

Message Four

The Function of the Church

(2)

The Corporate Manifestation of God in the Flesh

Scripture Reading: 1 Tim. 3:15-16; John 1:1, 14; Col. 2:9; 1 Cor. 6:17; 7:25, 40

I. God's manifestation was first in Christ as an individual expression in the flesh—1 Tim. 3:16; Col. 2:9; John 1:1, 14:

- A. The New Testament does not say that only the Son of God was incarnated; it reveals that God was manifested in the flesh—1 Tim. 3:15-16:
 - 1. God was manifested in the flesh not only as the Son but as the entire God—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.
 - 2. The entire God and not only God the Son was incarnated; hence, Christ in His incarnation was the entire God manifested in the flesh:
 - a. In His ministry in the stage of incarnation, Christ brought the infinite God into the finite man; in Christ, the infinite God and the finite man became one—John 8:58; 7:6; 12:24.
 - b. Through incarnation the divine incorporation—God in His Divine Trinity coinhering mutually and working together as one—was brought into humanity; Christ is therefore the incorporation of the Triune God with the tripartite man—14:10-11.
- B. The Word, who is God, became flesh—1:1, 14:
 - 1. *Became flesh* (v. 14) means in the likeness, in the fashion, of man—Rom. 8:3; Phil. 2:7-8.
 - 2. In the form of a man Christ appeared to people, yet He was God manifested in a man—2 Cor. 5:16.
 - 3. The God who the Word is, is not a partial God but the entire God—God the Son, God the Father, and God the Spirit.
 - 4. The Word is God's definition, explanation, and expression; hence, the Word who became flesh—God manifested in the flesh—is God's definition, explanation, and expression in the flesh—John 1:18.
- C. In Christ dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily—Col. 2:9:
 - 1. *All the fullness of the Godhead* refers to the entire Godhead, to the complete God.
 - 2. Since the Godhead comprises the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, the fullness of the Godhead must be the fullness of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.
 - 3. That all the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Christ bodily means that the Triune God is embodied in Him—John 14:10.
 - 4. As the embodiment of the fullness of the Godhead, Christ is not only the Son of God but also the entire God.

II. First Timothy 3:15-16 indicates that not only Christ Himself as the Head is the manifestation of God in the flesh but also that the church as the Body of Christ and the house of God is the manifestation of God in the flesh—the mystery of godliness:

- A. *Godliness* in verse 16 refers not only to piety but also to the living of God in the church, that is, God as life lived out in the church to be expressed:

1. Both Christ and the church are the mystery of godliness, expressing God in the flesh.
 2. The church life is the expression of God; therefore, the mystery of godliness is the living of a proper church—1 Cor. 16; 14:24-25.
- B. God is manifested in the church—the house of God and the Body of Christ—as the enlarged corporate expression in the flesh—Eph. 2:19; 1:22-23:
1. The manifestation of God in the flesh began with Christ when He was on earth—John 14:9.
 2. The manifestation of God in the flesh continues with the church, which is the increase, enlargement, and multiplication of the manifestation of God in the flesh—1 Tim. 3:15-16.
- C. When a church is taken care of according to what is written in 1 Timothy 1—3, the church will function as the house of the living God for His move on earth and as the pillar and base of the truth, bearing the reality of Christ and His Body— 3:15.
- D. Such a church becomes the continuation of Christ’s manifestation of God in the flesh—Christ lived out of the church as the manifestation of God—Eph. 5:32.
- E. This is God manifested in the flesh in a wider way according to the New Testament principle of incarnation—1 Cor. 7:40; Gal. 2:20:
1. The principle of incarnation is that God enters into man and mingles Himself with man to make man one with Himself; thus, God is in man, and man is in God—John 15:4-5.
 2. The principle of incarnation means that divinity is brought into humanity and works with humanity—1 Cor. 6:17; 7:40; 1 Tim. 4:1.
 3. The New Testament principle of incarnation is that, in Christ and through Christ, the divine life and nature are mingled with the human life and nature so that we and God may have one life and one living—1 Cor. 6:17; Gal. 2:20. 4. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 7 in the principle of incarnation:
 - a. The principle in verse 10 is the same as that in Galatians 2:20: the principle of incarnation—two persons living as one person.
 - b. In verses 25 and 40 of 1 Corinthians 7 we see the spirituality of a person who is so one with the Lord and permeated with Him that even his opinion expresses the Lord’s mind.
 - c. If we are saturated with the Spirit, what we express will be our thought, but it will also be something of the Lord because we are one with Him— 6:17.
- F. The great mystery of godliness is that God has become man so that man may become God in life and nature but not in the Godhead to produce a corporate God- man for the manifestation of God in the flesh—Rom. 8:3; 1:3-4; Eph. 4:24.
- G. Ultimately, God will be manifested in the New Jerusalem as the consummated corporate expression of the processed and consummated Triune God in the new heaven and new earth—Rev. 21:1-2, 10-11.

Excerpts from the Ministry:

THE PILLAR AND BASE OF THE TRUTH

Speaking metaphorically, Paul goes on to say [in 1 Timothy 3:15] that the church is “the pillar and base of the truth.” The pillar supports the building, and the base holds the pillar. The church is such a supporting pillar and holding base of the truth.

The truth here refers to the real things revealed in the New Testament concerning Christ and the church according to God’s New Testament economy. The church is the supporting pillar and holding base of all these realities. A local church should be such a building that holds, bears, and testifies the truth, the reality, of Christ and the church.

The church as the house of the living God is both the pillar that bears the truth and the base that upholds the pillar. As we have pointed out, the truth is the reality and the contents of God’s New Testament economy. This economy is composed of two mysteries: Christ as the mystery of God (Col. 2:2) and the church as the mystery of Christ (Eph. 3:4). Christ and the church, the Head and the Body, are the contents of the reality of God’s New Testament economy.

THE MYSTERY OF GODLINESS

First Timothy 3:16 begins with, “And confessedly, great is the mystery of godliness.” The conjunction *and* in verse 16 indicates that Paul has not finished speaking about the church in verse 15. Oh, the church is a great matter! It is the house of the living God and the pillar and base of the truth. Paul’s use of the conjunction at the beginning of verse 16 indicates that the church is something even more than the house of the living God and the pillar and base of the truth. The church is also the mystery of godliness. The church is the house, the pillar and the base, and the mystery of godliness.

According to the context, *godliness* in verse 16 refers not only to piety but also to the living of God in the church, that is, God as life lived out in the church. This is the great mystery confessed universally by believers in Christ.

The church as the house of the living God and as the pillar and base of the truth is not so mysterious. But the church as the manifestation of God in the flesh certainly is a mystery. A mystery always goes beyond our understanding. It refers to something that cannot be explained. If we are able to explain a certain matter, it is not a mystery.

The church is not only the house of the living God and the pillar and base of the truth but also the mystery of godliness. *Godliness* refers to God expressed. What are we doing in the church life? We are expressing God. Human beings may not realize this adequately, but the angels recognize it and appreciate it. On the one hand, the good angels rejoice when they behold the expression of God in the church. On the other hand, the evil angels and the demons tremble in fear. They realize that eventually those in the church life will condemn them to the lake of fire.

When the Lord Jesus was born, a host of angels praised God (Luke 2:10-14). If the angels rejoiced at the birth of the Lord Jesus in Bethlehem, the city of David, will they not also rejoice to see God manifested in the church, which is Christ’s increase and enlargement? Furthermore, when the Lord Jesus, living out God and manifesting Him on earth, confronted the demons, the demons cried out. In at least one case they begged the Lord Jesus not to send them into the abyss (8:31). If the demons trembled at the presence of the Lord Jesus, will they not also tremble at the manifestation of the living God in the church? No doubt when the church is living out God and manifesting Him, the demons and the evil angels will be terrified. Every local church must be a place where Christ is born anew in the saints. Furthermore, every local church must live out God in such a way that the devil’s time is shortened. On the one hand, when the churches come up to God’s standard, the angels will sing and rejoice; on the other hand, the demons and the evil angels will tremble.

According to unconfirmed historical accounts, the six lines of poetry in 1 Timothy 3:16 made up a song that the saints in the early church loved to sing. *He* refers to Christ, who was God manifested in the flesh as the mystery of godliness. The transition from *the mystery of godliness* to *He* implies that Christ as the manifestation of God in the flesh is the mystery of godliness (Col. 1:27; Gal. 2:20). This mystery of godliness is the living of a proper church, and such a living is also the manifestation of God in the flesh.

The first part of 1 Timothy 3:16 speaks of a matter—the mystery of godliness. Hence, we would expect Paul to use the relative pronoun *which* to refer to *the mystery of godliness* as a matter. However, the fact that he says “He who” implies that the mystery of godliness is a person and not merely a matter. As we will see, this person is Christ as the Head with His Body.

Through incarnation and human living (John 1:1, 14), God was manifested in the flesh. *In the flesh* means “in the likeness, in the fashion, of man” (Rom. 8:3; Phil. 2:7-8). Christ appeared to people in the form of man (2 Cor. 5:16), yet He was God manifested in man.

Christ was also “justified in the Spirit.” The Greek word for *justified* also means “vindicated.” The incarnated Christ in His human living was not only vindicated as the Son of God by the Spirit (Matt. 3:16-17; Rom. 1:3-4) but also justified, proved, and approved as right and righteous by the Spirit (Matt. 3:15-16; 4:1). He was manifested in the flesh but was vindicated and justified in the Spirit. He appeared in the flesh, but He lived in the Spirit (Luke 4:1, 14; Matt. 12:28) and offered Himself to God through the Spirit (Heb. 9:14). His transfiguration (Matt. 17:2) and His resurrection are both justifications in the Spirit. Furthermore, in resurrection He even became the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45; 2 Cor. 3:17) to dwell and live in us (Rom. 8:9-10) for the manifestation of God in the flesh as the mystery of godliness. Hence, now we know Him and His members no longer according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (2 Cor. 5:16). Since the manifestation of God in the flesh is justified in the Spirit, and the Spirit is one with our spirit (Rom. 8:16), we must live and behave in our spirit that this justification may be accomplished.

Paul also says “seen by angels.” Angels saw the incarnation, human living, and ascension of Christ (Luke 2:9-14; Matt. 4:11; Acts 1:10-11; Rev. 5:6, 11-12).

Christ was also preached among the nations. Christ as God’s manifestation in the flesh has been preached as the gospel among the nations, including the nation of Israel, from the day of Pentecost (Rom. 16:26; Eph. 3:8).

Furthermore, Christ has been “believed on in the world.” Christ as the embodiment of God in the flesh has been believed on, received as Savior and life, by people in the world (Acts 13:48).

Paul concludes 1 Timothy 3:16 with the phrase *taken up in glory*. This refers to Christ’s ascension into glory (Mark 16:19; Acts 1:9-11; 2:33; Phil. 2:9). According to the sequence of historical events, Christ’s ascension preceded His being preached among the nations. However, it is listed here as the last step in Christ’s being the manifestation of God in the flesh. This must indicate that the church too is taken up in glory. Hence, it implies that not only Christ Himself as the Head but also the church as the Body are the manifestation of God in the flesh. When a church is well taken care of according to the instructions given in the first two chapters of 1 Timothy, with the oversight of the episcopate and the service of the deacons fully established, as revealed in chapter 3, the church will function as the house and household of the living God for His move on the earth, and as the supporting pillar and holding base of the truth, bearing the divine reality of Christ and His Body as a testimony to the world. Then the church becomes the continuation of Christ as the manifestation of God in the flesh. This is the great mystery of godliness—Christ lived out of the church as the manifestation of God in the flesh!

I wish to emphasize the fact that although Christ was taken up in glory (Acts 1) before the preaching of Him began in Acts 2, Paul mentions this last, not only after the preaching but even after being believed on in the world. This indicates that “taken up in glory” may include not only the ascension of Christ but also the rapture of the church. The Head, Christ, was taken up before the preaching of Him began; however, the Body, the church, will be taken up only after Christ has been preached and believed on in the world. Therefore, in 1 Timothy 3:16 there is a definite indication that this verse refers not only to the Head as the

manifestation of God in the flesh but also to the Body as the continuation of this manifestation. This is indeed logical, for how can a person's head function in isolation from his body? The Head, Christ, has been taken up in glory, and the Body, the church, will also be taken up in glory. Both the Head and the Body are the mystery of godliness. This is the manifestation of God in the flesh. (*Life-study of 1 Timothy*, second edition, pp. 56-60)