

The Pillar (Part 4 of 4)

The Mystery of Godliness

1 Timothy 3:16

Mark Vroegop

¹⁶Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:

*He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory. (1 Timothy 3:16)*

Throughout church history, there have been moments when important summary statements regarding the Christian faith have been developed. Sometimes the product was a confession of faith, a more detailed explanation of core doctrines. At other times catechism were developed in order to teach people theology through a question and answer format. Yet another crystallization of Biblical truth is a **creed**, which is a very condensed summary of theology.

Probably the most famous, or familiar, creed is The Apostles Creed (*"I believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried . . ."*). But there are others. For instance, there is the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed.

Now the creeds are different, and that is because they all serve a unique purpose. For instance, the Apostle's Creed was developed as the Christian church spread through the Roman world, and there was a need to have a summary of the bare minimum that the church believed. The Nicene Creed was written in response to Arian teaching, which purported that Jesus was not fully God and the trinity was not comprised of three equally divine persons. The Athanasian Creed took this issue to another level clarifying that Jesus was not just "of similar substance" but was "of the same substance" as the Father. Creeds typically developed as crystallizations of important truths due to controversy or crisis. A crisis has a way of testing and clarifying what is really important.

Therefore, creeds are great summaries of important truths birthed in the fire of controversy, and as such they are able to serve as helpful guides for the future.

Our text today appears to be some kind of early creed, or crystallization, of biblical truth, as 1 Timothy 3:16 immediately follows the summary statement for the book: *"so that if I delay you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar*

and buttress of the truth." And verse 16 provides a unique summary of what the "truth" is. Actually what happens here is that Paul seems to celebrate the beauty and the glory of the gospel. He puts the content of what the truth is in a form that makes it more meaningful and memorable. You could think of this like a really good, doctrinally loaded hymn or a piece of poetry that communicates a truth in a way that makes it "sing."

So let's see if we can hear the tune that Paul wants us to hear regarding the truth of the gospel.

The Beauty of the Gospel

Verse 16 begins this celebration of the gospel by declaring the amazing nature and the beauty of what we are talking about. It is almost as if Paul says, "I'm telling you . . . this is amazing stuff!" You could almost savor every word in the opening of verse 16. There's a lot in this collection of words.

First, notice that Paul is talking about the gospel although he uses the word "godliness." This is the main point of what the entire verse is all about. The word for "godliness" in this context is not so much referring to practice of godliness – like righteous acts – but rather the foundation of what is true religion or truly righteous. Paul is referring to a manner of life that is reflective of God's ways, his word, and will. Think of it this way: "Great is the mystery of what it means to be God-like." That is what godliness means; it means to be righteous and to be holy.

The reality of God making us holy is truly amazing! Listen to how 1 John 3:2 puts it:

²Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is (1 John 3:2).

The glorious end-game of the gospel is godliness! We shall be like him!

Second, notice that Paul calls it a "mystery." Now we've seen the word before in 3:9 as it relates to deacons who are to "hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience." The word doesn't mean the something is unknown now, as if it is a present mystery. Rather, it means that at one time God's ways were not known to us, but now they have been graciously revealed (see 1 Cor. 2:6-16). It is a remarkable and beautiful thing that God has done in revealing himself.

And for all that we know there is still a great deal that we do not know. God's will and His gracious purposes are shrouded in a glorious category beyond our ability to fully know.

Third, Paul uses the word "great" to describe this mystery and then adds the word "indeed." He is marveling in the extraordinary beauty and the supremacy of what he is talking about. "Great" is the Greek word *mega*, and it can describe something that is great in stature, importance, degree, or intensity. The word "awesome" might come closer to the meaning here. While the meaning is not all that unusual, the context in Ephesus might be.

You see, Acts 19 tells us that Paul left the city of Ephesus due to a near riot. The people were alarmed that Paul's preaching was creating an economic problem by taking away the prominence

of the worship of Artemis and all the industry that went with it. For two hours they chanted “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians” (Acts 19:34). So a part of me wonders if Paul, remembering that event, chose to say “Great is the mystery of godliness.” Regardless, his point is clear.

Paul is savoring and celebrating the beauty of the gospel. The truth that the church must guard and exult is not just intellectual and propositional truth; it is emotional truth – something to be celebrated, something to marvel at. Great is the mystery of godliness.

The Glory of Gospel

What follows in the rest of verse 16 is some level of hymn, creed or fragment of both. It contains some depth truths, and it fascinating because of its structure. The content and the form are both quite complex. Let me explain.

Structure

There are few things related to the structure of this passage that are worth noting since this section of Scripture was meant, in the original language, to be a bit poetic and have commonalities that brought unity to the whole. If you knew Greek, you would hear it and feel it. Let me just show you what is there:

ἐφανερώθη ἐν σαρκί,
ἐδικαιώθη ἐν πνεύματι,
ὤφθη ἀγγέλοις,

ἐκηρύχθη ἐν ἔθνεσιν,
ἐπιστεύθη ἐν κόσμῳ,
ἀνελήφθη ἐν δόξῃ.

Let me just list the unique features:

- Each line has two members with a verb standing in the first position
- Every verb is past tense and passive voice and ends with – *the* (*θη*)
- Every verb but one (it is implied) is followed by εἰς
- The implied subject of each verb is Christ¹

So the organization of the verse is intended to link the entire verse into one collective message. Walter Lock, in his commentary of 1 Timothy, attempted to capture the essence of the message and the lyrical rhythm by crafting his own verse:

¹ Gordon Fee, The New International Biblical Commentary – 1-2 Timothy, Titus, (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 92-93

*In flesh unveiled to mortals' sight,
Kept righteous by the Spirit's might
 While angels' watch him from the sky
His heralds sped from shore to shore,
And men believed, the wide world o'er,
 When he in glory passed on high.²*

Hopefully now you get the point.

Your Bible likely sets this text apart from the rest of the content in 1 Timothy 3 so that it looks unique. However, every translation has to make a decision as to how this text is organized and that is reflected in the indentations. In other words, the layout of the passage is driven by what the translator sees here.

There are basically three ways to take the organization of this verse. 1) One view is to see the text as a single stanza with six consecutive lines (see NASB).

*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*

2) Another way to organize the verse is it as three stanzas with two lines each. The NIV takes it that way:

*He appeared in the flesh,
 was vindicated by the Spirit,
was seen by angels,
 was preached among the nations,
was believed on in the world,
 was taken up in glory.*

3) Yet another way to take it is to see the verses as two stanzas with three lines each. The ESV takes this view:

*He was manifested in the flesh,
 vindicated by the Spirit,
 seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
 believed on in the world,
 taken up in glory.*

² Walter Lock, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* as cited in Philip Ryken, *1 Timothy – Reformed Expository Commentary*, (Phillipsburg: New Jersey, 2007), 142.

At first you might think that this is not really a big deal, and on the overall scale of importance, it isn't, except for the fact that it informs what you believe is the message in the text. In other words, is Paul saying one thing six different ways, three things two different ways, or two things three different ways?

To be honest, we are not entirely sure. As I've looked at the various ways to take the passage and what the ultimate meaning seems to be, I'm most comfortable with the ESV's organization of the passage. In other words, Paul is saying two things three different ways.

Message

So what is this passage all about? What is Paul trying to say here? Remember that he has just talked about this truth, of which the church is the pillar and buttress. Now he is explaining it. It seems that Paul is summarizing the work of Jesus Christ through his life and through the life of the church. In other words, while his list is not exhaustive – it doesn't cover everything – there are some very critical things listed in regards to redemptive history.

The glory of Christ's work through his life

The first three stanzas seem to identify some critical moments in the life of Jesus which are directly connected to the essence of the gospel.

1. Humiliation - The Pre-existent Son became human

The first phrase is "He was manifested in the flesh." The word "manifested" means that he appeared or was revealed. This clearly is an affirmation of the humiliating entry of Jesus into the world as a baby. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" – John 1:14. The son of God became human.

Implied in this statement is the understanding that the infinite became finite, the pre-existent son became a physical man, and God came near again.

What's more, it means that salvation is possible, since the good news is that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15). The good news of the gospel is that God made forgiveness possible through the willful and double humiliation of his son – first in his incarnation and then in his crucifixion.

By becoming human, Jesus made it possible for a one-for-all sacrifice to be made on behalf of all those who would place their faith and trust in him. It means that God entered our world. It means that Jesus really understands our pains, our temptations, and the challenges connected to our broken world.

His humanity means that he really suffered. And his suffering is a critical part of the gospel message. Philip Ryken captures the essence when he writes:

The events of the passion of Jesus Christ were physical events. His cheek was kissed by his betrayer. His face was spit upon. His body was struck and slapped. His back was flogged. His brow was pierced by thorns. His head was struck with a staff. As the Scripture says, "Christ suffered in the flesh" (1 Peter 4:1).³

The son became human.

2. Exaltation - Jesus was raised from the dead

The second phrase, "vindicated by the Spirit," is a bit harder to translate and understand. The word "vindicated" means to make a person morally right, and is translated as "justified" in other translations (KJV, NKJV). However, we typically connect the concept of justification with the forgiveness of sins. Here the meaning is more connected to the idea of proving or showing someone to be right or true. We use the word this way when we say, "Let me justify my decision for you."

In that case, when was Jesus justified or proved to be right? When was it verified that he really was the Son of God? When was he vindicated as the Messiah? And of course the answer is the resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus Christ demonstrated that his sacrifice was sufficient and that death, the penalty for sin, had been conquered. In this way Jesus' death provides a path for forgiveness, but his resurrection proves that his sacrifice had the power to defeat sin and death. In other words, the resurrection verifies the efficacy of His death. The empty tomb declares "The cross worked!" The resurrection is God's vindication of his son.

Yet Jesus did not raise himself. He was raised by the Father through the agency of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁸For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit (1 Peter 3:18)

...concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh ⁴and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 1:3-4)

The glory of the gospel is that Jesus not only became human; He was raised from the dead.

3. Glorification - He was honored and worshiped

The third phrase is equally challenging: "seen by angels." Think of how interconnected the life of Jesus was with angels. They announced his birth (Luke 2:13-14), ministered to him in the wilderness (Mark 1:12-13), appeared in the Garden after his prayer (Luke 22:43), and they were present at the empty tomb (Matt 28:1-7). The angels are witnesses to the events of his life.

³ Philip Ryken, *1 Timothy – Reformed Expository Commentary*, (Phillipsburg: New Jersey, 2007), 144.

Given the role of angels and the location of this statement, it would seem Paul is saying the same thing that Peter does in 1 Peter 3:21-22.

"...through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²²who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him."

The effect of his resurrection is that Jesus is now glorified, honored, and worshipped.

This is the glory of the gospel through the life of Jesus. He was humiliated in becoming a human, exalted through the resurrection, and glorified through the position of honor that he has been given. This is the heart of the Bible, the glory of the gospel and the hope for the world.

But through whom is this message proclaimed? The church.

The glory of Christ's work through the church

This second section shows us the way in which the church lives out the life of Jesus in the world. It connects the story of the gospel to the continuing story of the church, and it fits so well within the theme of 1 Timothy. This book is about the church's role as the guardian of truth, but the church's mission is directly connected to the personal work of Jesus.

1. Proclaimed – His message went global

The next phrase is "proclaimed among the nations." We are reminded of Jesus' last instructions to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19). The glory of the gospel is its global mission. The promise God made to Abraham in Genesis 22:17 that "in you all nations will be blessed" is now being fulfilled. No longer is the work of God centered with the Jews. God has expanded the reach of the gospel beyond the borders of an ethnic group.

At Pentecost, the Spirit is poured out and people heard the message of the gospel in their own tongue. Later, Paul is specifically chosen to "bear my name before the Gentiles" (Acts 9:15). And the grand vision of the Scriptures is that the church is no longer a group of "strangers and aliens but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph. 2:19). The glory of the gospel is its global mission.

2. Believed – Salvation is offered to all

The next phrase continues the focus on the mission of the church – "believed on in the world." This is a statement of the response that is central to the church's mission. Followers of Jesus are called to call others to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved (Acts 16:31). It is the message of Romans 10:9-13.

"...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. ¹¹For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not

be put to shame.”¹²For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. ¹³For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

This is the mission of the church – to call people to believe in Jesus. This is our mission today – to invite you to stop trusting in yourself, in what you’ve done, in your religious activity. Our mission is to call you to see that God is holy, you are not, and that’s a problem. The mission of the church is to call you to believe in Jesus.

3. Victorious - He has triumphed and will return

The final statement seems similar to what we heard before. This creed or hymn ends with this statement: “taken up in glory.” This statement points to the moment in biblical history called ascension, the time after Jesus’ resurrection where he was physically taken up into heaven before the eyes of the disciples. How does this relate to the mission of the church?

Listen to what the angels said to the disciples as they stared into the open “Jesus-less” sky:

Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”(Acts 1:11)

The ascension of Jesus is not only a marker of his personal victory; it is a harbinger of a victory that we still are waiting for. His physical departure and the words from the angels remind us that central to the mission of the church is a moment when he returns:

*And, Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight,
the clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
the trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,
even so, it is well with my soul.⁴*

This is the church victorious!

So do you see how glorious this is? Do you see the glory of the gospel as lived out in the life of Christ? Do you see the glory of the gospel lived out through the life of the church? Jesus was humiliated, exalted, and glorified so that the message through the church could be proclaimed, believed, and – in the end – victorious.

These six stanzas provide the heart of what we believe. They crystalize the purpose of Jesus’ life. But they do something more. They remind us of the glory of the gospel **through** the church, that through the church, the mystery of godliness is known to the world.

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⁴ It is Well with My Soul – Horatio Spafford