

APPENDIX III

THE RESPONSES OF LEADING DISPENSATIONALISTS TO THIS WRITER'S INTERPRETATION OF 1 TIMOTHY 3:14-16

The solution to the contextual problem of 1 Timothy 3:14-16 that has been proposed in this thesis differs from the way the passage has been universally interpreted in the past, even by dispensationalists. The writer felt a real need, therefore, to confront leading dispensational writers with this interpretation in the hope of receiving some critical feedback. Letters were written to nineteen leading dispensationalists in the country. Enclosed in each letter was a copy of the abstract which appears on the following pages.

Following this abstract are copies of the correspondence with those men who responded to the letter. Several of the men did not reply, but of those who did the response was highly favorable.

THESIS ABSTRACT

George Zeller
 Grace Theological Seminary
 Winona Lake, Indiana 46590

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.

How then can the great mystery of 1 Timothy 3:16 be the incarnation of Christ, since that was clearly revealed in the Old Testament? But the incarnation of Christ as it applies to the church is a great mystery indeed! 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 God is now manifesting Himself in a body is the truth that thrilled the heart of the Apostle Paul (Col. 1:27; Eph. 1:22-3).

There are four primary 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 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. The objective statements concerning Christ must in some way relate to the church, otherwise there would be no mystery. 3) 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. 4) The Apostle Paul never sets forth his great Christological statements without applying 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.

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?

What is the significance of the word "godliness" (v.16) and how does it relate to the immediate context? 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 behave 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.

IV. The Contextual Solution As Dispensationally Applied

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

1. "Manifested in the flesh"--God the Son manifesting Himself through His body which is on the earth (Eph. 1:22-3; Col. 1:27).

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 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).
2. "Justified in the Spirit"--God the Holy Spirit vindicating the Resurrected Christ in and through the assembly (Jn. 16:7-11).
3. "Seen of angels"--God the Father making known His manifold wisdom and grace unto the principalities and powers by means of the assembly (Eph. 3:10; 2:7; cf. 1 Cor. 4:9; 11:10).
4. "Preached among the nations"--The assembly making known the mystery of the gospel among all nations (Eph. 3:5-8; 6:19; Col. 1:27; 4:3; Rom. 16:25-26).
5. "Believed on in the world"--The assembly functioning as a godly witness before the world (Jn. 17:21; 1 Cor. 14:24-25).
6. "Received up in glory"--The assembly being received up in glory at the rapture of the church (Col. 3:4; 1 Cor. 15:51-52; 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).

Thus Paul traces the purpose, witness, message and destiny of the church! 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 . The subject was not made explicit, thus permitting the possibility of a wider application to Christ and the church.

Dr. James L. Boyer
Professor of New Testament and Greek
Grace Theological Seminary
Winona Lake, Indiana 46590

(sample letter)

Dear Dr. Boyer,

About a year ago I talked with you about the possibility of writing a thesis on the contextual relationship between 1 Timothy 3:15 and 1 Timothy 3:16. In other words, what is the relationship between "the mystery of godliness" (verse 16) and the church (verse 15). You indicated that this would be a fruitful study, and indeed it has.

It has been my growing conviction, after having studied this passage during the past year, that 1 Timothy 3:16 has never been interpreted from a consistent dispensational point of view, even by dispensational writers. Dispensationalists believe that a New Testament mystery is a Divine secret that was not revealed in the Old Testament, but has now been revealed by the New Testament apostles and prophets, usually relating to some aspect of church truth. And yet, almost all interpreters, including dispensationalists, say that the "mystery of godliness" in 1 Timothy 3:16 is the incarnation of Christ and has no direct application to the church. The problem with this interpretation seems to be twofold: 1) How can the objective facts of the incarnation be properly called a mystery? 2) How can "the mystery of godliness" have no direct application to the church in light of the immediate context of verse 15?

I have written a Master of Divinity thesis in which I have offered a solution to this problem. I came to this solution by doing a careful contextual study of verse 15 and by seeking to apply a consistent dispensational hermeneutic. Enclosed is a brief abstract of this thesis and I would greatly appreciate your comments and/or evaluation. Since this proposed solution has never previously been set forth in writing (at least to my knowledge) I feel a real need for some critical feedback.

I thought that you would be a good person to present this to, especially since you teach a course on Ephesians, a book in which "mystery" truth is so clearly presented. I believe it would be profitable for you to re-examine 1 Timothy 3:16 in light of the context and in light of the New Testament usage of the term "mystery" as Biblically defined. It seems to me that 1 Timothy 3:16 provides the most comprehensive summary of the "mystery" aspects of church truth that can be found in the New Testament.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

George W. Zeller

George W. Zeller

Dr. Boyer responded to the letter by meeting with the writer for a personal interview.

He shared what he believed were the three strongest arguments for applying the "mystery of godliness" to the church:

1. The context of verse 15.
2. The term "godliness."
3. The term "mystery."

Dr. Boyer questioned whether the definition of "mystery" always applies everywhere the term is used in the New Testament.

He also questioned whether it is correct to say that Paul never sets forth Christological statements without applying them to believers. It would have been better to say that Paul most often makes such application.

Dr. Boyer questioned whether "spirit" (3:16) refers to the Holy Spirit in light of Romans 1:4 and 1 Peter 3:18, suggesting that it may be speaking of a contrast between the Lord's earthly life ("flesh") and His post-resurrection life ("spirit").

He also questioned whether the "church" could correctly be called the antecedent of ὁς . This indicates a misunderstanding because this thesis acknowledges that "Christ" (not "church") is the correct antecedent of each of the six phrases, but each of the six phrases has application to the church.

Dr. Boyer thanked the writer for sharing this abstract and he said that it helped him to see the passage in a way that he never had previously. He indicated that he learned much from studying the abstract.

Grace Theological Seminary
Winona Lake, Indiana 46590
February 24, 1975

Dr. Robert Gromacki
Chairman, Division of Biblical Education
Cedarville College
Cedarville, Ohio 45314

(sample letter)

Dear Dr. Gromacki,

Greetings in the name and fellowship of our Lord
Jesus Christ!

During the past year I have been studying "the mystery of godliness" as set forth by the Apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 3:16. It is my conviction that this verse has never been interpreted from a consistent dispensational point of view, even by dispensational writers. Dispensationalists believe that a New Testament mystery is a Divine secret that was not revealed in the Old Testament, but has now been revealed by the New Testament apostles and prophets, usually relating to some aspect of church truth. And yet, almost all interpreters, including dispensationalists, say that the "mystery of godliness" in 1 Timothy 3:16 is the incarnation of Christ and has no direct application to the church. The problem with this interpretation seems to be twofold: 1) How can the objective facts of the incarnation be properly called a mystery? 2) How can "the mystery of godliness" have no direct application to the church in light of the immediate context of verse 15?

It is interesting that Dr. Gundry seems to sense the inconsistency of this interpretation on page 14 of his book, The Church and the Tribulation.

I have written a Master of Divinity thesis in which I have offered a solution to this problem. I came to this solution by doing a careful contextual study of verse 15 and by seeking to apply a consistent dispensational hermeneutic. Enclosed is a brief abstract of this thesis and I would greatly appreciate your comments and/or evaluation. Since this proposed solution has never previously been set forth in writing (at least to my knowledge) I feel a real need for some critical feedback.

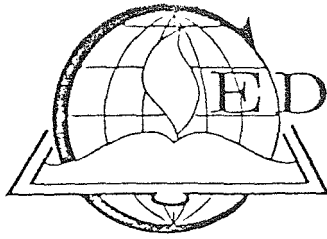
Since you are a respected dispensational writer and since are an authority in the area of N.T. studies, I thought you would be a good person to write to. I believe it would be profitable for you to re-examine this verse in light of the context and in light of the New Testament usage of the term "mystery" as dispensationally understood. It seems to me that 1 Timothy 3:16 provides the most comprehensive summary of the "mystery" aspects of church truth that can be found in the New Testament.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

George W. Zeller

George W. Zeller



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CEDARVILLE, OHIO 45314

March 8, 1975

Mr. George Zeller
Grace Theological Seminary
Winona Lake, Indiana 46590

Dear George:

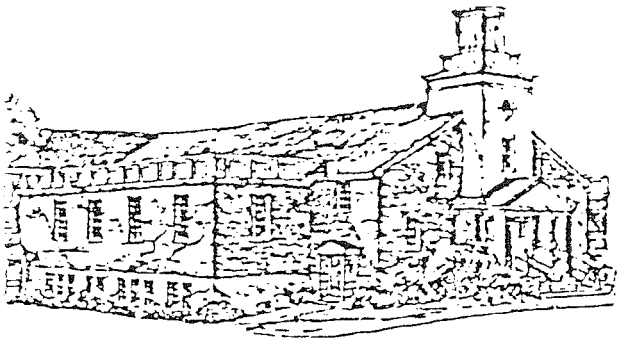
Thanks for your letter and abstract. You certainly stimulated my thinking on that subject. Your thesis is both Scriptural and logical, and in the light of the "mystery" concept may be absolutely correct. I know that the order of the six phrases, as applied to Christ alone, always bothered me.

I will try to read your thesis through the library loan program. Keep up the good work.

Sincerely in Him,

Robert Gromacki

Robert Gromacki
Chairman, Division of
Biblical Education



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February 21, 1975

Mr. George W. Zeller
Grace Theological Seminary
Winona Lake, Indiana 46590

Dear Brother:

Frankly, it hardly ever bothered my mind that commentators glossed over I Tim. 3:16 - practically wresting it out of context, because my studies are and have been first of all contextual and only when I've had good reason to wonder a bit over some conclusion reached, would I or do I see what the commentators have said.

Since I dare not presume to be adept in the original language - in fact, there may not be a dozen profs in the U.S.A. who could claim to be real authorities in the koine Greek - I have relied on the context, a systematic approach in recognition of dispensations, and the Greek words.

That so many self-confessed dispensationalists are inconsistent is not a new discovery. Consider, for example, Scofield and Pettingell who seem to assume that the instructions to the Jewish disciples of Christ on seeking redress for personal affront (Matt. 18: 15-20) has to do with New Testament church discipline.

But now that you have written about the deficiency on the part of the dispensational interpreters, it comes more forcibly to my mind how inconsistent they are.

No wonder that that marvelous scheme of God revealing that the local assembly is Christ's body should be ignored. It is as plain as it can be, but due to the long influence of Romanism all such passages seem to be applied to the universal company.

That whole section, including the first verses of chapter four in I Timothy must apply to the church at Ephesus. How else can that assembly be the dwelling place of God, the ground and pillar of the truth, except by the fact that the life of the Man in the glory indwells that body of believers?

It is more than piety - as important as that is - there is a God-like-ness definitely implied. Is it not strange that in the minds of most interpreters the mystery of Godliness, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus are not mentioned? The reason, of course, is that that is when, where, and how we came into this marvelous position in God's plan.

Paul, who so delighted in the Gospel and cherished every opportunity to speak of Christ's death and resurrection, would certainly have brought that in here if only the earthly sojourn and ministry of Jesus constituted the mystery.

-continued

Faithful to the Written Word of God

February 21, 1975
Mr. George W. Zeller
page 2

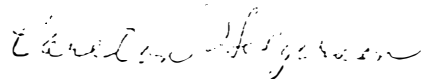
My brother, never lose sight of the revelation given: that the divine indwelling is the genius of apostolic Christianity. All the injunctions and exhortations in the Epistles become only advisory ethics unless we see what the Holy Spirit has in mind.

You have an excellent format in your paper. Perhaps later I may have time to comb over it more carefully. But as of now, may I encourage you to adhere to this interpretation that the place, purpose, and function of the local assembly is to parallel in a certain sense with the earthly witness of the Lord Jesus where the emphasis is upon His person and how He was observed.

This also reminds me of the importance of distinguishing between the Roman concept of trying to emulate His earthly life and the Apostolic concept of having His heavenly (resurrection) life in us. I often think of I Cor. 5:16 in this connection.

Thanks for writing.

Yours in Christ,



Carlton Helgerson
CH:js

P.S. Under separate cover I am sending you a copy of the articles carried in the VOICE magazine on Church Truth.

March 10, 1975

4824 E. Butler

Fresno, Calif. 93727

George Zeller
Grace Seminary
Winona Lake, In 46590

Dear Brother Zeller:

Thank you for your letter of February 18 and the inclosed summary of your investigation of I Timothy 3:15-16.

First of all I would like to commend you for your careful study and thought on this passage. I do hope that your final study will become available for a larger audience through its publication.

The view which you present is interesting indeed and I accept that it represents a view to which careful thought must be given. I agree with you that due to the close connection between Christ and the Church in the Mystery of Godliness the church cannot be eliminated from the picture. I am quite willing to accept that the fuller meaning of "the hymn" may present Christ and His church but I would not want to eliminate the view that Christ is Himself in the forefront of the picture.

I am interested in your interpretation of the six points of the "hymn" and agree that it would help solve something of the ambiguity of "hos" and the order of the phrases. But since all six verbs are passive, I do wonder about the ground for making 4. and 5. active in meaning.

Due to pressure of circumstances I find myself unable to give any lengthy study to your paper but I want to encourage you in your work and think that you definitely have a viewpoint that merits full development. I hope you get fuller results from some others to whom your material was presented.

Yours in Him,
J. Edmond Hiebert
J. Edmond Hiebert

1222 Commerce St.
Apt. 1610
Dallas, TEXAS 75202
MAR. 1, 1975

Dear Mr. Zeller,

This will acknowledge, with thanks, receipt of your letter and thesis abstract.

Your basic position seems quite tenable to me and, in fact, I have been teaching something quite similar to this for quite a few years now.

I wish you the very best. You are on the right track, I feel.

Sincerely in Christ,
Jane C. Hodges

Dr. Kent responded to the letter by sending the writer the following note:

3/14/75

George:

I have written a few comments on the abstract. There are certain attractive features about this view. However, I think there is good reason why the other view is "universally" held.

H. A. Kent, Jr.

In his comments on the abstract Dr. Kent pointed out that the proclamation of Christ among the nations (1 Tim. 3:16) is similar to the mystery of Romans 16:26.

Concerning the phrase, "believed on in the world," Dr. Kent asked this question, "Is the church 'believed on in the world?'"

Concerning that application of the phrase "received up in glory" to the rapture of the church, Dr. Kent pointed out that the verb is aorist indicative, "was taken up," not a future event.

Concerning the proposed solution to the chronological problem, Dr. Kent made this brief comment: "a good point."

Finally, concerning the use of the ambiguous relative pronoun, Dr. Kent made this comment: "If reference is to the church, why isn't the pronoun feminine, ἥ (to agree with ἐκκλησία)?"

Dallas

Department of Systematic Theology

March 6, 1975

Mr. George Zeller
Grace Theological Seminary
Winona Lake, Indiana 46590

Dear Brother Zeller:

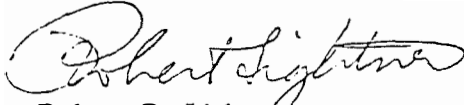
Thank you for your letter of February 17 and thesis abstract.

Your thesis abstract evidences a great deal of work on your subject. I believe you have made a significant contribution to the study of the doctrine of the church. You are right, I Tim. 3:16 has often been interpreted without due consideration to verse 15. I agree with your basic thrust. Your position is defensible.

I would offer one word of caution, however. In our attempt to show the relation of I Tim. 3:16 to the church, we must be careful not to rule out its relation to Christ. In other words, I believe both Christ and the church are involved, and we need to be sure both are stressed rather than just one or the other.

Thank you so much for sharing your paper with me. I do appreciate it very much.

Sincerely in Christ,



Robert P. Lightner

RPL:jl

Dallas

Department of Systematic Theology

March 24, 1975

Mr. George Zeller
Grace Theological Seminary
Winona Lake, Indiana 46590

Dear Mr. Zeller:

I am sorry I have been so long in replying to your letter, but I have not been able to read your abstract carefully until this week.

To be perfectly frank with you, I do not have any violent reactions either way! I mean by this that I do not disagree with what you are trying to do and, on the other hand, I do not feel very strongly convinced by what you have tried to do.

I feel you may have let your zeal for preserving the definition of a mystery force your conclusions into the pattern that they take. I would not personally be disturbed by the usual interpretation of the passage which says that the truths of verse 16 are the basis for the church which is a mystery. It is not that each truth of verse 16 has to have been unrevealed in the Old Testament, but the relation of those doctrinal truths to the church is what is together the mystery.

It would appear to me that your case would be much stronger if in verse 16 the word "flesh" were "body" and if the relative pronoun were not masculine.

However, as I said, I don't have any reactions against what you are trying to do. I just am not certain that you have presented a conclusive argument.

I am sorry I am not of more help, but this is my honest feeling.

Sincerely in Christ,



Charles C. Ryrie

CCR:jl

*P.S. Your revision just arrived. I think it is better
& tightens the link between the ideas.*



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March 4, 1975

Mr. George W. Zeller
Grace Seminary
Winona Lake, Indiana 46590

Dear Mr. Zeller:

Thank you so very much for your recent letter and your Thesis Abstract on "The Mystery of Godliness."

You may be surprised to learn that I agree with you in most of your interpretation. In fact, if I had had more space available in my booklet, I would have included this. In the public teaching of this portion of Scripture, I have usually made further reference to the fact that this is spoken not only of Christ, but also of His Church.

W.E. Vine in his book The Twelve Mysteries of Scripture says on page 27, "It has been suggested that, adopting the marginal reading of the Revised Version, 'which was manifested', the statements of verse 16, though definitely said of Christ, are, at the same time, in a secondary sense, applicable also to the Church, concerning which Paul has just been speaking, and that the clauses 'preached unto the Gentiles' and 'believed on in the world' may contain a day of reference to the truth concerning the church and to its testimony respectively." In addition to the above, I found a similar interpretation given in an old issue of "The Truth", a magazine edited by Dr. James H. Brooks. I have a set of the bound volumes which is very rare and filled with great expository teaching.

Again, thank you so much for sending me this material and I shall profit by it.

With warm Christian regards, I am

Yours in His Grace,



Paul R. Van Gorder

PRV:MB

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Dallas

Office of the President

March 5, 1975

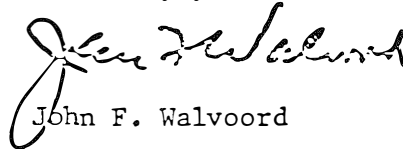
Mr. George W. Zeller
Grace Theological Seminary
Winona Lake, Indiana 46590

Dear Mr. Zeller:

This will acknowledge your letter of February 17. Your suggested interpretation of 1 Timothy 3:16 seems to be a plausible one even though it is not the ordinary interpretation. Probably the point of greatest difficulty is the concept that the Church is "preached among the nations" and "believed on in the world." This would seem to fit more naturally as referring to Christ, but your explanation is not impossible.

I appreciate very much your sharing the results of your study with me and the light it casts upon the meaning of this passage.

Sincerely yours in Christ,



John F. Walvoord

JFW:tm