond or free! Thus the distinctive message of the church 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 and living organism!

Dispensational writers have long recognized the distinctive element of gospel preaching in this church age. They have set forth the uniqueness of this mystery with all clarity. Walvoord, Ryrie and Saucy are here selected as representative of dispensational thought:

The idea that Gentiles should be on exactly the same plane as Israelites and, furthermore, in the intimate relationship as being members of the same body, is absolutely foreign to the Old Testament. According to Isaiah 61:5,6, the Gentiles are pictured as being the servants and Israel as the priests of God. While it is true that the Gentiles were promised blessings in the future millennial kingdom, they are never given equality with the Jews in the Old Testament.¹⁵³

¹⁵³ Walvoord, The Church in Prophecy, pp. 46-47.

The Old Testament does predict Gentile blessing for the millennial period (Isa. 61:5-6; 2:1-4), but the specific blessings do not include equality with the Jews as is true today in the Body of Christ. Great blessing is promised Gentiles in the predictions of the Old Testament, but not on the basis of equality of position with the Jews. This equality is the point of the mystery revealed to the apostles and prophets in New Testament times.¹⁵⁴

To be sure, God's blessing of Gentiles was a recurrent theme of Old Testament prophecy, beginning with the promise to Abraham (Gen 12:3) and onward. The Gentiles would be blessed during the glorious reign of the Messiah (Isa. 60:1-3; 62:1-2). Hint was even given of their blessing before the kingdom age during a time of Israel's disobedience (Deu. 32:21; cf. Rom. 10:19; 11:11). But the fact of the body of Christ in which there is neither Jew nor Gentile, bond or free, male or female (Gal 3:28) was not foreseen in Old Testament times. It is the mystery of the church age.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ Ryrie, Dispensationalism Today, p. 134.

¹⁵⁵ Saucy, p. 60.

5. Believed On In The World

Its Meaning With Respect To Christ

The Lord Jesus is the object of saving faith in this sin-cursed world:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life (Jn. 3:16).

Countless thousands have heard the gospel message and have responded properly to it.

Its Meaning As Applied To The Church

Certainly faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God (Rom. 10:17). It is the church's responsibility to proclaim the Word of God in order that the world might believe.

And yet, the purpose of the church extends far beyond the mere verbal proclamation of the message of salvation. Walvoord has called John 13-17 the great "Magna Charta of the church and the declaration of the essential principles which would govern its character and life".¹⁵⁶ In John 17:20 the Lord Jesus prayed for those who would believe on Him through the Apostle's word. This is a clear reference to the church. He then prays for the unity of the church for the purpose "that the world may believe that Thou sent Me" (Jn. 17:21). Thus, as the church functions in harmony and in unity and in accord with the Biblical pattern, it will convince the world that truly Christ is the sent-One of the Father.

This truth is illustrated in 1 Corinthians 14:24-25. When the local church functions according to godliness (1 Tim. 3:15) and edification (Eph. 4:11-16; 1 Cor. 14:1-26) the following response will take place if an unbeliever should enter such an assembly:

he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: and thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face, he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth (1 Cor. 14:24-25).

¹⁵⁶ Walvoord, The Church in Prophecy, p. 56.

Thus, even the unbeliever will acknowledge that “this is the assembly of the living God” (cf. 1 Tim. 3:15) and he will catch a glimpse of the truth of this glorious mystery among the nations, which is, “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27). God is in the assembly! The church is the house of God (1 Tim. 3: 15) and the saints who belong to the New Testament Bethel need to realize the truth that Jacob discovered concerning the Old Testament Bethel:

Surely the LORD is in this place. How awesome is this place! This is none other but the house of God (Gen. 28:16-17)!

The living God is today manifesting Himself in the assembly in order that the world might believe!

The assembly is thus to be that godly witness that draws attention to the only God and the only Saviour (Isa. 43:10-12; Acts 1:8). John came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, so that all men through Him might believe (Jn. 1:7). Even so the assembly, as the pillar and base of the truth, is to bear witness of the Light, so that the world might believe. May the unbelieving world be convicted as they see the living God being manifested in and through the assembly!

6. Received Up In Glory

Its Meaning With Respect To Christ

This expression most clearly refers to the ascension of Christ, which marked the termination of the Lord's earthly ministry and witness (Mk. 16:19; Acts 1:2,11,22). Actually according to Acts 1:1-2 the ascension of Christ did not mark the termination of the 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! It was necessary for the Lord to go away so that He could send the Comforter to inaugurate a new program in and through the church (Jn. 16:7-11).

Its Meaning As Applied To The Church

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).

Even as His ascension was the crowning point of His earthly activity, so the Church's reception into Glory will be the culminating point for those who by faith have received Him as Saviour.¹⁵⁷

It is this future prospect that Paul refers to as the church's "hope of glory" (Col. 1:27). The fact that Christ is now indwelling the assembly is the guarantee that the church will someday be received up in glory (Col. 1:27; cf. Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30). The Apostle Paul also makes mention of this glorious mystery in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52. A whole generation of living believers will not suffer physical death but will be raptured into the presence of Christ forevermore! Even so be coming Lord Jesus!

In John 20:21 Christ commissioned His disciples after this manner: "As the Father has sent Me, so send I you". In other words, the Father sent Christ into the world in the same way that Christ has sent the church into the world (Jn. 17:18). The Lord Jesus knew that when His work was finished, He would go home to be with His Sender (Jn. 7:33; 16:5). Even so, when the work and earthly witness of the assembly has been finished, the church will be caught up to be with its Sender forever (1 Th. 4:17):

And so let us wait till He shall please to receive us up to His glory, that “where He is, there we may be also”.¹⁵⁸

It is interesting that in Revelation 12:5 Christ is said to have been “caught up unto God”, an obvious reference to the ascension. The same verb (ἀρπάζω) is used in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 to describe the rapture of the church! As Christ was caught up at the ascension (Acts 1:9-11), so the church will be caught up at the rapture (1 Th. 4:13-18)! What a comforting mystery!¹⁵⁹

With the removal of the true church there will come an unprecedented period of apostasy (2 Th. 2:1-12; cf. 1 Tim. 4:1). The outworking of the mystery of godliness program is serving as a restraining influence in this present age until the time when the church is taken out of the way (2 Th. 2:7). There will then follow the mystery of lawlessness program which is already at work in this present age but which will find its ultimate expression following the removal of the Restrainer who indwells the body (2 Th. 2:3-12). The Head of the present program is the resurrected and exalted Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 1: 22-23). The head of the future program will be the man of sin (2 Th. 2:3,8-9).

¹⁵⁷ Van Gorder, p. 7.

¹⁵⁸ Scott, p. 436.

¹⁵⁹ Rainsford believes that the expression “received up in glory” finds its fulfillment when God’s people are raptured to be with the Lord. He reached this conclusion due to the chronological problem. See M. Rainsford, Lectures on St. John XVII, 3rd edition revised and corrected (London: Hamilton, Adams & Co., 1882), p. 75.