

GREAT IS THE MYSTERY OF GODLINESS!

**A Needful and Neglected Study
in Dispensational and Church Truth**

**The GREATNESS
of the
CHURCH**

1 Timothy 3:15

**What is the Relationship
Between the CHURCH
and the MYSTERY?**

**The GREATNESS
of the
MYSTERY**

1 Timothy 3:16

"These things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly: But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the CHURCH of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. And without controversy GREAT is the MYSTERY of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory." (1 Timothy 3:14-16)

GOD (the incarnate Son) WAS.....

manifest in the flesh,

justified in the Spirit,

seen of angels,

preached unto the Gentiles,

believed on in the world,

received up into glory!

The Mystery of Godliness

Its Application to the Local Assembly

1 Timothy 3:14-16

"But there is a God in heaven who revealeth
secrets" (Daniel 2:28)

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
I. THE CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND.....	3
The Assembly – Its Prominence in 1 Timothy	
The Assembly – Its Godly Conduct	
The Assembly – Its Greatness	
II. THE CONTEXTUAL PROBLEM.....	11
The Problem Of The Immediate Context	
The Problem Of The Textual Variant	
The Problem Of The Hymn	
The Problem Of Chronology	
III. THE CONTEXTUAL SOLUTION – AS UNIVERSALLY INTERPRETED.....	19
IV. THE CONTEXTUAL SOLUTION – AS DISPENSATIONALLY INTERPRETED.....	21
The Significance of μυστήριον (Mystery)	
The Significance of εὐσέβεια (Godliness)	
The Significance of μέγας (Great)	
The Significance of ὅς (He Who)	
V. THE CONTEXTUAL SOLUTION – AS DISPENSATIONALLY APPLIED.....	47
1. Manifested In The Flesh (ἐφανερώθη ἐν σαρκί)	
2. Justified In The Spirit (ἐδικαιώθη ἐν πνεύματι)	
3. Seen Of Angels (ὤφθη ἀγγέλοις)	
4. Preached Among The Gentiles (ἐκηρύχθη ἐν ἔθνεσιν)	
5. Believed On In The World (ἐπιστεύθη ἐν κόσμῳ)	
6. Received Up In Glory (ἀνελήμφθη ἐν δόξῃ)	
VI. CONCLUSION.....	67
APPENDIXES.....	71
Appendix 1 – The Greek Text of 1 Timothy 3:14-16	
Appendix 2 – A Grammatical Diagram of 1 Timothy 3:14-16	
Appendix 3 – Responses of Leading Dispensationalists	
Appendix 4 – Revised Abstract	
Appendix 5 – The Great Commission According to John	
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	105

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

To this writer's knowledge, apart from the published writings of a relatively unknown pastor in Massachusetts¹, 1 Timothy 3:16 has never been interpreted from a consistent, dispensational point of view. Even dispensational commentators have failed to maintain dispensational distinctives in interpreting this portion of

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER I

THE CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

The Assembly – Its Prominence in 1 Timothy

The dominant theme of 1 Timothy is the local church – its doctrine, its worship, its organization, its officers, its responsibilities, its discipline, its preservation, its enemies and its conduct. It was written to a young man who was responsible to care for the Ephesian assembly during the Apostle's absence (1 Tim. 1:3). Paul wrote the letter as one having a great concern for the church at Ephesus, for he himself had spent years laboring on behalf of this flock (Acts 20:26-31). And therefore, as Paul wrote to his beloved child in the faith, he desired only God's very best for Timothy and for the local assembly at Ephesus.

The Assembly – Its Godly Conduct

Paul's purpose in writing this letter is stated clearly in 1 Timothy 3:14-15:

“These things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly; but if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth”.

These instructions for proper conduct in the church are directed not to Timothy alone but to all the members of the local church.² The impersonal verb δεῖ is used with the infinitive ἀναστρέφειν, which means to “act, behave, conduct oneself or live”.³ Thus the expression may be rendered, “in order that you might know how it is necessary for men to conduct themselves in the house of God...”. The Apostle's concern was for Godly conduct in the assembly.

² W. E. Vine, An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1966, p. 112.

³ William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 60.

The Assembly – Its Greatness

Its Greatness As The House Of God

The Ephesian assembly is described in 1 Timothy 3:15 as “the house of God”. By implication, Paul used the same expression in 1 Timothy 3:5: “For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?”. The comparison is between the overseer's house and God's house, which is the church. The expression ἐκκλησίας θεοῦ in 1 Timothy 3:5 can only refer to the local church because elders are not responsible to rule over the universal church!⁴ Therefore it would be most reasonable to see the phrase οἶκῳ θεοῦ in 1 Timothy 3:15 as also being a reference to the local assembly. Men ought to know how to conduct themselves, not in the universal church, but in the local Ephesian assembly to which Paul was writing.

It is also clear that οἶκῳ θεοῦ is not a reference to any church building, because church buildings as such were never used in the days of the early church. To say that the church is God's house simply means that it is the special dwelling place of God. The Most High God dwells in His assembly. It is the “habitation of God through the Spirit” (Eph. 2:22). Believers are the house of God because God dwells in them.⁵ In his letter to the Corinthian assembly Paul wrote, “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?” (1 Cor. 3:16). The truth that thrilled Paul's heart as he wrote to the Colossians was that Christ indwelt the assembly: “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27). Such a unique relationship was predicted by the Lord Jesus: “At that day ye shall know that I am in My Father, and ye in Me, and I in you” (Jn. 14:20; cf. Jn. 17:23). This glorious truth ought to be a great incentive for godly living, because according to Psalm 93:5, the leading characteristic of God's house must be holiness: “holiness becometh thine house, O LORD, for ever”. The indwelling presence of the living God is a forceful reminder of the awesome greatness of the church!

⁴ Walter Lock, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Pastoral Epistles (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), p. 42.

⁵ William Hendriksen, New Testament Commentary-Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1965), p. 136.

Its Greatness As The Church Of The Living God

The grandeur of the local church is further indicated in 1 Timothy 3:16 by its description as “the church of the living God”. The Ephesian assembly was a body of believers, a living organism pulsating with the very life of God. The church is composed of “living stones” (1 Pet. 2:5) and indwelt by the living God.

Also located in the city of Ephesus was the “church of the dead god”, the great Ephesian temple of Diana, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The personal working of the living God in the midst of the Ephesian assembly formed a strong contrast to that “well-known graven image of the Diana of Ephesus, throned in that fair temple which glittered in its white and lifeless beauty over the roofs of the city where Timothy's charge lay”.⁶ In honor to their shrine of the lifeless god, the pagan Ephesians cried out, “Great is Diana of the Ephesians” (Acts 19:28,34). After describing the greatness of the assembly of the living God, Paul echoes another cry, “Great is the mystery of godliness” (1 Tim. 3:16).

Its Greatness As The Pillar And Ground Of The Truth

The final description of the local assembly, as recorded in 1 Timothy 3:15, is remarkable indeed. The church is “the pillar and ground of the truth”. Paul first pictures the church as a great assembly with the living God dwelling in its midst; and then the same church is painted as a massive pillar, holding up and displaying before men and angels the truth.⁷

Some commentators, such as John Peter Lange, have objected to such a lofty description of the church.⁸ In order to solve this alleged problem they have elected to punctuate verses 15 and 16 as follows:

A pillar and ground of the truth, and confessedly great is the mystery of godliness.

They thus place the phrase, “a pillar and ground of the truth”, in apposition not to “the church” but to “the mystery of godliness”. Such a construction is artificial,

⁶ Charles John Ellicott, ed., Ellicott's Commentary on the Whole Bible, Vol. VIII (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), p. 44.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ John Peter Lange, Commentary on the Holy Scriptures, translated and edited by Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), p. 44.

forced and cumbersome, and as Rowland states, it has been proposed due to the bias of the Protestant interpreter:

This is unnatural, abrupt, and unfair, and has been resorted to chiefly by Protestant commentators because they object to the statement that the church is the foundation of truth.⁹

To avoid the alleged embarrassment of taking the text as it would most normally read, they adopt a construction that is singular and hard. It is true that the Roman Catholic Church has claimed to be the sole depository of the truth, but Paul exposes this false religious system in the following chapter by declaring that those who forbid marriage and abstain from meats are really propagating doctrines of demons (1 Tim. 4:1-5). There is no way to detract from the import of Paul's statement in 1 Timothy 3:15. The church is the pillar and ground of the truth.

The word **στῦλος** means “pillar, column”.¹⁰ It occurs elsewhere in Galatians 2:9 and Revelation 3:12; 10:1. The function of a pillar is to support, to hold up and to display. The church is thus to support, uphold and display the truth of God. Hundreds of **στῦλοι** were visible to the Ephesian believers as they would pass by the great temple:

The temple of Diana, at Ephesus, was adorned with more than a hundred columns of stupendous size. They were mostly of Parian marble, and were either furnished by the various cities of Asia as offerings to the goddess, or were contributed by wealthy men and princes. These pillars are said to have been immense monoliths: single stones of sixty feet in height.¹¹

The precise meaning of the term **ἐδραίωμα** is more difficult to determine. Etymologically the word is derived from **ἔδος**, “a sitting-place, a seat, abode, dwelling place, a foundation, base,” and from **ἔδρα**, “a sitting-place, a seat, a chair, stool, bench”.¹² The term **ἔδρα** was also used to designate the back of a horse on which a rider would sit.¹³ This may suggest that **ἐδραίωμα**, would refer to the ground or foundation upon which the pillar sits or rests.

⁹ Alfred Rowland, Paul's Ideal Church and People – A Popular Commentary on the First Epistle to Timothy (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1893), p. 149.

¹⁰ Arndt and Gingrich, p. 779.

¹¹ Joseph S. Exell, The Biblical Illustrator – First Timothy, Vol. 49 (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, n.d.), p. 141.

¹² George Henry Liddell and Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, seventh edition revised and augmented (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1889), pp. 423-4.

¹³ Ibid., p. 424.

The kindred adjective **ἑδραῖος** is found three places in the New Testament (1 Cor. 7:37; 15:58; Col. 1:23) and is usually rendered “steadfast”. In secular Greek this adjective meant “seated, settled” and then it came to denote what is as fixed as a cube (**κύβος**) – thus, “steadfast, immovable”.¹⁴

The exact meaning of **ἑδραίωμα** is difficult to discern because there are no examples of its usage in secular Greek writings and it occurs only once in the New Testament in the passage under consideration. Since usage determines meaning, this word poses an exegetical problem. Some writers suggest the word means “bulwark, stay, support, prop, mainstay”.¹⁵ If this meaning is correct, then the term is hardly distinguished from **στῦλος**. Both would represent supporting structures:

By giving to **ἑδραίωμα** the sense of stay or prop, the use of the two words for the same general idea is readily explained. The church is the pillar of truth, and the function of the pillar is to support.¹⁶

Others prefer the meaning of “basis, foundation” which concurs with the rendering of “ground” in the Authorized Version.¹⁷ This latter meaning would make **ἑδραίωμα** the base by which all is upheld, and on which the entire building rests.¹⁸

Until more lexicographic light is shed on this noun, it may be well to adhere to the meaning of “foundation” or “base”. In Paul's second letter to Timothy, he described God's elect as the solid foundation (**Θεμέλιος**) of God. Not only is the church the pillar of truth, but it is the base and foundation of the truth as well.

¹⁴ Gerhard Kittel, ed., Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol. II, Translated and Edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), p. 362.

¹⁵ James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), pp. 180-81. See also G. Abbott-Smith, A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament, Third Edition (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937), p. 129.

¹⁶ M. R. Vincent, Word Studies in the New Testament (Wilmington, Delaware: Associated Publishers and Authors, 1972), p. 1030.

¹⁷ Edward Robinson, A Greek and English Lexicon of the New Testament, revised edition (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1868), p. 20). See also Arndt and Gingrich, p. 217.

¹⁸ C. G. Barth, ed., An Expository and Practical Commentary on the Books of Scripture (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1873), p. 938.

As a pillar supports the roof structure, so the real foundation supports the pillar:

As the pillar supports the roof, even better (note the climax!) as the foundation supports the entire superstructure, so the church supports the glorious truth.¹⁹

If this interpretation is correct, then the **στῦλος** is the intermediate support and the **ἐδραίωμα** is the final support of the building.²⁰ The verse could be thus para-phrased as follows: “The living God's church is the pillar, yea more, even the foundation of the truth”.²¹ The church is one massive foundation-pillar, supporting and displaying God's truth. Illustration of this fact could again be found in the city temple of Diana:

The pillars were set upon a basement which was elevated ten steps above the surrounding area. Diana had her pillar and her basement, but she had no pillar or basement of truth, hers was all imposture throughout.²²

The local church is in the midst of a crooked and perverse world to hold forth the Word of Life by manifesting the truth in practice and in message. “Each local church has in its power to support and strengthen the truth by its witness to the faith and by the lives of its members”.²³

Today God is manifesting His truth by means of His church! This does not mean that the Truth of God or the authority of the Scriptures depends upon the church, as the papists would like to believe. Alfred Plummer has correctly discerned the meaning of the passage:

Truth in itself is self-evident and self-sustained: it needs no external support or foundation. But truth as it is manifested to the world needs the best support and the firmest basis that can be found for it. And it is the duty and privilege of the Church to supply these.²⁴

¹⁹ Hendriksen, p. 136.

²⁰ Henry Alford, The Greek Testament, Vol. III-IV, revised by Everett F. Harrison (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), p. 330.

²¹ R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), p. 606.

²² Exell, p. 141.

²³ Lock, p. 44.

²⁴ Alfred Plummer, The Pastoral Epistles, Volume VI of An Exposition of the Bible (Hartford, Connecticut: S. S. Scranton Co., 1910), p. 419.

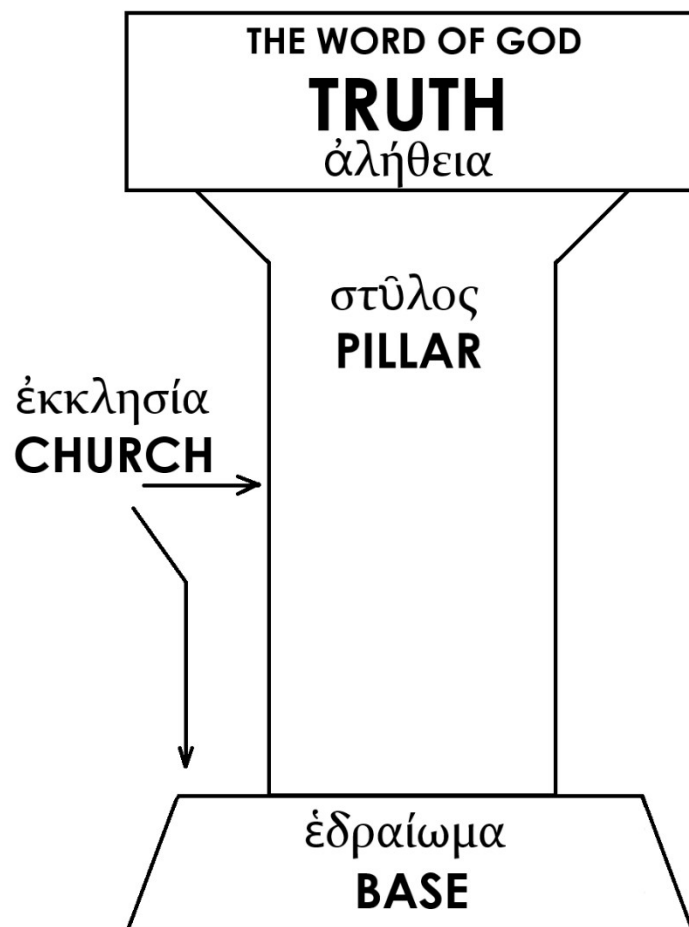
How great is the responsibility of the church to uphold the whole counsel of God! This is especially true in view of the great apostasy predicted by Paul in the following chapter (1 Tim. 4:1). In the latter times some shall apostatize from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons. Carlton Helgerson clearly describes the danger facing the church at this present hour:

The same Devil who hates God's Truth will surely try to destroy the pillar and the base. He always attacks the local assembly, its pastor, its elders and its constituents. He hopes to weaken or destroy the torch bearer. The light of Divine Truth, proclaimed and exemplified, in any given area is the local church. It cannot fulfill its purpose if disorganized or lacking in dogmatic doctrine. The more determined the local assembly's leaders are to adhere closely to this revealed truth, the more vehement will be the Enemy's determination to destroy that pillar. He may work subtly from within or launch an attack from without, but he will never cease to try to bring about disruption, confusion, mismanagement, or corruption of doctrine.²⁵

The local church is to uphold and display the truth of the Word of God before a lost and dying world. As the pillar and the base of God's truth, how great a responsibility is upon the assembly of the living God!

²⁵ Helgerson, p. 20

The Church as “the pillar and base of the truth” – 1 Timothy 3:15



In the diagram, the following **Greek words** are explicitly mentioned:

- ἀλήθεια → *truth*
- στῦλος → *pillar*
- ἐδραίωμα → *base, foundation, support, ground*
- ἐκκλησία → *church, assembly*

CHAPTER II

THE CONTEXTUAL PROBLEM

The Problem Of The Immediate Context

As the interpreter reads 1 Timothy 3:15 the greatness and grandeur of the local assembly looms large before his eyes. He sees the church as inhabited by God, indwelt by God's life and displaying God's 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. It was Christ who was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world and received up in glory!

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?

The Problem Of The Textual Variant

Perhaps no textual variant in the New Testament has caused so much dispute as the one in 1 Timothy 3:16. The Authorized Version follows the **Θεός** reading of the majority of Greek manuscripts and has “God was manifest in the flesh”. The oldest extant manuscripts have the masculine relative pronoun **ὃς**, “He who was manifested in the flesh”. The Revised Version of 1885 and almost all of the modern versions reflect this latter reading. Some of the ancient Western manuscripts have the neuter relative pronoun **ὃ** which would agree in gender with **μυστήριον**, “Great is the mystery . . . which was manifested in the flesh”. This is equivalent to saying that the mystery of godliness is Christ.

The reason **Θεός** and **ὃς** could be easily confused by the scribe as the New Testament text was transmitted is readily explained. In the Uncial Manuscripts, the word for God (**Θεός**) was often abbreviated by writing only the first and last letter, and including a dash above the letters to indicate that the word is in abbreviated form. Hence **Θεός** in uncial style would be written as **ΘEOC**, and abbreviated would be **ΘC**. The relative

ὁς would appear as OC in uncial manuscripts. The fact that $\overline{\Theta C}$ and OC could be confused one for the other is hardly surprising.

The manuscript evidence seems to favor the ὁς reading. The majority of manuscripts have Θεός but they are all late. The earliest manuscripts, though fewer in number, give overwhelming support to the ὁς reading. The evidence favoring ὁς from the Greek manuscripts, the versions, and the Fathers may be summarized as follows:

1. The uncial codices, $\aleph$, or Sinaitic manuscripts, of the fourth century, A and C, of the fifth, F and G, of the ninth.
2. The important cursive manuscripts 17, 73, 181, which were copies from uncial manuscripts, probably earlier than any now extant.
3. The Gothic, later Syriac, and Coptic Versions; in the Peshito, or earlier Syriac, it is uncertain whether the reading is who (ὁς), or which (ὃ).
4. The citation of the passage in this form by the Fathers, Cyril, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Epiphanius, Macarius, and Jerome.²⁶

The reading Θεός is assumed to be inferior because it lacks early support:

No uncial (in the first hand) earlier than the eighth or ninth century (Ψ) supports Θεός; all ancient Versions presuppose ὁς or ὃ; and no patristic writer prior to the last third of the fourth century testifies to the reading Θεός.²⁷

It is for these reasons that textual critics have almost universally concluded that ὁς is the reading of the original text:

In this result concur all the best critical authorities, as Griesbach, Lachmann, Tischendorf, Tregelles, and Westcott and Hort; with De Wette, Huther, Alford, Ellicott, and Fairbairn among interpreters.²⁸

²⁶ H. Harvey, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1890), p. 48. see also Alford, pp. 332-33.

²⁷ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971), p. 641.

²⁸ Harvey, p. 48.

One of the principles of textual criticism is that the original reading is most often the reading that best explains the rise of the other readings. It is not difficult to explain how **Θεός** could have arisen from **ὁς**:

The reading **Θεός** arose either (a) accidentally, through the misreading of **OC** as **ΘC** or (b) deliberately, either to supply a substantive for the following six verbs, or, with less probability, to provide greater dogmatic precision.²⁹

Those who defend the **Θεός** reading argue that the earliest extant manuscripts are corrupt and that the **ὁς** reading was a deliberate and intentional perversion of the text to weaken the doctrine of the deity of Christ.³⁰ If **Θεός** were the correct reading, 1 Timothy 3:16 would certainly be a direct assertion of the deity of Christ. In fact, the Westminster Confession of Faith includes 1 Timothy 3:16 as one of the Scriptural proofs for their statement concerning the Person of Christ.³¹

Assuming that **ὁς** is the correct reading, what is the antecedent of this masculine relative pronoun? Verse 15 provides only one possible antecedent, namely, **θεοῦ**, which is used twice in the verse: “who (namely, God – verse 15) was manifested in the flesh”. Since the church obviously belongs to Christ (Mt. 16:18), the antecedent “God” (1 Tim. 3:15) is most probably a reference to God the Son. If this is indeed the correct identification of the antecedent, then there is no essential difference between the two readings.

It is also possible that the antecedent is not supplied by the text directly, but must be inferred by the content of verse 16. In other words, Paul could have assumed that Timothy would be able to supply the proper antecedent, and certainly, the logical antecedent would be “Christ”. It was Christ who 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. And yet, even if “Christ” were the correct antecedent, the doctrine of the deity of Christ would not be weakened. Could it be said of a mere man that he was manifested in the flesh? Would it not be absurd to assert that the Apostle Paul was manifested in the flesh? No, the deity of Christ is woven into the very fabric of 1 Timothy 3:16 even if the **ὁς** reading is accepted as correct. This verse would be utterly

²⁹ Metzger, p. 641.

³⁰ “God was manifest in the flesh – 1 Timothy 3:16”, *Quarterly Record*, printed by the Trinitarian Bible Society for April and July, 1965.

³¹ *Ibid.*

meaningless apart from the truth of the deity of Christ, and if the enemies of the Cross were responsible for the ὅς reading by a deliberate plot to destroy this foundational doctrine of the Christian faith, then they have not been very successful.³²

Though the relative pronoun does not depreciate the doctrine of the deity of Christ, it does present a contextual problem. The ὅς reading gives an abrupt introduction to the six phrases that constitute the “mystery of godliness”. How can this abruptness be explained? “Christ” is clearly the logical antecedent of the relative pronoun, but why did Paul fail to make the subject explicit? He could have easily written, “Christ was manifested in the flesh”. Such an abrupt and ambiguous construction probably caused the early scribes to change ὅς to Θεός which would result in a smoother and more precise reading. Why then did Paul choose to allow such ambiguity?

The Problem Of The Hymn

Most commentators explain the abruptness of the ὅς construction by assuming that Paul was quoting a creed or hymn that was already familiar to the early Christians. It is not difficult to understand how verse 16 could be considered a credal hymn. The mystery of godliness is set forth by Paul in a series of six terse phrases with each phrase containing a passive verb as indicated by the -θη ending. As the verse is examined in the Greek text the lyrical quality of the phrase arrangement is readily recognized. The majesty and depth of this “hymn” is remarkable: “It would be difficult, if not impossible, to condense more interesting and sublime thought into so narrow a compass as this”.³³

There are many who believe that the “hymn” has little or nothing to do with the preceding context (verse 15) and they thus explain this apparent “contextual break” by saying that Paul introduced an early Christian hymn into the text. One of the supposed proofs of the hymnic nature of the passage is “its lack of agreement with the context”.³⁴ Lock believes that the hymn “goes beyond the statements required by the context”.³⁵ Another commentator is surprised by the so-called contextual break: “The sudden ascension of thought expressed in the text takes us by surprise”.³⁶ Another feels that the seeming abrupt shift of thought makes the hymn difficult to understand: “The

³² For a good discussion of this problem, see The Numerical Bible – Hebrews to Revelation, fourth edition (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, Bible Truth Depot, 1932), pp. 90-91.

³³ Albert Barnes, Barnes' Notes on the New Testament, edited by Ingram Cobbin (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1962), p. 1144.

³⁴ Clifton J. Allen, ed., The Broadman Bible Commentary, Vol. XI (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), p. 321.

³⁵ Lock, pp. 44-45.

meaning of the hymn is difficult because it has been removed from its original context".³⁷ Others have given up all hope of ever determining the exact meaning of the hymn because they feel it has been removed from its contextual setting:

A precise interpretation of the hymn is not possible because it is a fragment and without a context adequate to clarify its meaning.³⁸

Did Paul write this hymn himself, or did he merely quote from a previously written Christian hymn? It is impossible to answer this question with any finality. Plummer assumes that Paul is here quoting from some well-known form of words, but he admits that this is only a "reasonable and attractive conjecture".³⁹ Lenski also believes that Paul is quoting a Christian hymn or psalm but he concedes that such cannot be proved.⁴⁰

Apart from the supposed contextual problem, there is no reason Paul could not have written this hymn. Paul sang hymns himself (Acts 16:25) and he gave written instruction concerning Christ-honoring singing (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; 1 Cor. 14:15). Harvey thus argues for original Pauline authorship:

It seems, however, far more natural to think that the language here was original with Paul . . . For in Paul, as in all great writers and orators, when treating of subjects in their nature sublime, the tendency is to poetic and rhythmic expression. Compare Rom. 8:38-39; 11:33-36.⁴¹

Alford also attributes the original composition to Paul:

Once written, it would be sure to gain a place among the choice and treasured sayings of the church, and might easily find its way into liturgical use: but I should be most inclined to think that we have here its first expression.⁴²

³⁶ James Hastings, ed., The Great Texts of the Bible – Thessalonians to Hebrews (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), p. 101.

³⁷ Charles M. Laymon, ed., The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible (New York: Abingdon Press, 1971), p. 886.

³⁸ George Arthur Buttrick, ed., The Interpreter's Bible, Vol. XI (New York: Abingdon Press, 1955), p. 421.

³⁹ Plummer, p. 420.

⁴⁰ Lenski, p. 607.

⁴¹ Harvey, p. 47.

⁴² Alford, p. 334.

The problem of original composition of this hymn cannot be settled finally. There is no convincing evidence that Paul was quoting from a hymn already in use and there is no reason why Paul could not have written it himself. The expression “without controversy” (ὁμολογουμένως) has been taken by some to argue that Paul was quoting from a familiar hymn which contained truths that were confessed and acknowledged by all believers. But original Pauline composition cannot be denied on the basis of this word alone. Paul, in using this term, probably meant that the greatness of the mystery of godliness will be acknowledged and confessed by all who understand its significance and application.

If Paul were merely quoting a Christian hymn that was already in use, then there is perhaps a reason for the apparent discontinuity between the hymn and the immediate preceding context of verse 15. If Paul himself wrote the hymn, then the interpreter is forced to deal with the contextual problem and to determine what the relationship is between verse 15 and verse 16. On the other hand, even if Paul did not compose the hymn, the contextual problem must still be faced. Would Paul quote a hymn that was unrelated to the content and context of his letter? Assuming that he did make use of an early Christian hymn, would he not select a hymn which would have words that would express his own movement of thought? Writers generally cite other sources to support their argumentation, not to deviate from the subject matter at hand. It would be most unlikely Paul to quote a hymn without rhyme or reason for doing so!

As previously mentioned, some commentators believe that the hymn in 1 Timothy 3:16 is impossible to interpret precisely because of its lack of agreement with the context. Actually the opposite is true! It is impossible to interpret the hymn correctly and precisely unless the context is understood. To fail to understand the context is to fail to understand the hymn! The mystery of godliness becomes meaningless apart from the consideration of the immediate, preceding context of verse 15.

The Problem Of Chronology

If the mystery of godliness refers solely to Christ, as almost all commentators believe, then the interpreter is faced with a chronological problem. The six descriptive phrases are slightly out of order. The correct historical order would be as follows:

1. Manifested in the flesh.
2. Justified in the Spirit.
3. Seen of angels.
4. Received up in glory.
5. Preached among the Gentiles.
6. Believed on in the world.

The problem may be stated as follows:

The concluding refrain, taken up in glory, seems chronologically out of place. The phrase naturally refers to the Ascension, but this took place before the mission to the Gentiles, not after. No really satisfactory solution to the problem of arrangement is available.⁴³

Alford seeks to solve this problem by making the phrase, “preached among the Gentiles”, refer to the preaching mission of the twelve as recorded in Matthew 10.⁴⁴ But this is an impossible interpretation because the twelve apostles were not sent to the Gentiles at all, but only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Mt. 10:5-6). Homer Kent Jr. solves the problem by considering the chronological order insignificant. He “does not press any consecutive or chronological order in the series”.⁴⁵ Did Paul not intend to outline a strict chronological order of events or is there possibly another solution to this problem?

⁴³ Buttrick, The Interpreter's Bible, pp. 422-23. See also Lenski, p. 614.

⁴⁴ Alford, p. 334.

⁴⁵ Homer A. Kent, Jr., The Pastoral Epistles (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), p. 146.

CHAPTER III

THE CONTEXTUAL SOLUTION – AS UNIVERSALLY INTERPRETED

Those commentators who deal with the contextual problem are universally agreed that the solution is found by equating the “mystery of godliness” (verse 16) with “the truth” (verse 15). This interpretation may be represented as follows:

The connection of thought is with the truth (ver. 15), and the words mystery of godliness are a paraphrase of that word. The church is the pillar and stay of the truth, and the truth constitutes the mystery of godliness.⁴⁶

The content of the truth which the church upholds, supports, and confesses is summarized in the last verse.⁴⁷ Verse 16 delineates the content of “the truth” which has just been mentioned as being upheld by the church.⁴⁸ Such is the greatness of that truth of which the church is ‘the pillar and base’.⁴⁹ The saving truth which the living God’s church upholds as pillar and foundation, “is great”.⁵⁰

By this interpretation, “the mystery” consists of the truth concerning Christ as expressed in the six phrases of the “hymn”, especially 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.

⁴⁶ Vincent, pp. 1030-31.

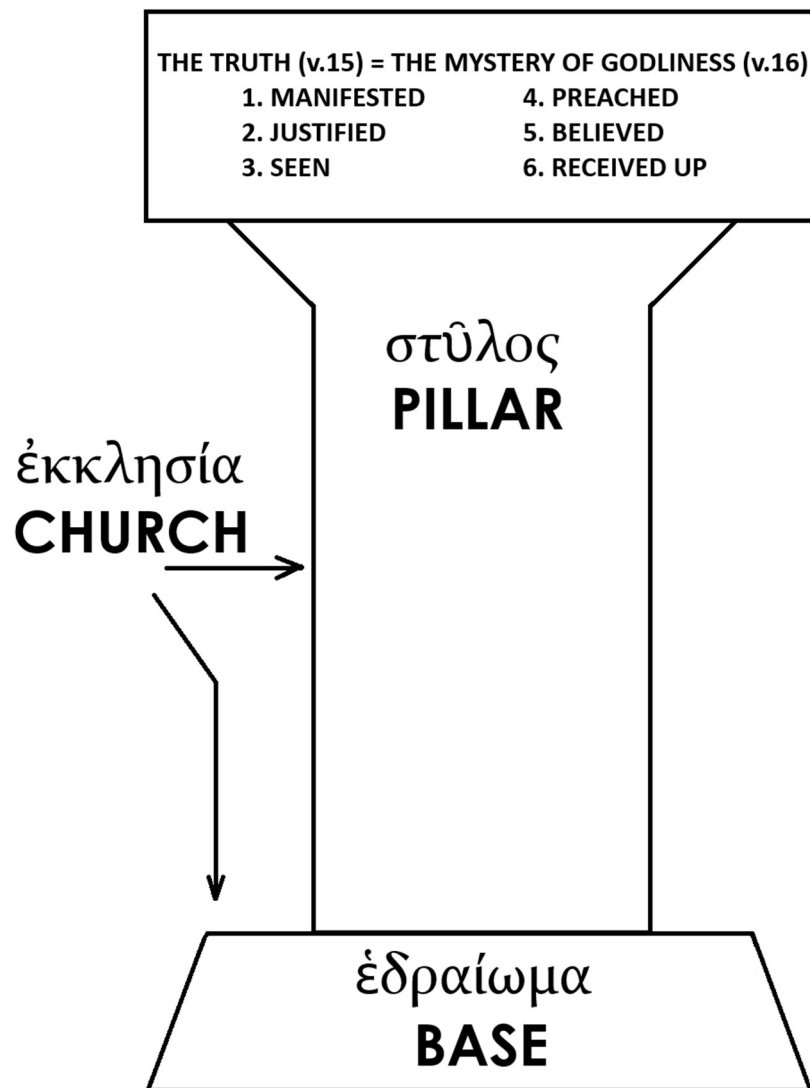
⁴⁷ Edmond D. Hiebert, First Timothy (Chicago: Moody Press, 1957), p. 73.

⁴⁸ Kent, Jr., p. 145.

⁴⁹ Harvey, p. 47.

⁵⁰ Lenski, p. 608.

The Church as “the pillar and base of the truth”
as Universally Misunderstood



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.⁵¹

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.⁵²

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

⁵² 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.⁵³

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.⁵⁴

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.⁵⁵

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 806.

⁵⁴ Liddell and Scott, p. 987.

⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶ 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".⁵⁷

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.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Edwards, I.S.B.E., p. 2104.

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

⁵⁸ 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. **φανεροῦν** – 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.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰

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.⁶¹

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.⁶²

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 1:26.⁶³

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.⁶⁴

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.

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

⁶¹ Walvoord, The Church, pp. 26-27.

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

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

⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵

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.⁶⁶

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).⁶⁷

⁶⁵ McClain, pp. 324-25.

⁶⁶ Ryrie, Biblical Theology, pp. 88-89.

⁶⁷ 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).⁶⁸

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.⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

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

⁷⁰ 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 3:1-7.⁷¹

The central feature of this mystery is that Gentiles should have an absolute equality with the Jews in the body of Christ.⁷² 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”.⁷³ 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.⁷⁴

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

⁷² John F. Walvoord, “Premillennialism and the Church as a mystery”, Bibliotheca Sacra, Volume 111, Number 441 (January, 1954), p. 3.

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

⁷⁴ 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.⁷⁵

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.⁷⁶

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.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Helgerson, Church Truth, p. 5.

⁷⁶ Walvoord, The Rapture Question, p. 35.

⁷⁷ 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).⁷⁸

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).

⁷⁸ 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”.⁷⁹

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.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ 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.

⁸⁰ 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.⁸¹

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”.⁸²

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.⁸³

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.⁸⁴

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

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

⁸³ Barth, p. 938.

⁸⁴ 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.⁸⁵ 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.⁸⁶

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)”.⁸⁷ 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”.⁸⁸ 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.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Chafer, Systematic Theology, Vol. I, p. 351.

⁸⁶ Ibid., Vol. III, p. 21.

⁸⁷ Pentecost, p. 135.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ 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 1:11.⁹⁰

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!

⁹⁰ *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”.⁹¹ 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.

⁹¹ 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”.⁹²

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.⁹³

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”.⁹⁴ 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, 17:4,17.⁹⁵

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”.⁹⁶

⁹² 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.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Liddell and Scott, p. 1378.

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

⁹⁶ 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”.⁹⁷

The adjective **σεβαστός** means “revered, worthy of reverence, august”, and was a Greek translation of the Latin “Augustus”, the designation of the Roman emperor.⁹⁸ 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**”.⁹⁹ 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.¹⁰⁰

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.¹⁰¹

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.¹⁰² It involves a reverence for God which shows itself in actions.¹⁰³ 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)!

⁹⁷ Arndt and Gingrich, p. 753 .

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Liddell and Scott, p. 1378.

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

¹⁰¹ Cremer, p. 523.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 524.

¹⁰³ 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”.¹⁰⁴ In the New Testament and Septuagint it is used only of the duty which man owes to God.¹⁰⁵ Cremer defines εὐσέβεια as “the good and careful cherishing of the fear of God”.¹⁰⁶ 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.¹⁰⁷

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).

¹⁰⁴ Liddell and Scott, p. 615.

¹⁰⁵ Arndt and Gingrich, p. 326.

¹⁰⁶ Cremer, p. 524.

¹⁰⁷ 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).¹⁰⁸ Alfred Plummer also mentions the contextual connection between “godliness” (verse 16) and “behave thyself” (verse 15).¹⁰⁹ 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”.¹¹⁰ 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 **ἀναστρέφεσθαι** 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.¹¹¹ For example, Hiebert describes the credal hymn as being “a majestic summary of the substance of Christian truth”.¹¹² 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:

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

¹⁰⁹ Plummer, p. 419.

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

¹¹¹ Arndt and Gingrich, p. 326. See also Buttrick, p. 421.

¹¹² 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.¹¹³

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).

¹¹³ 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. 5:32.¹¹⁴

The phrasing parallels closely Ephesians 5:32.¹¹⁵

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

Great (μέγας) means important, weighty, as Eph. 5:32.¹¹⁷

The epithet “great”, which is here applied to “the mystery of godliness”, is the same as in Eph. 5:32.¹¹⁸

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”.¹¹⁹ 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?

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

¹¹⁵ Allen, p. 321.

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

¹¹⁷ Vincent, p. 1031.

¹¹⁸ J. Armitage Robinson, p. 239.

¹¹⁹ 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.¹²⁰ "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?

¹²⁰ 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.

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 ὁμῖν 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 *δικαίωω* 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. 22.

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.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The six phrases of the hymn in 1 Timothy 3:16 as they apply to the church may be summarized briefly as follows:

1. God the Son manifesting Himself in and through His body which is on the earth. (Col. 1:24–27; Eph. 1:22–23).
2. God the Holy Spirit vindicating the Resurrected Christ in and through the assembly. (Jn. 16:7–11).
3. God the Father making known His manifold wisdom and grace unto the principalities and powers by means of the assembly. (Eph. 3:10; 2:7).
4. The assembly making known the mystery of the gospel among all nations. (Eph. 3:5–8; Rom. 16:25–26).
5. The assembly functioning as a godly witness before the world. (Jn. 17:21; 1 Cor. 14:24–25).
6. The assembly being received up in glory at the rapture of the church. (Col. 1:27; 3:4; 1 Cor. 15:51–52).

It should be noted that the problem of chronology disappears as the hymn is correctly applied to the local assembly, as summarized in the six statements above. Thus Paul traces the purpose, witness, message, and destiny of the church! It could be said 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.

The problem of the use of the ambiguous relative pronoun can also be explained. Certainly the logical antecedent of this pronoun is “Christ” or “God the Son” (v. 15). But the very fact that Paul did not make the subject explicit permits the possibility of a wider application to Christ and the church. In other words, all six phrases have “Christ” (or “God”) as the subject, but the significance of these phrases has direct bearing and application to the local church. Thus what we have is a series of six parallelisms in

which the present tenure of the local church is analogous to that of our Lord Jesus in the days of His earthly life and ministry.

This interpretation also explains why the death of Christ is not mentioned in the hymn of 1 Timothy 3:16. Certainly the death of Christ was of utmost significance to the church because God purchased the church with His own Blood (Acts 20:28). But the emphasis in 1 Timothy 3:16 is upon the life and witness of the Lord Jesus, and by application, the life and witness of the church. Thus the omission of any statement concerning the death of Christ is easily explained.

To this writer's knowledge, 1 Timothy 3:16 has never been interpreted from a consistent, dispensational viewpoint, apart from the writings of Carlton Helgerson. Helgerson mentions 1 Timothy 3:16 as applying to both Christ and the church:

The local assembly must see itself for what it is in God's purpose. It is here to exemplify the mystery of godliness. Of the God-Man, Christ Jesus, it is written: "God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory" (1 Tim. 3:16). His Body's tenure parallels this – manifesting God now and one day soon being caught up in the rapture.¹⁶⁰

In a series of articles that appeared in the Voice Magazine (I.F.C.A.), Helgerson made further mention of the mystery of godliness:

Neither should we be hesitant in accepting what the Lord has revealed about the local church as the current incarnation of the mystery of godliness (1 Tim. 3:16). We are to allow Him to manifest His life in body-coordination, interpersonal relationships, and true holiness.¹⁶¹

A summation of God's purpose in the local church is in 1 Timothy 3:15–16. There the Apostle defines the company of believers in Ephesus as "the house of God which is the assembly of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (v. 15). Knowing what God has said on this matter is an incentive to correct behavior and a boost to the morale of any young Timothy. The truth, once perfectly manifested in Christ, continues to be

¹⁶⁰ Helgerson, Church Truth, p. 48.

¹⁶¹ Helgerson, Church Truth – Articles as They Appeared in the Voice Magazine, p. 3.

mirrored as “the mystery of godliness” in the local assembly; whose present tenure is in this respect analogous to that of our Lord Jesus in the days of His flesh.¹⁶²

Helgerson then applies the six phrases of the hymn to the local assembly. It is interesting to note that his application, though not identical, is very similar to the application that has been proposed in this thesis:

1. Then, in Christ, God was manifested in sinless flesh and a holy human nature. He now wills to yet manifest Himself in our humanity despite our fallen nature (1 John 4:17).
2. Luke tells us that Christ was filled with the Holy Spirit and led by the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:1), and in Romans 1:4 it is written, “And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the Spirit of holiness...”. It is to the members of the body of Christ that the Spirit attests His witness (Rom. 8:16), and “by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body... now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular” (1 Cor. 12:13,27).
3. Angels attended Christ’s incarnation, birth, testing in the wilderness His agony in Gethsemane, His resurrection, and ascension. The local church is under close observation by angels, too (1 Cor. 11:10; 1 Pet. 1:12; Eph. 3:10).
4. Christ was made known to Gentiles: wise men came from the East after His birth, Roman soldiers heard, the Syrophenician woman called upon Him, and at His death the centurion exclaimed, “Through the faithfulness of local assemblies many nations now hear of Him; the influence is world-wide (Rom. 1:8; 16:19).
5. There were those who believed on Christ when He was on earth. So, even now, there are those in the world who credit the local church with being true, respect the church, and believe its message (1 Thess. 1:8).

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 13.

6. When our Lord's ministry was concluded, He was taken up into heaven. The rapture (1 Thess. 4:17; 1 Cor. 15:52) will terminate this dispensation's primary witness as the believers are transported to glory. (His miracles, crosswork, and resurrection are omitted. It was by His crucifixion and bodily resurrection that we were brought into this grace! Nor are we enjoined to duplicate the miracles. The particulars listed stress manifestation of a life rather than overt accomplishments).¹⁶³

Pastor Helgersen concludes with this precious statement:

The local church is for the glory of God and it is here that it may function as a body that evidences the power and indwelling of the life of God. The local assembly is to be seen as the manifestation of Christ in its locality.¹⁶⁴

Without controversy this mystery, which in other ages had been locked up in the loving heart of God, is indeed great! The realization of the glory and the greatness of this mystery would have stirred Timothy and the Ephesian church to that godly conduct which pleases Christ, the Head of the assembly, God blessed forever!

¹⁶³ Ibid., pp. 13–14.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 14.

APPENDIX I

THE GREEK TEXT OF 1 TIMOTHY 3:14-16

The following is copied from The Greek New Testament published by the United Bible Societies, second edition, 1968:

The Mystery of Godliness

14:

Ταῦτά σοι γράφω, ἐλπίζων ἐλθεῖν πρὸς σέ τάχιον.

KJV: These things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly:

15:

ἐὰν δὲ βραδύνω, ἵνα εἰδῇς πῶς δεῖ ἐν οἴκῳ Θεοῦ
ἀναστρέφεσθαι, ἥτις ἐστὶν ἐκκλησία Θεοῦ ζῶντος,
στῦλος καὶ ἐδραίωμα τῆς ἀληθείας.

KJV: But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.

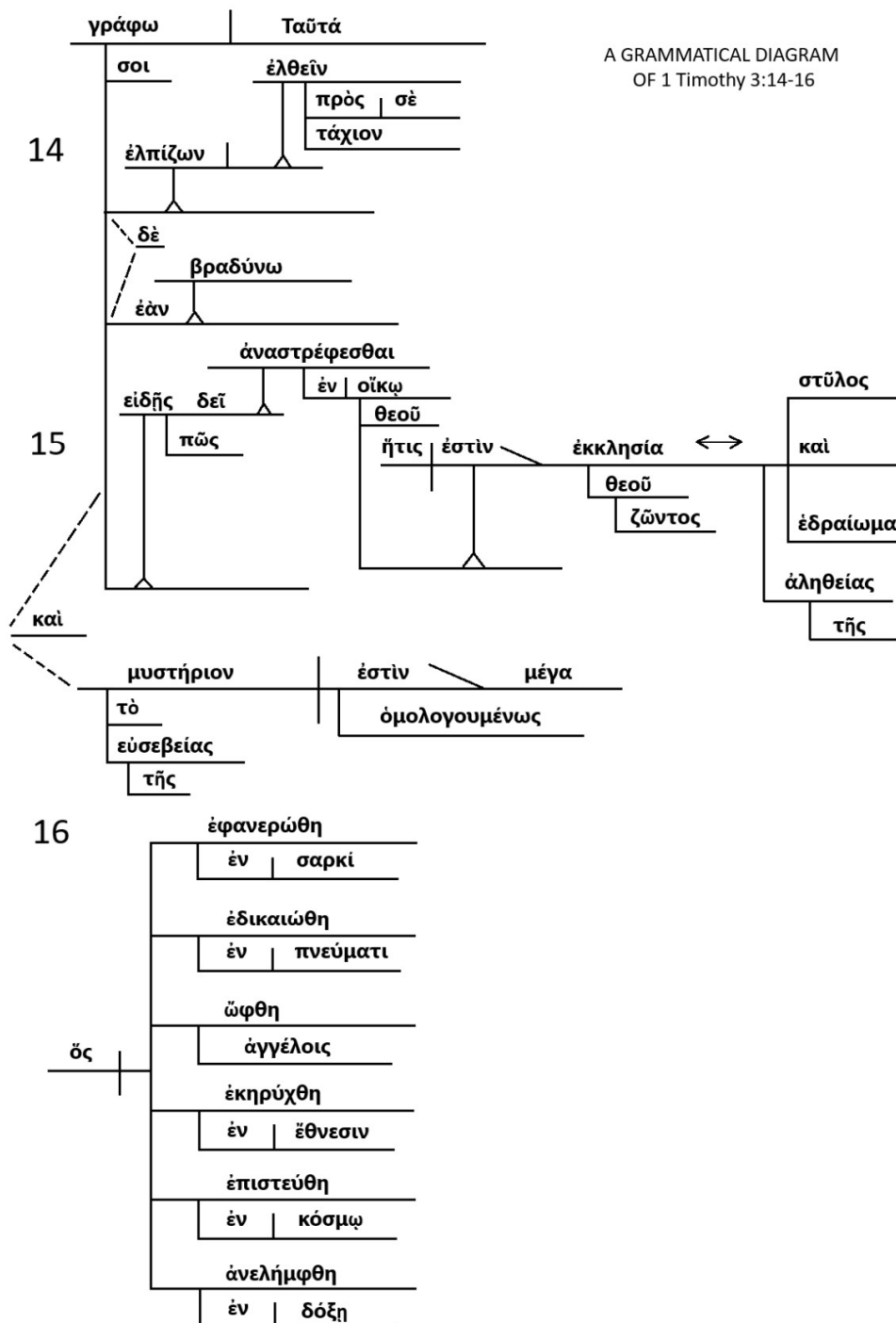
16:

καὶ ὁμολογουμένως μέγα ἐστὶν τὸ τῆς εὐσεβείας
μυστήριον.
Ὃς ἐφανερώθη ἐν σαρκί,
ἐδικαιώθη ἐν πνεύματι,
ὥφθη ἀγγέλοις,
ἐκηρύχθη ἐν ἔθνεσιν,
ἐπιστεύθη ἐν κόσμῳ,
ἀνελήμφθη ἐν δόξῃ.

KJV: And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory.

APPENDIX II

A GRAMMATICAL DIAGRAM OF 1 Timothy 3:14-16



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 now 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, ὃς. The subject was not made explicit, thus permitting the possibility of a wider application to Christ and the church.

Attached to this Appendix 3 are the genuine unaltered responses of leading dispensationalists to this thesis of the Mystery of Godliness.

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.

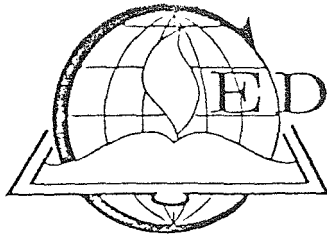
Since you are a respected dispensational writer and since are an authority in the area of N.T. studies, I thought you would be a good person to write to. I believe it would be profitable for you to re-examine this verse in light of the context and in light of the New Testament usage of the term "mystery" 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



CEDARVILLE COLLEGE

A Baptist College of Arts and Sciences

CEDARVILLE, OHIO 45314

March 8, 1975

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

Dear George:

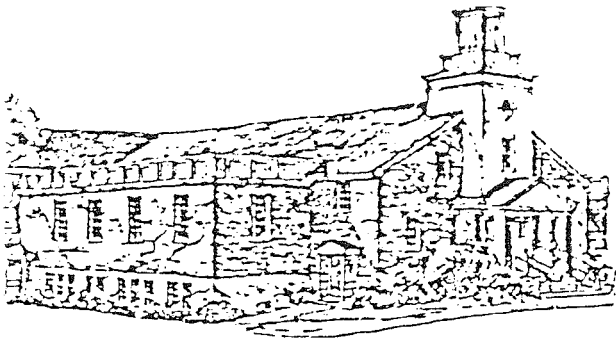
Thanks for your letter and abstract. You certainly stimulated my thinking on that subject. Your thesis is both Scriptural and logical, and in the light of the "mystery" concept may be absolutely correct. I know that the order of the six phrases, as applied to Christ alone, always bothered me.

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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* Tel. 272-0090

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

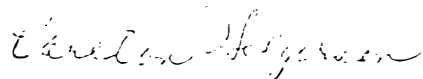
My brother, never lose sight of the revelation given: that the divine indwelling is the genius of apostolic Christianity. All the injunctions and exhortations in the Epistles become only advisory ethics unless we see what the Holy Spirit has in mind.

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 Helgersen
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,
D. Edmond Hiebert
D. 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:

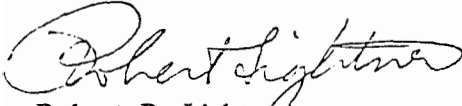
Thank you for your letter of February 17 and thesis abstract.

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.*



Radio Bible Class

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RADIO BIBLE CLASS OUR DAILY BREAD ON THE MOVE DAY OF DISCOVERY

OFFICE OF PAUL R. VAN GORDER
Associate Teacher

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

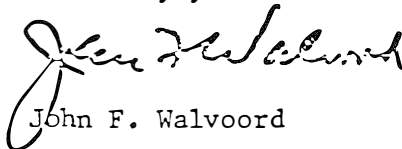
Mr. George W. Zeller
Grace Theological Seminary
Winona Lake, Indiana 46590

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

APPENDIX IV

REVISED ABSTRACT

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

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

This revised abstract appears on the following pages:

George Zeller
Student Body Chaplain
Grace Theological
Seminary

THE MYSTERY OF GODLINESS
ITS APPLICATION TO THE LOCAL ASSEMBLY
1 TIMOTHY 3:14-16

I. The Contextual Problem

As the interpreter reads 1 Timothy 5:15 the greatness and grandeur of the local assembly looms large before his eyes. The church is said to be the house of God, the assembly of the living God, the pillar and base of the truth! And yet, as he comes to verse 16 there is an apparent shift in thought. The Apostle Paul is there revealing a great mystery. Moreover, this mystery obviously relates to the Lord Jesus Christ, His incarnate life and ministry.

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

II. The Contextual Solution As Universally Interpreted

Those commentators who deal with the contextual problem, including dispensational commentators, are universally agreed that the solution is found by equating the "mystery of godliness" (verse 16) with "the truth" (verse 15). By this interpretation "the mystery" consists of the truth concerning Christ as expressed in the six phrases of "the hymn" (v. 16), especially the truth of His incarnation. Thus verse 16 refers exclusively to Christ and applies to the church only indirectly in the sense that the church, as the pillar and ground of the truth, is responsible to uphold and support the glorious facts of the incarnate Christ.

III. The Contextual Solution As Dispensationally Interpreted

In four passages (Eph. 3:4-5; Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:26; Rom. 16:26) the Apostle Paul has carefully defined a N.T. mystery. The definition that may be derived from these four references is as follows:

A New Testament mystery is that which has been hidden, kept secret, and not made known to men in previous ages but has now been made manifest and made known and revealed in this present church age by the N.T. apostles and prophets.

In view of this Biblical definition, how can the great mystery of 1 Timothy 3:16 be the incarnation of Christ since the incarnation was clearly revealed in the Old Testament? The fact that the Messiah would be manifested in the flesh was no secret to those who understood and believed their Old Testament (Isa. 7:14; 9:6; Jer. 23:5-6; Mic. 5:2; Mt. 2:4-5; etc.). But the fact that in this present age Christ is now manifesting Himself in a body is the truth that thrilled the heart of the Apostle Paul (Col. 1:27; Eph. 1:22-23). The incarnation of Christ as it applies to the church is a great mystery indeed!

There are at least six reasons for suggesting that the statements concerning Christ in 1 Timothy 3:16 apply directly to the church: **1)** The context of verse 15 seems to demand application to the church. Paul's theme there is the greatness of the local assembly. **2)** Since a N.T. mystery cannot consist of truths that were revealed in the Old Testament, the "mystery of godliness" must refer to more than the mere objective facts of the incarnation of Christ as set forth in verse 16. Certainly the incarnation of Christ was not a hidden truth in Old Testament times. (Note: If Paul were merely setting forth the objective facts of the Incarnation, then he apparently made a serious omission. In declaring the chief purpose of the incarnation, Dr. Alva McClain made this statement: "God became incarnate in Christ in order that He might die for sinners". And yet, in verse 16 nothing is said concerning the death of Christ! Would we omit such a tenet from our doctrinal statements?) **3)** The term "mystery" as used by Paul almost always involves some aspect of church truth (see Eph. 3:4-6; 5:32; Col. 1:24-27; 1 Cor. 15:51; etc.) and 1 Timothy 3:16 should be no exception, especially in view of the context of verse 15, which describes the grandeur of the local church. **4)** The term "godliness" (v.16) relates to the immediate context of verse 15. The term "godliness" always involves the idea of piety, reverence and respect which results in God-fearing conduct. Thus the "mystery of godliness" in 1 Timothy 3:16 could accurately be paraphrased as "the mystery of God-fearing conduct". The obvious

reference is to the previous verse where Paul's purpose in writing is stated: "that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself (conduct thyself) in the house of God". The answer to the question how men should conduct themselves in the church (verse 15) is answered by the term "godliness" (verse 16). In other words, the great mystery of godliness must somehow relate to proper conduct and behavior in the local assembly. **5)** The Apostle Paul, in setting forth great Christological truths, almost always applies them to believers (cf. Phil. 2:5-11). The doctrine of the resurrection and exaltation of Christ in Ephesians 1:18-23 is applied directly to the church. In Colossians 1:15-18 Paul declares that Christ is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Again direct application is made to the church (Col. 1:18). It would therefore be most unlike Paul to set forth such great statements concerning the incarnation of Christ in 1 Timothy 3:16 without making direct application to believers, even to the church. **6)** The great mystery of which Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:32 concerned not Christ alone, but "Christ and the church." Could not the great mystery of 1 Timothy 3:16 also have reference to Christ and the church?

(Note: We can assume that Timothy was quite familiar With the contents of the Ephesian letter – cf. 1 Tim. 1:3)

IV. The Contextual Solution As Dispensationally Applied

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

1. Christ was manifested in the flesh! The living God became flesh (Jn. 1:14; and made Himself known in and through a body (Jn. 1:18). Likewise, God the Son is today manifesting Himself in and through His body which is on the earth (Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:24-27). As the visible and local body of Christ stays healthy (Eph. 4:12-16), conducts itself in a Godly way and functions according to the Biblical pattern (1 Tim. 3:1-15), then the following will be true:

- 1) God's life will be manifested in and by the church (Col. 1:27).
- 2) God's wisdom will be manifested in and by the church (Eph. 3:10).
- 3) God's power will be manifested in and by the church (Eph. 3:20).
- 4) God's grace will be manifested in and by the church (Eph. 2:7).
- 5) God's truth will be manifested in and by the church (1 Tim. 3:15).
- 6) God's love will be manifested in and by the church (Jn. 17:23).
- 7) God's glory will be manifested in and by the church (Eph. 3:21).

2. Christ was justified (declared righteous, vindicated) in the Spirit! Throughout His earthly ministry Christ was vindicated by the Spirit of God. His miracles and signs were performed by the power of the Spirit (Mt. 12:28), giving unmistakable evidence that Christ was all He claimed to be. The ultimate vindication of Christ took place when He was raised from the dead (Rom. 1:4). Likewise, God the Holy Spirit is today vindicating the Resurrected Christ in and through the assembly, convicting the world that He indeed is the Righteous One (John 16:7-11; note especially verse 7 which associates this convicting and vindicating ministry with the Spirit's coming on the day of Pentecost).
3. Christ was seen of angels! Throughout His earthly life and ministry the God-man was the very center of angelic interest, attention and curiosity! They marveled at their Holy Lord (Isa. 6:1-4; cf. Jn. 12:41) as He humbled Himself (Phil. 2:5-8) and was made even lower than the angels so that He might taste death for every man (Heb. 2:9)! And yet today it is the church that has become the theater of the universe and the center of angelic observation! Unto the principalities and powers God is now making known His manifold wisdom and grace by the church (Eph. 3:10; 2:7; cf. 1 Cor. 4:9; 11:10). The living God is using the church to teach angels concerning Himself!
4. Christ was preached among the nations and the responsibility and privilege of making known the unsearchable riches of Christ has been committed to the church! Although the gospel was known in previous ages (Rom. 1:1-4; Gal. 3:8), there is a “mystery” aspect of the gospel which was unknown in other ages but now forms the very core of the gospel preaching of this age. The following passages delineate the “mystery of the gospel”: Rom. 16:25-26; Eph. 3:5-8; 6:19; Col. 1:27; 4:3. Our distinctive message today is that Jew and Gentile alike may believe the gospel and be united together into one body (1 Cor. 12:13) for the purpose of manifesting and bearing witness to Christ who is the sovereign Head of this unique organism!
5. Christ was believed on in the world and it is the glorious privilege of the church “to bear witness to Christ as the sole object of faith! The Lord Jesus prayed for the unity of the church for the purpose “that the world may believe that Thou sent Me” (Jn. 17:21). As the church functions according to godliness (1 Tim. 3:15) and edification (Eph. 4:12-16) then unbelievers will be convicted as they see the living God being manifested in the assembly (see 1 Cor. 14:24-25; cf. Col. 1:27 and John's purpose as a witness in John 1:7)!

6. Christ was received up in glory when He was taken up into heaven at the ascension. This marked the termination of the Lord's earthly ministry and witness. Likewise the earthly ministry and witness of the church also has a terminal point: "When Christ who is our life shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory" (Col. 3:4; see also the "mystery" discussed in 1 Cor. 15:51-52 and compare Rev. 12:5 with 1 Thess. 4:17 where the same word for the ascension of Christ is used for the rapture of the church). Actually according to Acts 1:1-2 the ascension of Christ did not mark the termination of our Lord's ministry and witness, but it marked only the beginning! It is the church that continues the witness (Acts 1:8) and teaching (Mt. 28:20) of the resurrected Lord who is the Head of the body, God blessed forever!

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

1. God the Son manifesting Himself in and through His body which is on the earth (Col. 1:24-27; Eph. 1:22-23).
2. God the Holy Spirit vindicating the Resurrected Christ in and through the assembly (Jn. 16:7-11).
3. God the Father making known His manifold wisdom and grace unto the principalities and powers by means of the assembly (Eph. 3:10; 2:7).
4. The assembly making known the mystery of the gospel among all nations (Eph. 3:5-8; Rom. 16:25-26).
5. The assembly functioning as a godly witness before the world (Jn. 17:21; 1 Cor. 14:24-25).
6. The assembly being received up in glory at the rapture of the church (Col. 3:4; 1 Cor. 15:51-52).

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

This interpretation solves the chronological problem (Why did Paul mention the “preaching” and “believing” before the ascension of Christ?). It also offers a reasonable solution as to why Paul used the ambiguous relative pronoun, **ὅς**. Certainly the logical antecedent of this pronoun is “Christ” and the nearest antecedent in the context would be “God” (v. 15, referring of course to God the Son, because it's His church!), but the very fact that Paul did not make the subject explicit permits the possibility of a wider application to Christ and the church. In other words, all 6 phrases have “Christ” (or “God”) as the subject, but the significance of these phrases has direct bearing and application to the local church! Thus what we have is a series of six parallelisms in which the present tenure of the local church is analogous to that of our Lord Jesus in the days of His flesh!

The death of Christ is not mentioned in 1 Timothy 3:16. Certainly the death of Christ was of utmost significance to the church because God purchased the church with His own blood (Acts 20:28). But the emphasis in 1 Timothy 3:16 is upon the life and witness of the Lord Jesus, and by application, the life and witness of the church, and thus the omission of any statement concerning the death of Christ is easily explained.

* * *

Do we see the church as God sees it? Does church truth thrill your heart as it did the Apostle Paul? Do you pray fervently that the Lord might open the eyes of your understanding so that you might see how precious the church is to Christ (Eph. 1:18)? Have you discovered what is the riches of the glory of this mystery (Col. 1:27)? Are you a healthy cell and a healthy member of a local body of believers (Eph. 4:12-16)? Is the indwelling Christ being manifested in your assembly (1 Cor. 14:25)? Oh may we see the assembly as God sees it! May we agree and confess with Paul: “Great is the mystery of godliness!”.

APPENDIX V

THE GREAT COMMISSION ACCORDING TO JOHN (John 20:21)

In 1 Timothy 3:16 the incarnate life and ministry of the Lord Jesus serves as a pattern for the present ministry and witness of the church (cf. Acts 1:1-2). Likewise, it is the earthly life and witness of Christ that forms the very basis for the Great Commission of the church according to John (Jn. 20:21; 17:18). Therefore, a proper understanding of the Great Commission according to John should facilitate a correct understanding of the mystery of godliness.¹⁶⁵

The Apostle John recorded the words of the Lord Jesus as He made known to His disciples this Great Commission:

Just as the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you (Jn. 20:21).

Just as You sent Me into the world, even so I sent them into the world (Jn. 17:18).

The Father sent the Son, and in the same way, the Son sent His disciples (and by extension the church). If we are to understand what it means to be sent by Christ we must understand what it means for Christ to have been sent by the Father. How was Christ sent? What was His relationship to His Sender? The Gospel of John clearly delineates the meaning of this relationship:¹⁶⁶

1. Christ was sent not to do His own will, but the will of His Sender (4:34; 5:30; 6:38). Even so, we ought to be able to say, “My food is to do the will of Christ my Sender – to do only what Christ wants and desires. Not My will, but Christ's will be done!”

¹⁶⁵ Some of the truths involved in the Great Commission according to John were employed in the argumentation of this thesis to show how the objective facts of 1 Timothy 3:16 apply to the church. See pages 39-40; 52-53.

¹⁶⁶ This material was first prepared by the writer as part of a series of chaplaincy notes for the students of Grace Theological Seminary, January, 1975.

2. Christ was sent not to please Himself, but to please His Sender (8:29). Even so, may we be able to say, “For I do always those things that please Christ”. May our only fear be that of not pleasing Christ (2 Cor. 5:9-11; Eph. 5:10; 1 Cor. 7:32; Phil. 3:7-8).
3. Christ was not sent to seek His own glory, but to seek the glory of His Sender (7:18). Even so, we should not want recognition, praise or attention to be heaped upon ourselves. We want our lives to draw attention, not to the ugliness of self, but to the beauty of our Lord Jesus who has sent us. We are His witnesses and may our lives point only to Him (Acts 1:8; Isa. 43:10; Jn. 3:30).
4. Christ was sent into the world to represent His invisible Sender (5:37; cf. 1:18). Men could not see the Father, but they could see Christ. Even so, we have been sent into the world to represent the invisible Christ (2 Cor. 5:20). The world cannot see the Head but they can see the Body, which is His church. No man has seen Christ at any time (at least not since He has gone back to heaven), but the church is here to declare Him (1 Tim. 3:15-16).
5. Christ was sent into the world so that men, in seeing Him, would see His Sender (12:44-45). Even so, as men and women look at our lives they should see our Sender, even our Lord Jesus (Gal. 2:20; 4:19; 5:22-23; 1 Cor. 13:4-7).
6. Christ was sent into the world by His living Father and He lived by (through) His Sender (6:57). Even so, the living Christ has sent us and we live by Him. Christ is our life (Col. 3:3-4; Phil. 1:21)!
7. Christ was sent into the world, not with His own words and doctrine, but with the words and doctrine of His Sender (3:34; 7:16; 12:49-50). Even so, Christ has sent us into the world, not with our own message, but with the Gospel of Christ, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever Christ has commanded (Mt. 28:20).
8. Christ could do nothing apart from His Sender (5:30). Even so, we are totally dependent upon our Sender and apart from Him we can do nothing (Jn. 15:5).
9. Christ was not alone, His Sender was with Him (8:16,29). Even so, we have the promise of our Sender (Mt. 28:20; Heb. 13:5)!

10. Christ was busy in doing the work of His Sender (4:34; 9:4) and when His work was done, He went home to be with His Sender (7:33; 16:5). Even so, we are to be always abounding in the work of our Lord Jesus, and when our work is finished we will go home to be with our Sender (Phil. 1:23; 2 Tim. 4:6-8)!

* * * *

And not only did Christ send us into the world, but He also sent another Person to make all of this possible: the Holy Spirit within us, our Comforter (Jn. 16:7)!

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