

The High & Holy Importance of Proper Church Function

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Well, grab your Bibles and turn off your mechanical electronic devices and turn to 1 Timothy, 1 Timothy 3. You don't need to get those alerts while the pastor is preaching. Just turn them off. Just turn it off. It's okay. Or I'll take it up like in school again. I've never done that. Boy, I'm going to do that one day and just shock everybody. Um, I'd be remiss if I did not say thank you for the many ways many of you have shown kindness to me this last month. When October comes around, I usually start getting cards and letters and some them even have gifts in them saying thank you for being our pastor. I think why is this happening and I remember it's pastor appreciation month, like we need one of those. But, um, you, you, you appreciate your pastor and you show it and that's biblical, so I appreciate you being biblical but you've been gracious and I thank you so much for your kindness toward me in doing that. If you didn't do anything, I didn't expect you to so you're good too, all right?

1 Timothy 3. We're talking about beautifying the bride. Well, we're talking about it because God has already talked about it. Through the sovereign superintending of God, God used this early apostle, the Apostle Paul, to write most of our New Testament and one of those books is 1 Timothy and in that book to Timothy he gives Timothy the instructions on how to fashion and function in the local church because it's very, let me give a third one, very important that the church do things right; that we do things in the church God's way, by God's power, for God's glory. Can I remind you this morning this ain't your church. It is not my church. It is Christ's church and we are the under-shepherds, we are the stewards of another's property, and particularly that falls on me and then on to the elders who work alongside me, but it's all of our responsibility to reaffirm and realign ourselves with God's way to fashion and to function in the local church and that's what Paul's talking to Timothy about.

Now let's look, look at the text as we come to 1 Timothy 3:14 through 16, and can I say to you, ah, I, I, I used this text to a significant degree in last year's True Church Conference so I've got a lot of work in this already and I think I missed it. I don't mean I missed it in that I preached heresy because what I taught was true to the balance of biblical truth, but I think it just came to being in this last week meditating on the text how it ought to be unfolded before us. 1 Timothy 3:14, Paul writes to Timothy and says,

14 I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; 15 but in case I am delayed, I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth. 16 By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness: He who was revealed in the flesh, Was vindicated in the Spirit, Seen by angels, Proclaimed among the nations, Believed on in the world, Taken up in glory.

What comes to your mind when you think of these two words: true religion? True religion, other than a blue jean company. There is actually a, a clothing, apparel company that calls themselves True Religion. Matter of fact, I, I, I was in Las Vegas keeping grandchildren during a trade show this last summer and, um, there was a building outside of the hotel where we were staying that was advertising, um, marijuana or I don't, they have different words. I'm not up on all the stuff, but, ah, advertising marijuana and they call themselves some sort of church, the church of something. So we see in today's age they're, they're just brazenly out there saying, "We're going to take our lust, our indulgences, our pleasures, our viewpoints and call it our own church, our own religion." And I think that's the idea going back to the clothing company that calls themselves True Religion, it's like, "We're the authentic thing. You wear our clothing and you make a statement about your authentic self," because in this post-Christian culture that we have called America today, we have now become secularized. Your worship, your religion is you. You worship yourself now and you're all about your own self-actualization and your own self-fulfillment, your own, ah, self-message, if you will, to the world. It's all about me now.

But however it's used, it, it has the idea this is the authentic thing, true religion. This is the real thing. Through the ages if you asked somebody what's true religion, they would say, "Well, our, our, our system that we've adopted in our religious practice, it's, it's the true thing, it's the authentic thing. You have to follow our laws if you want to know God and be pleasing to God and be blessed by God. You have to follow our ceremonies. You have to be under the teaching of our priest or our holy man or men. You have to go to our, ah, ah, shrine or to our temple, like the Islamists go to Mecca." And on and ought we could go. What they mean is, "If you'll do these things, if you'll follow these things, then you'll be pleasing to God, you'll be acceptable to God and you'll be blessed by God. This is true religion."

Well, what does God say? Here's a powerful verse to consider, Proverbs 14:12, "There is a way which seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death." And that's so true. I, I, I have no doubt, now listen to what I'm going to tell you, I have no doubt that I could build a church with thousands and thousands and thousands of people in it, much larger than us if I would compromise, actually go apostate and appeal to men's natural inclinations of what religion ought to be. If I gave you what your fallen thinking and fallen desires naturally wanted in religion, I could pack the building out and a lot of people do that today with a Christian façade on it, because men naturally want some rules or some laws, give me a hoop jump or two, give me a few ceremonies, give me something I can perform in my ability to make me feel like I've pleased God, I'm close to

God, and now I'll be blessed by God. Give me a formula. Give me a system. Because why? Put that verse back up, Tommy. Because that is what seems right to a man but it ends in eternal loss, in eternal death.

So when we're talking about what's true religion, what really does get you to God? What really does please God? What really does put you in the sphere or in the place of receiving the blessings of God? What is true religion? Well, let's unpack this text and we'll talk about that, all right?

Now though I'm going to revisit the concept of true religion in a few moments, we've got to get ourselves in the flow of the context and this is what's hard to do sometimes because when you come to a Scripture that's got such rich rich truth in it, especially about the person of Christ, it's easy and I think perhaps forgivable to just get all caught up in Christ and miss the flow of what he's saying. He's talking to the church, a local church, and he's talking about here is how you ought to conduct yourselves in the church. So what he's talking about is the high and holy importance of proper local church conduct or doing local church properly, and that's our title, "The High & Holy Importance of Proper Church Function." That's what he's saying. That's what all of this is about. If you miss that, you miss what Paul is trying to get across. So as you might want to develop some of the other glorious themes in this text, don't forget to reconnect them to the purpose for, that Paul gave them to start with, to help the church grasp why it's so high and holy that she do her job right.

Now in verse 15 he writes, "but in case, Timothy, I am delayed, I'm writing this letter to you so that one will know how he ought to conduct himself in the household of God." In other words, there are things we can know, things that are of high importance, things God has told us in his word, in this case in the immediate context, things in this letter from Paul to Timothy, and then things in the balance of the Scriptures that teach us so that we can know how we as a local church are to conduct ourselves. We remind ourselves that the entirety of the Bible in an unveiled fashion, the entirety of the New Testament is centered in – now listen to me – Jesus Christ and his church. Everything – listen to what I'm telling you – everything that ever has happened in the universe and in time and space history, eternity past through time to eternity future, everything is to the end of honoring Jesus Christ and to the good of his church. You are the apple of God's eye. I don't care what they're doing in Russia or Syria or China or Washington, DC, you listen to me, everything is being superintended by the divine hand of Almighty God to the end of honoring Christ and doing good for his church. You say, "I don't know if that's all true." Well, you just wait around until it all shuts down and see what happens. You just wait around until it all gets done and you'll see Christ exalted and his church glorified with him.

So Paul says, "I'm writing, Timothy, that you might know while you're here in this local church, while we are here in our local churches, how we ought to conduct ourselves." Let's remind ourselves that when the New Testament opens, we see the baby Jesus who's come to save his church. Matthew 1:20-21, the angel is appearing to Joseph who don't know what to do about his wife being pregnant with this child, of course, she was

pregnant of the Holy Spirit so God says, "But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus,'" and here's what it's all about, Joseph, "He will save," note the particular notion here, "His people from their sins." Can I remind you, dear friend, he didn't fail. He did, he is, he will save his people from their sins. Jesus never fails.

So when the New Testament opens, Christ comes, there's just very few things that enthrall me with joy like the Incarnation. Obviously the crucifixion, burial and resurrection is the centerpiece of the redemptive work of Christ but it's just a matter of time before that's gonna happen once he's come. I mean, when Jesus appears, brother, it's on. When Jesus appears, it's just a few moments until he's going to get it all done. So it just, that when Jesus comes, the whole universe is pregnant with anticipation of all he's about to get done and all that he's about to get done is to the end of saving his church.

Then when the New Testament closes, he has banished all sin and ungodliness, purified and cleaned up the old physical realm, remade it as a new heaven and a new earth, and there he is in that eternal state in the new heaven and the new earth with his glorified bride, the church. So now we're in the age in between those two things and now he is building his church. Somehow, someway in the perfect or the perfection of divine providence, he's commissioned you and he's commissioned me to join him in this building of his church, and as Paul writes to Timothy, he tells Timothy, "This is really important stuff, Timothy. Do it right." Do it right.

So God has ordained in his word how the church is to be fashioned and how the church is to function. Now just in brief running review, through chapter 3 already Paul has told Timothy about false teaching and how he has to tirelessly work to eradicate false doctrine that creeps in the church. Some of you probably get tired of me talking about that. Well, you just gonna have to get over it because continuously every letter Paul wrote in the New Testament, he's dealing with false doctrine that sneaks into the church. That's one of your pastor's primary jobs, to keep praying, to keep preaching the word, to keep discerning. "Here is some error coming in there. Here is some error over there." It's his job to take the rod of the shepherd and drive the wolves away. You better, you'd better not get yourself under a pastor who doesn't have an iron will against false doctrine. So the first thing out of the gate he says, "Timothy, check out this false doctrine stuff. Get rid of it. Get it out of the church."

He, he, he talks to Timothy about the importance of preaching the Gospel. Of course, that remains constant throughout a pastor's ministry. He tells Timothy to keep fighting the good fight, that's preaching the Gospel and correcting the error in the church. He talks about how we ought to be a prayer for church and the things we ought to pray for, and it centers in praying for the lost to be saved. Could I stop right there and say let's keep praying for God to save the lost. Your, your daughters, your sons, your grandchildren, your, your family members, your work associates, young people, your classmates. Pray for God to save the lost.

Then, then he spends significant and pointed amount of instruction on women in the church, on their roles and their conduct, and can I say no matter what you're hearing in the evangelical Baptist Southern Baptist world today, God's plan and God's design for women and their roles has not evolved. This nonsense we keep hearing about we gotta keep reshaping, rethinking, re-changing things in the church because the culture demands it. Can I just say this pointedly and clearly? I don't mean this to be humorous, the culture can go to hell because that's where they're headed. Here's my point: why would we want to receive guidance and help to build Christ's church from a culture that's under God's condemnation? Think about that. We don't need the outside help. Thank you but no thank you. Boy, I try so hard not to get on these tangents.

God then, Paul then writes to Timothy and talks exhaustively about the calling and the qualifications of church pastors, and then last time in three sessions we saw him talking about the qualifications and the role of church deacons, and then he comes to something of a summary fashion here, and then we have verses 14 through 16. And so just looking at this, we remind ourselves today of the dire need for pastors, church leaders, good churchmen to lash themselves to the Scriptures and continually repent of any and all worldly notions that are being brought into the church and return the church to being thoroughly biblical, i.e. Paul's words to Timothy, return to being how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God. Return to being biblical. So Paul says, "I, I want you to know how to function as a local church so I'm giving you these instructions." The high and holy importance of the church functioning properly.

Now that's all introduction. I, in our outline, the high and holy nature of the church. So one of the key things Paul brings out to Timothy here is, "You've got to understand what you're overseeing, Timothy. I want to remind you that this isn't just a social club with a religious connotation attached to it. This isn't just a, a, a society or a Bible study organized to help people get to heaven, though the church certainly is about that. This is a grand divine scheme of Almighty God and you, Timothy, are the overseer. You need to grasp the nature of this great thing, this awesome entity, the very church of God you're overseeing."

So he breaks it down in several phrases in verse 15 and, first of all, he says, "I want you to conduct yourself right in the church because it is literally the household of God. Timothy, you are about the management of God's household." As I said earlier, we are household stewards. In the days of biblical writing, many of the wealthier homes had slaves and the highest slave in the home was considered the household steward. He was responsible for everything under his master, all the other slaves, the material wealth, the physical properties, even the finances, but he must manage them according to his master's will and that's what Timothy is supposed to be and that's what I'm supposed to be, and in a general sense all of us. Pastors are held accountable for the conduct of the household they are responsible for.

Hebrews 3:6 reminds us, "but Christ was faithful Son over His house." I love that phrase. Now I could preach there for an hour. Jesus came and did exactly what was best for his

house, his children, his church. He performed the role that only he could perform and he performed it perfectly. He did his job because it's his house. Then he says, "whose house we are," we are his, we are his house, "if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end." So it's his house and we must conduct ourselves according to his rules.

Then he elaborates a little further, not only the household of God, he says, "Timothy, I want you to get this, it's the church of the living God." Now in this context that was a radical thought because whether you went into the primary flow of Jewish thinking or whether you went into the Greek and Roman mythologies and pagan idolatries of the day, everybody viewed the temple of God as a material place. The house of God was a physical building somewhere and Timothy says, or Paul says to Timothy, "Timothy, remind yourself what we're about is a far far greater and more glorious thing than any of the other religions ever came up with. We're the church, ekklesia, God's called out and called together one of the living God." That's the way he views it. Now even if you go back into the Old Testament, those who were truly spiritually enlightened understood that the physical temple and the physical furnishings in the temple were emblems of God's dwelling or God's fellowship with the people because the only true habitation of God was with his children. Not a building. You can't contain God in a building. His temple, his dwelling place is his people. But with the understanding they had in the Old Testament, they still just saw it shadowy. They sure didn't grasp it fully but now here in the New Testament it's been brought forth in the full daylight. 1 Peter 2:5 reminds us, "you are living stones being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." You folks, it's not physical stones, we are all God's building. We're all living stones and as the Bible says, he being the chief cornerstone. We all fit to him.

So here it's the clear teaching that the habitation of God is his people, specifically the individuals that make up his church, and I mean in this context is because Paul was writing to a local church. We are his called out ones, those he saved, those he has indwelt, and those he has gathered together into local congregations, and he will keep us, the Bible promises, he will grow us. Is God growing you? He will grow us and one day he will glorify us together with himself. We are God's church and we bear the name the church of the living God. We are a living congregation of saints pervaded by the living God. What's his point? "So Timothy, we must conduct ourselves properly. This is not to be played with. This isn't trivial stuff. Make sure the church functions right."

He builds on that, verse 15, he said this is "the pillar and support of the truth." Think about that, the church is the pillar like a, like a like a beam holding up a structure, and support like a foundation stone that everything, the rest of the building stands on. So he says God's truth in the world depends upon God's local churches. Can I elaborate on that? Though they're not necessarily evil, God's truth does not depend upon the denominational organizations whether it be the American Baptist Convention or the Church of Christ denomination or the Southern Baptist Convention or any of the rest of them. They are helpful at times and good at times but God has ordained his truth does not rest upon and does not depend upon man-made organizations to help missions or the Gospel.

That means those things can come or go. In the eighteenth century, flaming godly men like George Whitefield, Daniel Rolling and others, stormed the European continent and the early 13 colonies preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ and seeing people saved by the tens of thousands, literally the hundreds of thousands and they came out of the old church of England, the Anglican Church which was dead, double dog dead, graveyard dead, they were becoming born again and they tried to reform it but it wouldn't reform so it was left behind and they started new movements, and Baptist work and Methodist group, grew out of that phenomenally. So there's always times when God's gonna take men's organizations and let them fade off and start something more sound and more true and more right. So get over your idolatry of men's systems to help churches and missions. Those come and go but the local churches will be here until glorification day. Those are the pillar and support of the truth.

Now so you ask yourself where else would the God of truth reveal and proclaim his truth other than the place of his dwelling? It's the exclusive calling and mission of the church to maintain and exhibit the truth of God before the world. Remember Jesus Christ himself said, "I am the way. I am the truth. No one comes to the Father except by Me." Christ was the truth in the world during his Incarnation – now listen – and his people gathered in local churches possess his truth in the world now after his ascension, but Christ is still in the world sounding forth his truth but in all mind-boggling things, he's ordained us to be the vessels from which his truth would go forth, the local church.

My friend, you need to sober up. You need to listen up. A few of you need to sit up. God's called you, some of you young people, who told you you could coast and play and act like a bunch of juvenile delinquents until you get to 27 or 28 and get married? Who told you that? There is important stuff to do for God. Where do we get these foolish mindsets? I'll tell you where we got them, not from this book but out in that world.

So the whole flow of the context is, "Timothy, do you see how important this is?" Make sure we conduct ourselves right in the household of God. If the local church is scripturally and spiritually right, then she is rightfully supporting God's truth and she is rightfully the pillar that holds high the truth for all the world to see. You may have asked yourself, "Why when the pastor talks about missions," and we talk about missions a lot, "why when the pastor exhorts us about our missions commitment every year, why do we always preach the word local church, preach the word local church, preach the word local church?" Because it's the only thing God gives to support and proclaim his truth in the world. Nothing else. I'm not saying other things are wrong but they are at best secondary to the work of God in his churches. If we do not conduct ourselves properly in this local church, our local churches are not conducting themselves properly, then we fail in our only true mission, to shine forth God's truth. The church, and again I mean the local church, as one old divine said is the mother of all the saints, regenerating them, rearing them, and training them throughout their whole lives.

There's been a movement and I've referred to it a few times, another one of these little errors that comes in packaged in a, a good-looking package, and the error that came

floating through was, "You know, to really save your children, to really be pleasing to God, you and three or four other good families can just get together and have you just a home church and y'all can just be so set apart and pure and godly and righteous." That all sounds good but there's only one problem with that: God has not ordained that to work that way. You watch, I've watched these movements come and go, come and go, come and go, come and go, and that's what they're going to keep doing. All these new little nuances and niches and notions come and go, come, but let me tell you what has been here for 2,000 years sound, glory of God focused, Christ-honoring, Bible-saturated local churches.

[cough] Excuse me. I know that was loud but I had to cough.

Is it not true, brothers and sisters, is it not emphatically proven over and over in the annals of time and in the history of the church that if the church fails – now hear me – if the local church fails, i.e. if the pulpit is weak, if the preaching of the word is not strong, then the truth falls because she's the pillar and support of it, and then when the truth falls in the church, it falls in the culture, and then lies and errors and superstitions and all forms of corruption multiply, metastasize. That's why Paul tells Timothy among other things, "Timothy, keep fighting the good fight. There's just too much on the line." You want to know why America is going to hell? Because the churches have failed. It all starts there. You want to know why the churches have failed? Because the pulpit has failed. You're not gonna clean up America by voting in another politician. We need churches and pastors who are faithful.

So getting back to the flow of Paul's instruction to Timothy, because of these things, this is the household of God, because of these things the church of the living God, because of these things the pillar and support of the truth, because of these we must conduct ourselves properly in God's local church. You see, the church is his palace. He is the great King and when one considers the divine nature of God's church, how foolish we are to try to add the things of the world to the church to improve the church's greatness. What a blasphemy. She must avoid all worldliness and cling only to the truth in all of her faction or structure and in all of her function.

Now as we come to this, we have to remind ourselves of the error of Roman Catholicism and some other groups but the church at Rome has advanced this error more than any other, that is, she takes this statement that the church is the pillar and support of the truth and she goes a couple of steps too far. Roman Catholics take that to mean, "So aha, the head of the church, the Pope." See, that's where they messed up. You've got to go to a level infinitely higher than the Pope to find the head of the church, Jesus Christ. But they'll say the head of the church, the Pope, therefore can give us the truth because the church is the pillar and support of the truth. So he can come out and speak ex cathedra, speak for God, and give us new doctrine, new truth, and as the centuries unfold we keep getting new stuff from the Pope because the church is the pillar and support of the church and he's head of the church. That's a ridiculous unbiblical and extra-biblical excess in interpretation. That is not what Paul is saying to Timothy.

You see, truth is not given by the church, the church is entrusted with the truth. The church is the holder and the dispenser of truth. It is the theater and the conduit through which the truth flows out, and as John MacArthur said, quote, "The church does not invent the truth and it alters it only at the cost of judgment." So as the church walks in the truth, then God and God's truth is seen and it is marveled over. Again, back to the flow of the letter. "Timothy, this is why I'm writing that you might know how to conduct yourselves properly in the local church." There is so much on the line when you consider the nature of the church.

II. And I've only got two points, by the way. They are a little lengthy but I only have two so don't you grow weary in well-doing. You listen hard because I promise you, I'm gonna preach hard. The high and holy mystery unveiled. Actually, I, I would like to change that, the high and holy mystery that's entrusted to you, or you could say the high and holy mystery that's unveiled and entrusted to you, that is, entrusted to the church. Now if you want to add that on, that'd be a little bit clearer, the high and holy mystery unveiled and entrusted to the church. "So another reason why, Timothy, you must conduct yourselves properly in the local church."

Now we come to verse 16 and the apostle writes and here's where a lot of guys just fly off to Mars, they literally leave our universe and go to another one and they shouldn't do that, they should interpret this in the flow of the letter. Verse 16, "By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness." The phrase "common confession" here, first of all, means "everybody gets this, everybody agrees on this." What does everybody and Paul, what does everybody agree on? That is, what do all Christians agree on? Well, we all agree that the way God makes a man truly godly was a mystery to us until he showed us. We, in other words, we would have never figured it out had God not shown. We all agree on that. We could have never come up with the plan of salvation ourselves. It's just, it's, it was a mystery to us. We all agree that. So by common confession great is the mystery of godliness he says here in the text.

Now the word "godliness" here is a word that means "piety," which has the idea of "a devout fulfillment of our duties to God." So here's what he's saying, great and we could say, was the mystery of godliness because now it's unveiled, it's not a mystery anymore. Remember a mystery in the Bible is something that was once concealed but is now revealed. And, and what Paul is telling Timothy great is this mystery that was concealed in God, now it's unveiled and we're all beginning to grasp it and the word he used, great is the mystery of godliness or piety. Great is the mystery of how one becomes truly devout in honoring and following God.

Actually the word "godliness" is a word that's a compound word in the original. It comes from two Greek words. One Greek word is "good" and one is "worship." So godliness could be translated "good work." Great is the mystery of those who are good worshipers. In other words, great is the mystery of how one becomes a true worshiper of God. That's one way to say that. We thought it was taking the sacrifices to the temple. We thought it was through bringing our tithes and offerings. We thought it was through keeping the law of God and lo and behold, when God unveils it, it's got nothing to do with any of that.

Now we become people who are genuine true worshipers of God in a way we never dreamed it could possibly happen.

Now I want to go a step further. True religion. That might be the phrase I would use here. Paul says great is the mystery of those who find, embrace, walk in true religion. Well, are the Church of Christ right, are the Baptists right, are the Episcopalians right, are the Roman Catholics right, are the Hindus right, are the Islamists right? Who's got true religion? Paul says to Timothy great is the mystery of what it really is. Men have come up with thousands of things they called true religion and then God said, "Shut up! I'm about to show you what it is." And it blew our minds when he showed us. It was such a great thing we could have never figured it out.

What's the authentic true religion that causes us to know God, be in unison with God, obey God, and receive the blessings of God? What is true religion? Well, where does he go? That last section of verse 16 he thoroughly, emphatically, gloriously unveils the person of Jesus Christ. Aha. If you're helped by the Holy Spirit, the light is dawning in your understanding. Wait a minute, it's not a way to get to God, it's not a system to get to God, it's not ceremonies that get us to God, it's not moral uprightness or cleanness that get us to God, the way to God is him. It's not a plan, it's a man.

Baptists have spent generations being a little sloppy, at least, with telling people the plan of salvation when really they need to be more thundering the man of salvation because all of us, all the, all the folks in Ephesus who were familiar with Judaism and works idolatries from their pagan culture, were up on the edge of their seats waiting for what Timothy was gonna tell them Paul wrote, and all of a sudden Paul writes to Timothy, "great is the mystery of godliness," and they're all saying, "Oh, here it comes. I hope I dotted the right i's. I hope I crossed the right t's. I hope I jumped through the right hoops. I hope I, I've partaken of the right sacraments and ceremonies. I hope I joined the right church. I hope I was baptized by the right mode, sprinkling or immersion, which one is it? Where's the way?" And, boom, Paul, the next thing Paul writes, he says, "It's Him. It's Him." The way you walk in true religion is be in him. In him.

It's all about Jesus. Let's just read it real quick. "He," the first word after he says is the mystery, it's unveiled, here's how you walk in true religion, here's how you know God and get blessed by God, then he talks about Jesus. "Wait a minute, Paul, we, we, we love Jesus but how am I gonna get there?" He said, "That's where you're messed up. You don't get the mystery. It's not a way, it's a person."

"He who was revealed in the flesh," that's Jesus, "Was vindicated by the Spirit," that's Jesus, "Seen by the angels," that's Jesus, "Proclaimed among the nations," that's Jesus, "Believed on in the world," that's Jesus, "Taken up into glory," that's Jesus. He leaves it right there. That's why so many times I've closed the service and I've said something like this: your flesh would love for me to give you something to do right now, go here, go there, walk down here, walk over there, raise your hand, put your hand down, fill out a card, don't fill out a card, check a box, walk back to the room. Your flesh would love to do something so you can feel like, "I did that." Listen to me, child of God, listen to me,

on your deathbed if I happen to be there and I say, "Do you know you're saved?" Don't tell me, "I did that." Tell me, "I know Him. I know Him." I don't care if you're Roman Catholic and you did all the things they told you to do. I don't care if you're an Episcopalian and did all the things they told you to do. I don't care if you're an Assembly of God or Pentecostal and did all the things they tell you to do. I don't care if you're a good Baptist and did all the things they tell you to do. I want to know do you know him? Paul just leaves Timothy completely shipwrecked on Christ and stranded on omnipotence. Nothing else. There's no hoop jump here. How are we gonna walk in the true religion, the one true religion? Him. He just leaves us with him.

I preached through the book of Isaiah years ago and I'd love to preach through it again and fix the stuff I didn't get right, but I think I did preach truth. But the whole theme of the book of Isaiah is the servant of God. Now what Isaiah says is God called Israel to be her, his servant. Israel, the nation Israel was to be right with God, to obey God, and shine God's light and God's truth to the nations of the world. But Israel radically failed. She fell short of the glory of God and so we have those glorious prophecies from the prophet Isaiah were God says, "Okay, Israel, you failed so I'm gonna raise up My own Israel. I'm gonna raise up My own Servant." Another nation? No, him. Read Isaiah 53. Him, Jesus Christ. He is the true servant of God. "Israel, you never did walk in true religion. You always blew it." Good Southern Baptist, you've never walked in true religion, not of your own accord and strength and ability. God just has to raise up his own true religion, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ.

You see, the great mystery is that it all centers in him. He, he, he that's what he said, it's the pronoun "He," and I think the pronoun "He" at the first part of verse 16 may be the most profound and important pronoun in all the writings of all literature of all the ages including the Bible. I wish I could just stop you on "He" and if I could just open up your skin and part your organs and your flesh and probably some fat molecules in there too, and cut open the marrow of your bone and fill it full of Jesus so you would be overwhelmingly enamored with him. Banish the foolish notions of even sincere evangelists who said, "Jump through this hoop. Walk to here. Do that." And didn't leave you wholly with him. Because if you walked down an aisle to get saved and you're trusting in any way with coming down an aisle, you're lost, and he's found only by faith. In his person and in his work is unveiled to us the mystery that the way to know God, the way to be near God, the way to have a right standing before God and the way to walk pleasing to God is to walk in him, so that as God looks at you, he sees the righteousness of his Son and not you. It's all in him. Colossians 1:27, "to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery and even among the Gentiles," those people furthest away from God, the Gentiles, "which is Christ in you," him, "the hope of glory."

Now there's three parallels here in verse 16. Let's unpack them a little bit and we'll be done. But notice what he says, first of all, "He who was revealed in the flesh." The implication was he was already in existence. He was already something marvelously, wondrously, infinitely greater than anybody else who ever existed, and then he became flesh. He became human. Now see, you just hear that and you go home and eat roast.

How do you do that? God became human. The Jew or Gentile of this day when they heard that they said, "Whoa, timeout. We never heard anything. That's the greatest mystery we've ever contemplated. The Triune, infinitely holy God put on the confinements, the infirmities, the limitations of human form?" That's what he's saying. Golly. Guys in the Ephesians church were scratching their heads saying, "Man, this is different." He was revealed in the flesh. He became one of us.

Then it says he "Was vindicated by the Spirit." The word "vindicated" there has the concept of "approved as righteous." So we all know that the flesh is fallen and the flesh is weak, and since the fall of Adam and Eve, the flesh is sinful, the flesh is impotent, the flesh is unholy, yet mystery of mysteries of mysteries, God came, put on human flesh but was approved as righteous by the pure and Holy Spirit of God. He became fully man but without sin, fully man but totally righteous, fully man but never lost his divine holiness. How can it be? It's a mystery. It's a mystery. We will never figure that out but that's the way God does things. The Spirit in Jesus Christ, the flesh and the Spirit flowed in perfect unison.

Now you and I walk and the Bible tells us that we walk warring, warring against the flesh. The Bible says the flesh sets its desire against the spirit, and the spirit sets its desire against the flesh and you and I live in this warfare as long as we're living down here because we're packaged in this fallen unredeemed humanity that has its own lust and sinful desires but it's not the new true us, it's just the old us, and we fight with it and battle with it until one day we get new bodies and are glorified in heaven. But that's not true of Jesus. He could put on flesh but the Spirit of God said, "I am 100% at home and happy in this flesh body." By the way, it's not in my notes but this is a foreshadow of what you're gonna be. One day you're gonna have a body forever and it's going to be perfectly holy. Now listen to me, sir, you'll never again be selfish. That's a big deal for some of you. Women, you'll never again have an unholy thought. You'll never again struggle with your pride and on and on and on we could go. But Jesus was that way from the beginning. Marvel of a marvels, miracle of miracles, mystery of mysteries. Jesus lived the perfect Spirit-filled or Spirit-controlled life and that God would manifest himself in human form and yet remain holy is a mystery.

Now the second parallel here, "Seen by angels and proclaimed among the nations." Seen here has the concept of one's self-exposing or self-exhibiting. In other words, he appears, he has shown the angels his glory and his majesty, his holiness, who he truly is. So this infinitely holy one – now listen – who was wholly comfortable among holy angels and the point is the Jews of this day primarily viewed angels as so infinitely wondrously glorious and holy, no one could conceive being in the presence of angels. So Paul writes and said, "Now Jesus is perfectly comfortable in the presence of angels. They're holy angels but He's the holy one." And yet this same one, look at verse 16 again, he was proclaimed among the nations. The word "nations" there means the Gentiles. That's, that's the people who are furthest away from God. So this one who is comfortable in the celestial glory of angels, the purity and the holiness of angels, is known now among the most ungodly of the earth. What a mystery because everything in Jewish teaching and everything in most pagan idolatries of the day said you can't mix the two, but God found

a way to put on human flesh, the holy one who is comfortable in the presence of holy angels, and yet make his name known among the lowest and wicked of sinners. Why? Well, that he might save these fallen sinners, that he might lift them up that they too might one day be welcome in the presence of angels. He came from the angels to take you to the angels.

Hebrews 12:22 reflects on this. Hebrews 12:22, "But you have come to Mount Zion," figurative language of coming into the true family of God, "you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels." Why angels? Because the Jews, that's where the glory is, that's where God is, that's where purity and holiness is. He says when you come to Jesus Christ, you're already in association with holy angels and you're just waiting to get to your final domain. You are sojourners right now.

Then he says, "Believed on in the world." And then he says, "Taken up into glory." These are two total opposites, two totally separate things, two things that are normally at enmity with each other, two things that are normally in the greatest contrast. One is heavenly and the other is earthly. One is of celestial brightness and purity, the other is filled with unnumbered sin, evil, disease, demons and even death. While Christ was fit for the holiness of glory, he is made manifest to this world so that many could believe and be saved. But Paul says, "Timothy, do the church right because you've been entrusted with this mystery that nobody else gets. Don't mess up the mystery. Don't mess up the message." Now churchman, are you listening to your pastor this morning? Our proclamation is essential if we're going to proclaim things right, but also your conduct is essential if we're going to proclaim the message right.

So God's purpose and God's plan was a great mystery unto the day it was unveiled, the day he came, lived among us, died on a cross for our sins that we might be saved, he rose again. Last phrase of verse 16, he was taken up in glory. This was a great mystery, the mystery of what does it mean to know true religion? It's to know him. It's to know him. He, Christ Jesus. You see, he is the only true godly one. He is the only true righteous one. He is the only true religionist who ever lived and if you're gonna be true and accepted by God and blessed by God, you have to be in him. You have to be in him. You can't be following a path or a plan, you've got to be in him. If not, when you present yourself on judgment day, God will look at you like he looked at Cain and Cain said, "I performed these things, God. I planted these crops. I did these things. I worked hard at it." And he said, "I reject your offer. That's not true religion." That's not in him. That's in you. "God, I prayed that prayer. I cleaned up my life morally. I was baptized in the church. I tried to do some good things." God says, "That's in you. I only take people in here that are in Him." You hear what Jesus said in Matthew 25 when people will come before the Lord in the judgment day and they'll say, "We cast out demons in Your name. We did good works in Your name." And he'll say, "Depart from Me, I never knew you." That's you did that. You'd been better off not to have done half those things but make sure you're in him, because you get in him and you'll naturally do good things but don't do good things thinking it's going to suffice for you being in him. That's the great mystery. He is the key to true religion. He is true religion.

Closing thought. There's a threefold aspect to this mystery and there's a threefold Incarnation, okay? Threefold aspect to this mystery and a threefold Incarnation. 1. The first part or facet of the mystery is that God became man. Excuse me. 2 Corinthians 5:19, "namely, that God was in Christ," God was, God became man, God was in Christ.

The second aspect of the mystery is God indwelt man. Christ comes into us and lives in us. Colossians 1:27, "to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you." Is Christ in you. Do you know him? Are you in him?

God became man, God indwells man, and thirdly, God indwells his local church. Matthew 18:20, "For where there are two or three gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst." In the collective assembly of the local church. So right now true religion is lived out by those who Christ is in them, and true religion is lived out by the congregation where Christ dwells in them collectively speaking.

So God was Incarnate in his physical body during his pilgrimage on the earth. God is now Incarnate in individual Christians on the earth. And he calls the church's body, God is Incarnate in the collectivity of his local church here on the. Great is this mystery.

So make sure today, two parts, make sure you're in true religion trusting in Jesus and him alone, and make sure you are participating in the church conducting itself properly because all this resides on, rests on, is dependent upon the local church. They are the distributors of the mysteries of God, the proclaimers of the mysteries of God, and performers that we have experienced the miracles and the mysteries of God. Don't be like Galatians 6:12 where you try to make a good showing in the flesh. Don't do that. It's absolutely and only through him.

So I leave you this morning with him. Have you bowed at the foot of a bloody cross and say, "O Christ, I bring all the empty bankrupt nonsense, religious performances and works, I bring all that nonsense and lay it right here in this blood. I'm not trusting anything I performed or did. This day, O Christ, I trust You. Take me, Christ. Cleanse me, Christ. I believe in You." Because on your deathbed, please, please, please don't say, "Pastor, preacher, I did that." No, say, "Pastor, I know Him." He is the way to God. He is true religion.