

The Mystery of Godliness

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – Paul outlines the central message of the church, the appearance of God in the flesh
2. aim – to cause us to understand how we are to behave in the household of God, in light of Christ
3. passage – 1 Timothy 3:14-16

b. outline

1. The Prerequisite of the Mystery (1 Timothy 3:14-15a)
2. The Repository of the Mystery (1 Timothy 3:15b)
3. The Substance of the Mystery (1 Timothy 3:16)

c. opening

1. the **beginning** of a new year – a great place to start a new year
 - a. it is the beginning of a “new thought” (?) that will continue into chapter 4 (e.g. myths)
 - b. it is an excellent passage for “reviewing” (continuing) what has already come in the book
 - c. it is a tremendous statement of the importance of the church, especially as we consider how to “spur one another on” to hold fast our confession and our commitment to Jesus in a new year
 1. i.e. to **reconsider** the importance of the church as a *central aspect of our existence*, not just something “to be done,” but a place to find an **anchor** in the midst of uncertainty
2. the **key word** in this passage: “*mystery of godliness*” (v. 16) – the “hinge” phrase (before and after)

I. The Prerequisite of the Mystery (1 Timothy 3:14-15a)

Content

a. a personal comment (v. 14)

1. we can draw several conclusions from the phrase “*I hope to come to you soon*”
 - a. that Paul feels free (for now) to visit churches in the original area of his missionary work
 1. **remember:** Paul *probably* wrote this letter from Macedonia (i.e. Philippi; **see 1:3**)
 - b. that Paul was *planning* to return to Ephesus – given how much time and effort he had put into that church, it is likely that he planned to return there to continue his instructions and training
 1. **remember:** Paul had “left” Timothy there to continue *his* work
 2. **note:** this does *not* imply that Paul distrusted Timothy
 - c. that Paul considered the situation at Ephesus *critical*, thus he wanted to finish what he was doing elsewhere and get back there “soon” (note also “*if I delay*” [or “*if I am delayed*”] in v. 15a)
 1. **remember:** Ephesus was the center of a *number* of churches in W Asia Minor (**see Rev. 2-3**), and what happened there would quickly “filter out” to the others
2. we can also see where Paul is headed in the phrase “*but I am writing these things to you so that*”
 - a. Paul is about to give the *reason* for the letter – he is about to be *explicit* in why he is writing
 1. **not that Timothy (or we) would have any doubts as to Paul’s intentions so far**

b. a personal instruction (v. 15a)

1. “*the household of God*” (*oikos*) = house; temple; family; lineage; here, a euphemism for the church
 - a. another way of referring to the church, which was *common* to Paul’s view of it
 1. e.g. **Gal. 6:10**; **Eph. 2:19**; **see also 1 Peter 4:17**; **remember 1 Tim. 3:5**
 2. Paul *clarifies* this later in the sentence (i.e. “*which is the church of the living God*”; v. 15b)
 - b. also, another way of referring to the church, emphasizing a *specific aspect* of it
 1. i.e. that the church is a *family structure* – a group of people with a common *heritage*
 2. i.e. all belonging to the *family of God* (regardless of human ancestry) as adopted together (with Jesus) as sons and daughters (remember the *decree* in **Eph. 1:3-5**)
 - c. also, another way of referring to the church, as the very *dwelling place* of God himself
 1. i.e. the temple being built up in which God himself will reside forever (**read Eph. 2:19-22**)
2. “*how one ought to behave in*” = choose to live; conduct oneself; lit. to move back to a point
 - a. how a *believer* (i.e. a member of the household) should choose (or move back to) a proper connection and standard of conduct in relation to others in the household
 - b. **LOW:** this letter is instruction from Paul about how followers of Christ are to understand:

1. *what* the church *is*, how one is *connected* to it, how the church *operates*, and how one is to behave *in relationship* to the church (*i.e.* to other believers)
- c. **note:** it is that *first thing* that will occupy Paul's thinking throughout the rest of the paragraph
- d. **why? – because if you don't understand what the church *is*, you will flounder to understand how it is supposed to operate and how you are to behave within it!**
 1. this is where the *bulk* of (modern) church issues arise (*i.e.* for us, the church is ...)

II. The Repository of the Mystery (1 Timothy 3:15b)

Content

a. the repository of truth

1. a “*pillar and buttress*” (or ground, support, foundation, bulwark) = the repository
 - a. Paul uses an *architectural imagery* to make his point (referring to the household picture above; *i.e.* a *structure* that is inhabited by the family of God, *and God himself*)
 - b. a pillar is a support structure: a fundamental part, supporting the framework (*e.g.* load-bearing)
 - c. a buttress is the foundation: the most *substantial* part of the building, holding up all of the rest
 1. *e.g.* Jesus' own words regarding the foundation of faith in **Matthew 7:24-25**
“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.”
2. of “*the truth*” = the central message of the Christian faith; the unique fact which undergirds everything
 - a. not “all” truth – not that the church is the *only* source of what is true in the world
 - b. not “a” truth – not a truth that exists in a vacuum, with no other repercussions
 - c. **“the” truth – the foundational message that defines and upholds the entirety of the Christian faith: the gospel of Jesus Christ, the central message entrusted to the church**
 1. the church is the *foundation* of the message, and the *support* of the effort to advance it
3. **Paul will now drill into the very core of this message ...**

III. The Substance of the Mystery (1 Timothy 3:16)

Content

a. the definition of the mystery

1. “*mystery*” = something *formerly* hidden (and not understood), but now revealed (and understood)
 - a. *not by everyone* – revelation is a *personal* matter, now understood *only* by those to whom it is *specifically* given – it remains hidden to “outsiders” (see **Matt. 13:13 re:** parables)
2. “*of godliness*” = the revelation of what God is doing through Christ in the world
 - a. Paul uses a similar expression here as he did in **3:9** (*i.e.* the mystery of faith)
 - b. God's plan to bring a people into intimate relationship with himself (from a sea of rebel sinners) has now been revealed – how he draws a people into “*godliness*” is now made known
 - c. **so, what is the core reality of God's plan to accomplish this goal in the world ... ?**

b. the core of the mystery

1. probably an original hymn or creed repeated in the church (note the poetic formatting)
2. **line #1** – that this *plan of God* was “*manifested*” (*i.e.* revealed; made known; became apparent)
 - a. “*in the flesh*” = lit. given flesh and bone; “*he was*” (or *who was*) – the Incarnation of the Son
 - b. **the foundation of the church is God's plan revealed in the human person of Jesus Christ, God himself entering into the world to live and die as one of us**
3. **line #2** – that this *revealed one* is “*vindicated*” (*i.e.* shown to *be* the One; shown to have been truthful)
 - a. “*by the Spirit*” = probably a reference to the Resurrection – the singular event which demonstrates that all of what Jesus said about himself was true – the *justification* of his words in light of revelation
 - b. **the foundation of the church is the objective reality that this Jesus rose from the dead, making his words and works truthful and applicable**
4. **line #3** – that this *raised one* was “*seen*” (witnessed) by the heavenly audience of “*angels*”
 - a. probably a reference to the concepts of **Eph. 1:20-21** and **3:10** – that God's plan is witnessed by the heavenly audience as the Christ is raised and seated at the right hand of God forever
 - b. **the foundation of the church is that this raised One has been exalted above every other authority, in heaven or on earth, and that the church is his instrument of power**
5. **line #4** – that this *powerful one* is now “*proclaimed among the nations*” (*i.e.* who he is to all)
 - a. that this plan of God, revealed and vindicated in his Son, is now *the* message to go out to the uttermost parts of the earth – the message is Christ Jesus himself to the whole world
 - b. **the foundation of the church is the message of Jesus himself, the good news that the plan of God has been fully fulfilled in him for all of humanity**

6. **line #5** – that this **saving one** is “*believed on in the world*” (**i.e.** that he is being trusted by many)
 - a. that the church is (by definition) made up of those who have put their trust in this Christ, believing that *he* has made them a part of God’s decree of redemption
 - b. **the foundation of the church is the call to faith in Jesus, to a radical trust in his completed work of salvation and away from all other forms of self-righteousness**
 7. **line #6** – that **faithful one** is “*taken up in glory*” (**i.e.** consummated to all glory in the end)
 - a. assuming that this hymn or creed *did not intend* to be in *strict* chronological order, this is probably *not* about the assumption of Jesus (**that’s in line 3**)
 - b. rather, this is probably Jesus being “*lifted up*” to his final place of possessing all glory and honor due to his obedience as the Incarnate One – **i.e.** the fullness of glory that comes from the decree of the Father
 - c. **the foundation of the church is the glory of Jesus, the reality that he receive all honor and majesty as the church fulfills his purpose in the earth to call the elect to him**
- c. the reality of the mystery**
1. **question:** what is the purpose of the church in the world today?
 - a. the answer (in most quarters) is that the church is about *us* – a place (and a message) that means a better life for you (or others) now
 1. Andy Stanley: be a follower of Jesus so that you “have a better life, and be better at life”
 2. the evangelical “ethos” today is that the church is to be a place that is *enticing* to people who (at this point) despise God and hate the true message of the church (**i.e.** to be “likeable”)
 2. **the purpose of the church is to be a repository of the truth of what God is actually doing in his world through Jesus, and inculcating that truth in the minds and hearts of his people so that they “behave” as those entrusted with the message**
 - a. not giving better lives, but *disciplining* people into the fullness of this revelation, both in terms of *how they live* and in terms of *what they do with that message*