

The Ultimate Mystery

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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? {1Ti 3:16}

Many Bible scholars view this verse as part of a first century Christian hymn. It is highly informative to read these profound words and imagine the sound of those early believers singing these sentiments in collective worship. We would greatly improve the quality of our song worship if we sought out and sang only hymns that so profoundly address the truths of God. Far too many of our popular hymns deal more in sentiment than in doctrine. They focus on how we "feel" instead of who God is and what He has done. And we need not single out newer hymns; some of the very old ones give voice to similar sentiment. At times I've thought that I'd like to go through every hymnal that our people have used for the last hundred or so years and do a massive "cut and paste" project, using only those selections that focus on God. However, my own mortality would seep through, and years later others would review and critique my work, bemoaning my inclusion of one selection and my omission of another. There is only one "inspired" hymnal, the psalms of the Old Testament.

Some commentaries also offer the possibility that this verse was taken from a confession of faith that was accepted by the first generation of Christians. Confession or hymn, either way it reflects the core theology of Paul and the early believers.

The greater point is that this truth makes up the content of the church's message as the "pillar and ground of the truth." A church that represents any other message has lost its vision of what a true New Testament church is about.

The New Testament uses the word translated "mystery" some twenty seven times. The word contains the idea of a mystery not revealed to simple mortals, but revealed to a certain group or class. The dominant idea seems to be that of a mystery now made known. From Ge 3 we confront the problem of sin in Scripture. In the priestly rituals of the Old Testament Law we see a shadow of God's intent to provide a remedy, but the shape of that remedy does not become clear till we see the full scope of the Incarnation, God becoming human and doing for His elect what they could not do for themselves to alleviate the sin problem and to secure their final salvation. To know the mystery does not mean that we now understand every facet of its content. We will need eternity to begin to grasp the scope of our redemption. However, with the Incarnation we can see far more clearly God's intent than in any of the shadowy images of sacrifice and priestly order in the Old Testament. Someway I fear that we reverse the order of the matter when we look to the shadows of the Old Testament priesthood and sacrifices to see the glory of Calvary. Should the exact reverse not be the case? The glory is in our Lord Jesus and His work, not in the shadowy images of the old order. They provide a faint glimmer of the dazzling glory of the actual work that He alone performed on our behalf.

Controversy regarding the Person and work of our Lord has appeared in almost every generation of Christians since the first, but Paul's point is that there should be none. God's intent is so clear, and so clearly exhibited, in the Incarnation, death, resurrection, and glorious return of our Lord to heaven that controversy is inexcusable. The profound mystery of God becoming man, of the Creator for a moment becoming part of His creation, cannot be fully fathomed by finite minds. All Christians should view the fact as undeniable, the bedrock foundation of all Christian faith. Paul draws the logical sequence for our reflection in this verse. Slowly and prayerfully follow each incredible step in the progressing scene of the unfolding mystery of our redemption.

1. God was manifest in the flesh. Perhaps the most significant controversy that appeared late in the

apostolic era and immediately thereafter was Docetic Gnosticism. It apparently tried to integrate into Christianity. However, its basic tenets were contrary to this fundamental Christian foundation. Gnosticism held that the chief deity despised anything material, so the idea of God becoming man, of entering His creation as if a creature was repugnant to this philosophy. Paul confronts the early beginnings of Gnosticism in Colossians, and John confronts it more directly in 1Jo 1-5. Apart from God becoming man, there can be no true Christianity. There can be no redemption, no appeasement of a holy God for our sins.

2. God was justified in the Spirit. The word translated "justified" may mean to "render righteous," or it may mean to "declare one to be righteous." It was a first century legal term that equates with our legal term "Not guilty," the court's official declaration of innocence. The question arises, when was God Incarnate declared righteous in the Spirit? We might make any number of points, but the most obvious answer appears at our Lord's resurrection. When He came out of the grave alive, the Holy Spirit shouted aloud the fact of His deity, His sinlessness, the first such man who ever lived without sin. With the Holy Spirit's declaration of His "justification" at the resurrection, God at the same time also declared the "justification" of all for whom Jesus died. His death was not merely provisional, making our justification possible. It was factual. When He arose from the grave, God declared His satisfaction with Jesus' work and accepted it as full satisfaction for our sins and our consequent entrance into the family of God.

3. God was seen of angels. Again we might offer several optional views as to when this event occurred, but the clearest once again seems to be at our Lord's resurrection. Can you imagine the gleeful surprise of the angel who announced His resurrection to the women who visited the empty tomb early in the morning? Angels saw the stone roll back. They saw the Lord, their Creator, come out alive. They were thrilled to announce His resurrection to the women who first arrived at the empty tomb.

4. God was preached unto the Gentiles. If we interpret this point as referring to the subsequent preaching of the early church and all subsequent generations of the faithful, this point is out of chronological sequence. I do not suggest another view only to note the unusual sequence in what otherwise appears to be a chronological sequence of events. Perhaps Paul is presenting the logical sequence rather than the chronological order. Unless all the other points in the verse are true, we have no gospel to preach.

5. God was believed on in the world. Despite the incredible idea of God condescending to become man and further condescending to die the ignominious death of crucifixion for mere mortals, this is the gospel's message. When Isaiah saw the prophetic image of the crucified Redeemer in the closing verses of Isa 52 and started to summarize its significance in Isa 53, he began the chapter with a question, almost a statement of incredulity. How could he convince anyone of such an incredible fact? This is God Incarnate dying for His people and coming back to life and glory. "Who hath believed our report?" Then he answers the question with a second question, "And to whom is the arm of the LORD revealed?" The union of the two questions gives us the answer. Only a person who has seen the arm of the LORD will believe such a message.

6. God was received up into glory. We read the narrative of Jesus' ascension in Ac 1. There two angels appeared and assured the onlooking and bewildered disciples that as they had seen their Lord disappear, they would also see Him appear. He left in glory; He shall return in glory.

The content of this hymn or early confession of faith underscores Paul's description elsewhere of the "glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God." {2Co 4:4} May we never forget the glory of this message!

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