

“The Mystery of Godliness” (1 Timothy 3:14–16)

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I want you to imagine something. Imagine that you live in England. And imagine you have receive a letter in the mail. This is not just any letter, but an official letter from the British royal family. The letter informs you that Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex, and his new wife, Meghan Markle, will be relocating from Nottingham Cottage, on the grounds of Kensington Palace, to your house. That’s right, Prince Harry and his wife, two months after their marriage, are going to live with you. They want to live among the common people, and there’s no discussion, no debate. They’re not asking you if they can live with you. They’re just announcing that they will move in.

How would that change your life? What would you do? You would probably clean your house better than you ever have before. You might buy new furniture. You would be on your best behavior. You would probably make sure you had Harry and Meghan’s favorite foods. Of course, this enthusiasm might wear off over time. But what if you were told that the fate of England depended, at least in part, on how you managed your now-royal house? That would keep you motivated, wouldn’t it?

Okay, that’s a silly thing to imagine, I know. (I deliberately chose British royalty instead of American politicians because American politicians are now so hated.) But you get the point. If you had very special guests in your home, that would probably change how you live. And if you knew that the health of your house affected the whole nation, well, you would probably do your best to live in a right way. Of course, today’s British royals are really symbolic figures. Imagine if King Henry VIII was your royal guest. Now that was a monarch with power. And he was the Supreme Head of the Church of England, too.

Well, there is a greater reality that this should remind us of, one that isn’t just a silly thought experiment. If you are a Christian, you are part of the church, the body of Christ, God’s household, and God’s temple. You are part of God’s home on Earth, his temple where he is worshiped. You are even part of his family. And that should change the way you live. It should change how we live as individuals and how we conduct ourselves in this local church. That’s what we’re going to talk about today.

Three months ago, we started to look at the book of 1 Timothy. It's a letter written by Paul, an apostle, which is a fancy way of saying a special messenger of Jesus. Paul was commissioned by Jesus to travel throughout the Roman Empire, almost two thousand years ago, to tell other people about Jesus and to plant churches. He helped established a church in Ephesus, a significant city in the Roman Empire located in the western part of what we now call Turkey. Paul left his younger associate Timothy there, to make sure that the church was healthy. Specifically, Paul wanted Timothy to protect the church from false teachers and from bad behaviors. And he wanted Timothy to have the church function according to God's design for the church. In other words, Paul wanted Timothy to have the church go the way God wanted it to go.

Today, after some recent detours from 1 Timothy, we get to the center of the letter, which states why Paul wrote it. Since we're looking at only three verses of this book today, let's read them all right now. This is 1 Timothy 3:14–16:

¹⁴ I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ Great 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

Paul tells Timothy why he is writing this letter. Paul has left Timothy in Ephesus. While Paul hopes to come to Timothy soon, he realizes that he may not be able to get there quickly. So, he writes this letter to Timothy, “that . . . you may know how one ought to behave” in church. Timothy is to make sure the church is in good order. Specifically, he is to protect the church from false teachers and also from behavior that is not in line with the message of Christianity. Toward the beginning of the letter, Paul tells Timothy, “As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine” (1 Tim. 1:3). Some people had been teaching a different message, and they “made [a] shipwreck of their faith” (1 Tim. 1:19).

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

But it's not just right beliefs or right teaching that Paul is concerned about. He's also concerned about right behavior. The two are related. If you have right beliefs, you should behave rightly. And there's even more motivation to behave rightly, because the church is "the household of God." The church isn't a museum that houses memories of a dead god. No, the church is "the church of the living God." God is alive, and he makes his home on Earth with his people.

This should blow our minds. God doesn't just dwell with his people. God dwells in his people. That's because the church isn't a building; the church is a group of people. God dwells among the church, but he also lives in individual Christians. The third Person of God, the Holy Spirit, dwells in believers. If we are God's house, shouldn't we live accordingly?

The language of "God's house" indicates that Paul has something particular in mind. God's house is the temple. The language of "pillar" also indicates that Paul is thinking of a temple. The temple of God isn't one special building that we all have to make a pilgrimage to. The temple of God is God's people.

This is what Paul writes in another letter, a letter to the church in Ephesus, the same city where Timothy was when he received the letter that we're now studying. In Ephesians 2, Paul says that there is one people of God, consisting of Jews and Gentiles, who were brought together by Jesus. In verses 18–22, he writes,

¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

The whole of the church is a temple, built upon the cornerstone, who is Jesus. The cornerstone determines the shape of the building; it is the most important stone. The temple is built upon God's word; the New Testament was written by "apostles and prophets." And this temple is growing, as more and more people are added to it. It is the "place" where the Holy Spirit dwells. It is the "place" where God is worshiped.

The apostle Peter says something similar in 1 Peter 2. He writes,

⁴ As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, ⁵ you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a

spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 2:4–5).

In the Old Testament, animal sacrifices were offered to God to make atonement for sin and to bring peace between God and his people. But the fact is that those sacrifices didn't actually atone for sin. They foreshadowed the only sacrifice that could pay for human sin, which was the death of Jesus on the cross. So, sacrifices for sin are no longer made. But we do make spiritual sacrifices, offerings to God of praise (Heb. 13:15), good works (Heb. 13:16), and finances given to ministry (Phil. 4:18). In fact, our very lives are offered up to God as "living sacrifice[s]" (Rom. 12:1).

Getting back to 1 Timothy, Paul says that the church is also a "buttress." The Greek word that's translated as "buttress" only appears this one time in the New Testament, so it's not clear exactly what it means. It could mean "stay," "support," or "bulwark." It is a support to the truth. Paul has something specific in mind when he talks about the truth. He doesn't just mean "truth" in general. In the previous chapter, Paul said that God "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). Paul means the gospel, or good news. That is the message of Christianity. Ultimately, Jesus is the truth (John 14:6). And the gospel is a message about him.

The church is meant to support, or uphold, the truth. The church isn't the only support; that's why Paul says that the church is "a pillar and buttress of the truth," and not "the pillar and buttress of the truth." Even if all Christians on Earth were to die, the message of Jesus would remain the truth, and that truth is witnessed to by the Bible and is supported also by the Holy Spirit. But the church is a guardian of the truth. We need to have a firm grip on the truth of who Jesus is and what he has done for us. We need to teach the truth about God and his kingdom. We need to teach the truth about God's plans for the world, how we can be reconciled to God, and how we should live for him.

That's what Paul gets to next when he talks about the "mystery of godliness." That's an interesting phrase. When Paul uses "mystery," he doesn't mean it in quite the way that we do. We usually talk about "mystery" in terms of something we can't figure out. Paul does mean that, but he doesn't mean it's a secret. Paul means that what we couldn't figure out on our own, God has now revealed. We could not figure out God's plans through unaided human reasoning. We

couldn't discover on our own how to be right in God's eyes. But God has revealed that information to us, and that's what Paul writes.

When Paul writes "the mystery of godliness," he is stating the reason why we should live godly lives, or why we should be devoted to God. The reason is Jesus: who he is and what he has done for us. This is what the church needs to believe and confess.

What follows is probably a poem or a hymn:

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.

This is something that Paul probably didn't write. It was probably an early hymn of praise, a poem that captured some of the important elements of Christianity.² If you look at the translation that we use, the English Standard Version, you can see that the hymn is six lines long. The ESV divides it into two stanzas of three lines each. The New International Version divides it into three stanzas of two lines each. There's some debate about the structure of the hymn, but either way, the message is clear.

The first line, "He was manifested in the flesh," refers to Jesus' incarnation, when the eternal Son of God added a second nature and became the God-man, Jesus of Nazareth. In John's Gospel, we're told that Jesus is the "Word of God." "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Jesus has always existed, but over two thousand years ago, "he was manifested in the flesh."

The last line of the hymn, "taken up in glory," refers to Jesus' ascension to heaven. After Jesus died on the cross and rose from the grave, he ascended back to heaven. So, the first and last lines bookend Jesus' coming to earth and his leaving.

The middle lines indicate what Jesus did and how people have responded to him. They don't tell us everything about what Jesus did, but they tell us some important things. The second

² Other hymns in the New Testament include Phil. 2:6–11 and Col. 1:15–20.

line says that Jesus was “vindicated by the Spirit.” This is probably a reference to his resurrection. When Jesus died, it might have looked like he was a failure. If he stayed in the grave, we might wonder if his death had any meaning. But his resurrection vindicated him, showing that he is who he claimed to be, the Son of God. That’s what Paul writes at the beginning of his letter to the Romans:

¹ Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, ² which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, ³ concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh ⁴ and 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, ⁵ through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, ⁶ including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:1–6).

The resurrection, accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit, declared that Jesus is the Son of God, that he has power over sin and death, and that the sins of his people have been paid in full.

The third line of the hymn says that Jesus was “seen by angels.” This could possibly refer to the fact that angels appeared at Jesus’ resurrection. It could be a reference to the apostles, who saw Jesus, because the word “angel” can also mean “messenger.” But it more likely refers to angels in the spiritual realm. The risen Christ was seen by people and supernatural beings.

The fourth and fifth lines seem to belong together. Jesus was “proclaimed among the nations” and “believed on in the world.” Apostles like Paul and Peter told people throughout the Roman Empire about Jesus, and many people believed in him.

Now, this is just a poem. It’s not a very detailed statement of systematic theology. So, more could be said about who Jesus is and what he came to do. Who is Jesus? He is God. More specifically, he is the second Person of the triune God, the Son of God. And he became man. So, we say he is the God-man. Why did Jesus come into the world? Paul doesn’t explicitly mention Jesus’ death on the cross. Why did Jesus come into the world? “To save sinners,” as Paul says in the first chapter of this letter (1 Tim. 1:15; cf. Matt. 1:21). How did he do that?

Jesus saves sinners by fulfilling God’s plans for humanity and then dying for the sins of rebellious human beings. God made human beings in his image and likeness. That means we were made to represent God, to reflect God’s character, to rule over his creation, to worship him, and to love and obey him, the way children would love and obey a perfect father. But from the beginning, human beings have turned away from God, living life on their own terms instead of

his. Instead of building our world around God and accepting the role he has given us, we build our worlds around ourselves, rejecting his authority. The rebellion of the first human beings created a separation between God and human beings.

Jesus is the one who closes that gap. He came to fulfill God's plans for humanity. He is the perfect human being who always loves and obeys his Father. Yet though he never sinned, he died in the place of sinners, bearing the penalty that they deserve. All who believe in Jesus, who trust him, have their sins forgiven, are adopted into God's family, and have eternal life. Though they die, they will live with God forever in a new creation, which will be established when Jesus returns to Earth to bring history as we know it to an end.

This is the "mystery" revealed to the church. This is the reason why we should pursue godliness. We do that because God first pursued us.

Our behavior should line up with the reality that we are God's family, part of his very household. We don't behave well in order to become part of his house. No, we are chosen by God, the gospel was preached to us, we believed, and we were adopted by God into his family. This is not because of merit. It's not something we deserved. It's not because we were so lovable that God just had to come rescue us. It's not because we're so good, because we've first cleaned up our house. No, it is all a gift from God, because he is love.

As I said earlier, we are God's temple, the place where he resides on Earth, the place where he is worshiped, where we offer up spiritual sacrifices. God wants a beautiful temple to live in. The fact that he chooses to live in us is amazing. But God wants us to be purified, to become a house fitting for a king.

In his wonderful book, *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis describes what it's like to become a Christian. He likens the Christian life to being a house that is undergoing renovation:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be

made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and to live in it Himself.³

God wants to refashion us so that we are a good house, children who act like our Father, people who represent the family name well, a great building for an even greater God to live in. As Lewis says, sometimes this refashioning hurts.

Our behavior should line up with what we profess to believe. But that doesn't just mean how we live our individual lives. The way that we "do church" should line up with Scripture. That's what Paul stresses throughout the letter of 1 Timothy. The problem is that so many churches aren't organized and run according to God's word. It's no surprise that so many churches abandon "the mystery of godliness," forsaking the truth of the gospel.

The reality is that while the truth should change how we live, often how we live changes what we think is true. Many people forsake the gospel because they don't want to live the way God wants us to. Some people reject the truth of the Bible because of Christianity's sexual ethics. They may reject Christianity outright, or they may revise the Bible to suit their desires. In that case, sex is an idol, a false god, and truth is put on the altar and sacrificed. Some people reject Christianity because they worship the idol of power, or of money. They don't want God to be King, or they don't want to be told to give money away to the church and to the poor. Some people sacrifice the truth to the idol of being acceptable in the world's eyes. They are afraid of being seen as backward or foolish, so they alter Christianity so that it fits with the spirit of the age. But, as one person wisely said, those who marry the spirit of the age will soon become widows (or widowers), because that spirit always changes.

When some view of the good life, some view of human flourishing, puts anything other than God at the center of reality, truth will be sacrificed and an idol will be worshiped. This is what we rebellious human beings do. So, we need to hold on to the truth.

Doctrine gets a bad reputation among some people. The straw man argument is that those who care about doctrine have reduced Christianity to some cold, lifeless, dead orthodoxy, a religion of facts but not a living religion of the heart. But doctrine simply means "teaching." Everyone has doctrine. Everyone has a creed of some kind. And our doctrine will either be true, or some mixture of truth and falsehoods, or completely false.

³ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; repr. New York: Touchstone, 1996), 176.

If we personally know the living God, we will know what he is like. We'll know facts about him. If we really know God, we can't fail to know who he is. We'll know if he is triune. If we really know Jesus, we'll know he is divine. To claim that Jesus was merely a man or prophet shows that we don't really know who he is.

A few weeks ago, I was in Washington State, where I used to live. I was there to attend a friend's funeral. After the service, I happened to meet someone who grew up in my hometown of Wenham. He is the same age as my oldest brother, Ted. I knew that they were in the same high school class and they both played on the basketball team. I also knew he lived somewhere north of Seattle and that he was a firefighter, just as my friend was. But I don't recall ever having personally met this man, named David.

When we met, he told me that both he and Ted put the same Scripture, Proverbs 3:5–6, under their high school yearbook photo; went to Gordon College; and went on the same mission trip.

But what if David started saying some things that didn't line up with what I know to be true of Ted? What if he said, "Yeah, I remember Ted had that beautiful sister. What happened to her?" If he said that, I would say, "Uh, we didn't have a sister." He might say, "Oh, I must have been thinking of someone else. But Ted drove that awesome Corvette, right?" "No, but he drove a 1970s Dodge Dart for a while."

If this went on for a while, I would start to wonder if we were talking about the same person. Either his memory would be really mixed up or he was thinking about a different person.

And that's how it is with Jesus. Some people preach "another Jesus," which is something that Paul noted elsewhere (2 Cor. 11:4). Mormons don't believe the same Jesus we do. Muslims don't think Jesus is the Son of God, that he is divine. They don't believe he died on the cross, and therefore they deny the resurrection. Jehovah's Witnesses believe that Jesus isn't God. Are they really talking about the same Jesus?

If we know Jesus personally, we'll know facts about him, just the way that if we're married, we'll know facts about our spouse. We may not know everything, but we'll know important things. Christianity is ultimately a relationship, and real relationships must be built on truth and love.

And that knowledge should lead to right behavior. Theology, our knowledge of God, must be lived out. One theologian said, "Theology is all about knowing how to sing the song of

redemption: to know when to shout, when to mourn, when to be silent and when to hope. But in order to enjoy the song and sing it well, we must learn the words and the music.”⁴ Think about that for a moment. If you don’t know the Bible and how to understand it, you’re like someone who doesn’t know the words and the tune of the song you’re supposed to be singing. The song is the Christian life. You’re supposed to sing it! But how can you sing it if you don’t know the words and the tune? You’re like the person in the shower singing a song they heard on the radio and making up words as they go. It’s funny when people get the words to a song wrong—“Hold me closer, Tony Danza”—but it’s not funny when people get words about God wrong.⁵

So, know the tune. Know the words. And then sing the song! Sing it at home. Sing it at work. Sing it when you’re running errands. Sing it when we gather. Behave as if you’re God’s house, God’s building, God’s temple. Because if you are a Christian, that’s what you are.

And if you’re not a Christian, I would urge you to put your trust in Jesus. The true Jesus is the one revealed in the pages of the Bible. He is not the Jesus of our imagination. No one could make up Jesus, because he confronts us all. He challenges each one of us. He calls us out on our sin. He teaches us a new way to live. He tells us to lay down our lives and to love our enemies. No one would invent that. Jesus tells us that he will come again to judge the living and the dead, and that the way we respond to him is truly the way we respond to God. When Jesus prayed to the Father on the night before he died, he said, “And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3).

⁴ Kelly M. Kapic, *A Little Book for New Theologians: Why and How to Study Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 22-23.

⁵ In an episode of the sitcom *Friends*, one of the characters mistakenly thought that Elton John’s song “Tiny Dancer” featured those words.