

The Mystery of Godliness

The Pillar of 1 Timothy

1Tim 3:14 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 Timothy 3:14-16)

Salvation: It's No Mystery?

What makes a **good mystery**? You need a **strong hook**, something that invites the reader to solve the problem by piquing their interest. You need some kind of **ominous atmosphere** that creates anxiety and an unknown antagonist lurking in the shadows. You need a **crime** that fuels the plot. You need a **sleuth**, a main character determined to solve the crime. Your story must **gain momentum** as it moves along. You must leave a **trail of clues** to engage the reader on a

deeper level. **Foreshadowing** drops hints of things that will happen in the future. **Red herrings** are essential, because while building tension they also lead the reader and the sleuth off track. Most of all, you need a **satisfying ending**.¹

A mystery is something baffling, cryptic, obscure, puzzling, secretive, inexplicable, unknown, weird, dark, or mystifying. Antonyms are apparent, clear, comprehensible, evident, intelligible, known, normal, obvious, plain, public, or straightforward. There are **many mysteries in the Bible**. One of the greatest surrounds the question of **salvation**. Jesus said, “**I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God**” (**Matt 19:24**). This saying revealed a true mystery, for when the disciples heard it, they were baffled and responded, “**Who then can be saved?**” (**25**).

The occasion for this mystery was a young man (a ruler, **Luke 18:18**) who came to Jesus and asked him, “**Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?**” (**Matt 19:16**). **The biblical proverb** teaches, “**There is a way that seems right to man, but its end is the way to death**” (**Prov 14:12**). As this man shows us, there is a way to eternal life

¹ Summarized from “The 10 Essential Elements of a Mystery Story,” Master Class (Sept 8, 2021), <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/essential-elements-of-a-mystery-story#10-elements-of-a-mystery-story>.

that men see, not as mystery, but as obvious, self-evident, completely accessible, and able to be solved by themselves. That way is summarized by several modern proverbs. “Pull yourself by your own bootstraps.” “God helps those who help themselves.” “God will not deny his grace to those who do what lies within them.” “Do your best and God will take care of the rest.” This young man believed that godliness leads to salvation and eternal life.

And why wouldn't he? It is the natural propensity of humanity (at least those still tethered to their conscience) to want to be better, moral people. God built a desire to be good into us. But sin causes something to well up inside of us as well. It causes us to think that this lies within our power to achieve autonomously. This is why when people hear Jesus' mystery, instead of sitting there dumbfounded like the disciples (which is the point of the absurdity),² you will always find some trying to make the impossible possible.

So, for example, you can read people talking about that “eye of a needle” in the camel story not as the tiny eye of a sowing instrument like we think of it and which Jesus also

² As Hagner writes, “The attempts to make the analogy more ‘reasonable’ ... by understanding the “eye of the needle” as a narrow doorway miss the very point of the imagery. The analogy is deliberately ludicrous and hyperbolic.” Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, vol. 33B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1995), 561.

almost certainly had in mind,³ but as something like, “a small gate of a walled eastern city. The purpose of the small gate was to enable people to enter the city without the inconvenience of having to open the large gates. Modern commentators assume that a camel might be forced through the small gate. However, that would be a difficult task given its size. So, a camel would have to stoop down and have all of its load removed so that it could pass through.”⁴ That’s interesting, but as R. T. France says in his magisterial commentary on Matthew, this is nothing but “romantic speculation” that “has been so often repeated that it is sometimes treated as an established exegesis. Unfortunately ... there is in fact no evidence at all for such usage of ‘the eye of the needle’ either in non-biblical sources or in ancient commentaries on the gospels.”⁵

³ A tantalizing clue to this is found in the *Bible Backgrounds Commentary* which only gives a sowing needle as the background for this saying. If what follows were really an historical reality, wouldn’t this have been a great place to write about it? See **Michael L. Wilkins**, Matthew, in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, vol. 1, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 120.

⁴ **Carlos Echevarria**, “When Three Worlds Collide: A Multidimensional Biblical Interpretation of Matthew 19:24,” De La Salle University, Manila (July 31, 2018), 13. https://www.academia.edu/37208445/When_Three_Worlds_Collide_A_Multidimensional_Biblical_Interpretation_of_Matthew_19_24. Echevarria does not cite scholarship, but a blog: **Vinson, C.** (2012).

Camels and needles (Matthew 19:24). Retrieved from <http://trivialdevotion.blogspot.com/2012/10/camels-and-needles-matthew-1924.html>.

⁵ **R. T. France**, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 738. France cites a book that upon further investigation seems a treasure trove of chiasmic and literary exegesis on the Gospels. See **Kenneth E. Bailey**, *Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 166. [file:///Users/douglasvandorn/Downloads/Poet%20%20Peasant%20and%20Through%20Peasant%20Eyes%20A%20Literary-Cultural%20Approach%20to%20the%20Parables%20in%20Luke%20Combined%20Edition%20by%20Kenneth%20E.%20Bailey%20\(z-lib.org\).pdf](file:///Users/douglasvandorn/Downloads/Poet%20%20Peasant%20and%20Through%20Peasant%20Eyes%20A%20Literary-Cultural%20Approach%20to%20the%20Parables%20in%20Luke%20Combined%20Edition%20by%20Kenneth%20E.%20Bailey%20(z-lib.org).pdf)

What this exercise in the needle shows us is that people want to sew up the rip of sin themselves. It isn't impossible, they say, just really hard. In this way, sin deceives us, and through the commandment (“*what good work must I do?*”), it puts us to death (**Rom 7:13**). People don't like this particular mystery until they come to the end of themselves. This man went away sad (**Matt 19:22**).

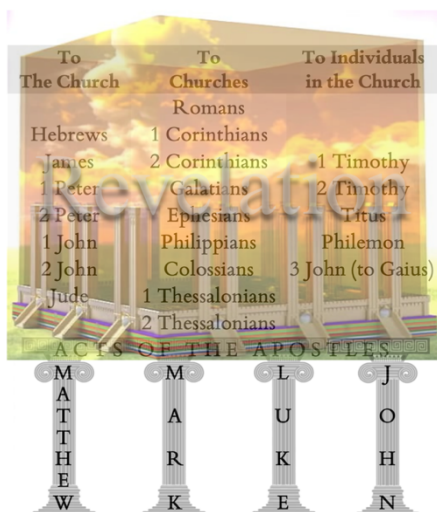
This is why *the gospel and the church* have been attacked so ruthlessly over the years. Specifically, *the gospel* has been, since the days of the NT (including the church at Ephesus at which Timothy was the elder), turned by heresy into *one form or another of self-righteous law keeping*. This is precisely what the young man was suggesting to Jesus. “*What good deed must I do to have eternal life?*”

As it regards church, people clamor and demand that their churches *teach them how to be better people*. Anything else is impractical and unhelpful. And so, “how to” sermons are all the rage; indeed, they are in many places the only rage. That is, *if people even care about church* at all. For today, it is much more popular to say that the church itself is a relic of by-gone era whose time has long since past, and that we can now figure out how to do this without her help, thank you very much. In this, there is a hint that another biblical mystery, the visible and

invisible church distinction, which is always held in tension in Scripture, is being thrown out, that the visible church isn't *really* the “true” church after all, because what matters is simply that a person is saved in their heart.

The “Household” of God: The Structure and Context of 1 Tim 3:14-16

As we move to the context of our passage, I want to recall the very beginning of our study. We began 1 Timothy by thinking about the NT as a working out of **Revelation's Golden City** from heaven here on earth. I visualized the 27 books of the NT as forming the structure of that city, with **the Gospels** as the four underground pillars that ground the structure, **Acts** as the foundation stone upon which the structure is laid, **the rest of the books** (except Revelation) as the structure itself, and **Revelation** as the heavenly archetype upon which it is all modeled (see picture below).



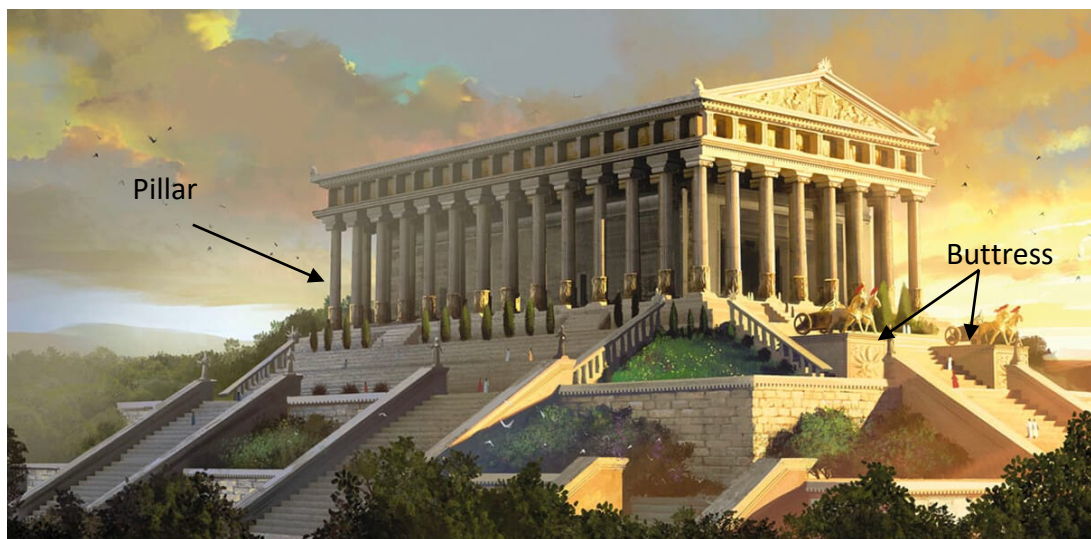
The New Testament as
an Earthly Working out of
what Revelation sees as
the Heavenly Church
Come Down from
Heaven

I did this because the NT is written, not merely to individual people, but to Christ's *church*. 1 Timothy likewise is not just to a person about personal matters, but to an elder of *a church* about vital matters pertaining not just to his church, but to the **church** of Jesus Christ for **all times and places**.

One thing we have not yet talked much about in our study of 1 Timothy is a fabulous structure that was in the middle of ancient Ephesus. Ephesus was known best as home to one of the **seven wonders of the ancient world** (**Antipater of Sidon**, *Epigram* 9.58). The renowned “**Temple of Artemis**” was hailed by the historian and traveler **Pausanias** as “**the largest building in the [ancient] world**” (Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 4.31.8). Antipater of Sidon said, “**I have set eyes on the wall of lofty Babylon on which is a road for chariots, and the statue of Zeus by the Alpheus, and the hanging gardens, and the colossus of the Sun, and the huge labor of the high pyramids, and the vast tomb of Mausolus; but when I saw the house of Artemis that mounted to the clouds, those other marvels lost their brilliancy, and I said, ‘Lo, apart from Olympus, the Sun never looked on aught so grand’**” (Antipater, *ibid*).

This structure seems overtly related to our passage today where Paul talks about “a pillar and buttress” (1Tim 3:15). The Artemis temple looked a lot like the Parthenon, and its pillars would have instantly come to mind to anyone living anywhere near Ephesus. Though it was destroyed in the third century, today one of those pillars still stands on the original spot.

Along with the foundation, pillars and buttresses are the main architectural designs that support the superstructure’s walls from moving outward, eventually leading to a collapse of the building. Pillars take the vertical load, while buttresses prevent horizontal movement.



Artistic Rendering of the Temple of Artemis: Wonder of the World



Remaining Pillar:
Temple of Artemis

Amazingly, this verse appears as the preface to what many have suggested is the very middle of the letter (vs. 16).

This is true **both theologically** (Beale says it “**occupies a central role in 1 Timothy**”⁶; Wall and Steele say it, “**is arguably the passage of gravitas in this letter, if not of the Pastoral Epistles as a collection**”⁷), and **structurally**:

- A) 1 Tim 1:1-2, Paul to Timothy, a true son: Grace, mercy, peace from God our Father and Jesus Christ;
- B) 1 Tim 1:2-20, Timothy’s charge: **guard sound doctrine** from which some have strayed:
- C) 1 Tim 2:1-8, Prayers + intercession for those in authority (exercise of authority):
- D) 1 Tim 2:9-15, Proper exercise/ care of church authority:
- E) 1 Tim 3:1-13, Qualification of bishops + deacons:
- F) 1 Tim 3:14-15, I write that you may know how to conduct yourself in the house of God; **central axis of the book) 1 Tim 3:16, “And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, Justified in the Spirit, Seen by angels; Preached among the Gentiles, Believed on in the world, Received up in glory;”**
- F’) 1 Tim 4:1-16, Instruction for Timothy as church pastor:— 1b.4) 1 Tim 1:7b-8a, Exercise
- E’) 1 Tim 5:1-19, Qualifications of true widows/ treatment of elderly + elders:— 1c) 1
- D’) 1 Tim 5:20-25, Proper exercise/ care of church authority;
- C’) 1 Tim 6:1-2a, Proper honor between bondservants and masters (exercise of authority);
- B’) 1 Tim 6:2b-21a, Timothy’s charge: **teach sound doctrine** from which some have strayed:
- A’) 1 Tim 6:21b, Grace be with you. Amen.⁸

As such, **it can itself be viewed as the pillar and buttress of 1 Timothy**, if not all three of the Pastoral Epistles!

Today we are looking at **the last three verses** of 1 Timothy 3 (**vv. 14-16**). They begin with the easiest of the

⁶ G. K. Beale and Benjamin L. Gladd, *Hidden But Now Revealed: A Biblical Theology of Mystery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), kindle.

⁷ Robert W. Wall and Richard B. Steele, *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus*, ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner, *The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 111.

⁸ Christine Smith, “Book of 1 Timothy Chiastic Structure,” *A Little Perspective* (Nov 4, 2013), <https://www.alittleperspective.com/book-of-1-timothy-chiastic-structure/>.

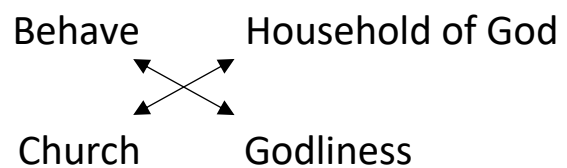
three verses, “I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that...” (14). Paul is obviously not in Ephesus. It is possible that he is in Rome under arrest and awaiting trial from which he believes he will be exonerated, or that he is between arrests in Rome on a missionary journey somewhere, hopeful to make his way home by travelling through Ephesus, or perhaps he has been stranded by a shipwreck and hopes to get off the island soon.

While this verse demonstrates the personal relationship that Paul had with Timothy, it is really the “so that” which is the point. Paul is writing this letter *in case* he doesn’t actually make it to Ephesus. Thank God he did, because if he hadn’t, we would not have these timeless instructions.

What is the reason he gives for the letter? It is what could also be considered the thesis statement of 1 Timothy: 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. Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness...” (15-16a). As you can see and hear, the focus here is on behavior, which is called godliness. This is why I began today with that young man’s question to Jesus, “What good deed must I do?”

What Paul is going to do here is **so insightful**, so astonishing, so otherworldly and **mysterious** that it will literally rock the entire world for the next 2,000 plus years. But I want to move into it slowly. Let's begin by noticing that this godly behavior does not stand alone. It is the bread which sandwiches two synonymous things called "**the household of God**" and "**the church of the living God.**" So, somehow, the church is involved in this godly behavior.

- A. Behave
- B. The household of God
- B'. The church
- A'. Godliness



Let's think a little more of how this could be and how it relates to the context. Although the different terms have multiple meanings, they can each communicate different things. The opposite of what many think today, "church" is the "assembly" of "called out" ones. In other words, **people rather than a building**. "Household" also communicates people, but in a **family** relationship to one another. So, this is the behavior of people in a house together. That house is called the church. This is the immediate context.

But both ideas can also communicate a **formal structure**, both in terms of **a building** (i.e. houses and churches) and

something more invisible like the way a group is **organized**. This brings us to the broader context. The words “know” and “how” and “household” found here appear earlier in Paul’s **list of elders** (this shows us the chiasmic nature of the entire chapter). The language we began today with, a “mystery,” is tied directly to **the deacons** (see the chiasm chart below), which as we will see later, is vital for a proper understanding of this amazing little passage.

Elders (3:1-5) & the Church (14-15)

- A. Faithful (1), woman, temperate (2), not addicted to wine (3), leading, household, children (4), **know**, lead, **household**, **how**, church of God (5)
- B. **Fall, devil (6)**
- B'. **Fall, devil (7)**
- A'. Faith (9), temperate, faithful (11), woman, leading, children, households (12), **know**, **how**, **household**, church of the living God (15).

Deacons (8-13) & the Church (14-15)

- A. ⁸ Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. ⁹ They must hold the **mystery** of the faith with a clear conscience.
- B. ¹⁰ And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.
- C. ¹¹ Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.
- C'. ¹² Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well.
- B'. ¹³ For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. 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.
- A'. 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.

There is one more vital point about **vs. 15** to see. Paul identifies the church as “**a pillar and buttress of the truth.**” This is such a massive point that I’ve already prepared us for it by thinking about pillars and buttresses. This is the beginning of a claim that Paul is making that I think few have ever comprehended. We can think of it, thus far, in two parts.

First, **the church is a pillar and buttress** (also good translations are bulwark or support, thinking structurally of course). “Buttress” creates a problem that we find in some translations. The Greek word *hedraiōma* can mean either a support like a **buttress or bulwark** or it can mean a **ground or foundation** (KJV and all older translations). While these are not necessarily mutually exclusive (bulwarks are foundational, but not in the same sense as the actual foundation), “**The question then can be asked: is the church the protector of the truth, or is it the foundation and ground of the truth?**”⁹ Lest you think this is a purely academic exercise, consider Rome and the Reformation.

The Roman Catholic position is that “**the truth finds its grounding in the church.**”¹⁰ In other words, it establishes

⁹ **Daniel C. Arichea** and Howard Hatton, *A Handbook on Paul's Letters to Timothy and to Titus*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1995), 80.

¹⁰ **R. C. Sproul**, “Upholding the Truth: Monday June 29,” *Tabletalk Magazine*, June 2009: *The Parable of the Sower* (Lake Mary, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2009), 58. <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/upholding-truth>.

truth. Truth is what Rome says it is, because Rome is “The Church,” and the church is the foundation of the truth. But this can’t possibly be what Paul means, because elsewhere he tells us that **the church’s foundation is the Word of God**—the apostolic and prophetic writings, of which Christ Jesus is the Chief Cornerstone (cf. **Eph 2:19-20**). This was the testimony of the early church, where Fathers like Irenaeus said, “**The ‘pillar and ground’ of the church is the gospel and the spirit of life**” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.11.8).¹¹ So the truth is not established by the church, but by the deeper foundation of the Scripture.

Thus, the better translation and the one that fits the context here is that the church is *the buttress* of the truth, that is, it holds the truth up, it supports it, preventing it from falling before the eyes of this fallen world. This interpretation parallels the pillar nicely. When **crushing forces from the top**, let’s call them satanic and demonic doctrines, press down hard on the structure, **the church as pillar** bears the weight, disperses it, and keeps the roof from collapsing. When those same crushing forces seek out even

¹¹ The fuller quote “supports” my first diagram of the NT as patterned after the structure of the church. “It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are. **For there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, while the church is scattered throughout all the world**, and the “pillar and ground” of the church is the gospel and the spirit of life. Therefore, it is fitting that it should have four pillars, breathing out immortality on every side and vivifying all humanity afresh.”

the slightest out of plumb wall to begin bending outward, or when **devastating forces from the sides** (let's call them the doctrines of men) seek to blow down the walls, the **church as buttress**, firmly grounded herself, pushes back and will not allow the walls to buckle. So the first claim is that **the church is the support for the truth**. If this is true, then just think of the consequences of the church failing at this duty!

The second is that the church as a household structure (thinking not people now, but building), **contains** something vital. That is, it **contains the truth**. Think of a great cathedral that you've walked into. As you look around, even here on the inside you see pillars and buttresses keeping the vaulted dome above you rather than crashing down on you. But think of that vast **beautiful open space** as containing "the truth." So what is "the truth?" That's the question that Pilate asked Jesus. Jesus said, **"Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice."** Pilate responded, **"What is truth?"** (**John 18:27-28**). It is no coincidence that I bring up this particular conversation between a governor and the God-man who was brought into court and was being put on trial.

The Truth: The Six-Point Hymn of 1 Tim 3:16

When trying to figure out what “truth” Paul is talking about here, we need to keep reading. What we find is that “truth” is not our subjective feelings or opinions about the world. Rather, it parallels structurally with the end of **vs. 16**, so that you have a larger structure that looks something like this:

- A. How one ought to **behave**
- B. In the **household of God**
- B'. Which is the **church of the living God**
- C. A pillar and buttress of **the truth**
- A'. Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of **godliness**
- C'. The great **six-part early hymn** of 1 Tim 3:16b

The end of vs. 16 is what many have called one of the earliest Christian hymns. It's six-part structure focuses in on the historical, objective work of Jesus Christ. This in turn demonstrates that the church is not the ground that establishes the truth. Rather, the truth is the objective truth of human history that directly concerns the Lord Jesus Christ, both his person and his work. *He* is the center of 1 Timothy! He is its pillar and buttress.

Let's now move to **the hymn itself**. As I said, it is composed of six lines (here is the ESV):

1. He was manifested in the flesh,
2. vindicated by the Spirit,
3. seen by angels,
4. proclaimed among the nations,
5. believed on in the world,
6. taken up in glory.

As we get a bird's eye look, we can view it from several different fascinating vantage points. We can think of these as **historical** and **chronological**:¹²

He appeared in a body,	Jesus' incarnation
was vindicated by the Spirit,	Jesus' earthly life
was seen by angels,	Jesus' resurrection
was preached among the nations,	missionary proclamation
was believed on in the world,	response to this proclamation

We can think of them as **spatial**, moving back and forth between **heaven** and earth:

Earthly	Heavenly
He appeared in a body was vindicated by the Spirit
Heavenly	Earthly
was seen by angels was preached among the nations,
Earthly	Heavenly
Was believed on in the world was taken up in glory

¹² This and the next two charts are from **Walter L. Liefeld**, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 141-43.

We can think of these as **emphatic and chiasmic**:

A. He appeared in a body ,	Manifestation on earth (mortal)
B. was vindicated by the Spirit ,	Acceptance in spiritual realm (justification)
C. was seen by angels ,	Comprehension by heavenly beings (witnesses)
C.' was preached among the nations ,	Comprehension by human beings (witnesses)
B.' was believed on in the world ,	Acceptance in earthly realm (faith)
A.' was taken up in glory.	Manifestation in heaven (immortal) ¹³

We can think of the pairings as **antithesis'**:

1. Flesh	3. Angels	5. World
Incarnation and resurrection	Manifestation and proclamation	Reception in world and heaven
2. Spirit	4. Nations	6. Glory [heaven] ¹⁴

Those are just different ways to ruminate on the brilliance of the hymn.

¹³ The parenthesis come from the chiasmic summary at biblical chiasm exchange.

¹⁴ This is found in Beale who gets it from **J. N. D. Kelly**, *The Pastoral Epistles* (London: Black, 1963), pp. 71-77.

But as important as the structure might be, it is the content that is really mind blowing. First, let's look at **what it is actually saying**, then we will move to consider its relationship to the first part of the verse and the idea of “**mystery.**”

God was Manifested in the Flesh

As we think about what the hymn says, we must understand that there are multiple ways of translating most of the lines line. For example,

<i>He was manifested in the flesh,</i>	God <i>was manifested in the flesh</i>
<i>vindicated by the Spirit,</i>	justified <i>by the Spirit</i>
<i>seen by angels,</i>	<i>seen by messengers,</i>
<i>proclaimed among the nations,</i>	<i>preached among the Gentiles</i>
<i>believed on in the world,</i>	<i>Believed on in the world</i>
<i>taken up in glory.</i>	Received <i>up into glory</i>

Some people find this frustrating. I believe this makes good sense of the way poetry works. Poetry differs from prose in that it often opens itself up, intentionally, to multiple lines of thought.

The first difficulty comes from **a textual variant in the first word of the first line**. In the original NT, all the letters

were capitalized and there were no spaces between any of the words (have fun reading that). The first word of our first line is *hos* (ΟΣ). It means “which” or “who.” This is almost certainly the original.¹⁵ However, the capital Omicron (Ο) and the Theta (Θ) look identical, save for a line through its middle. It just so happens that ΘΣ is a short form of the word God. At some point, it seems that “God” replaced “who,” either due to a manuscript defect or a theological change. Hence, some translations (added the full name for God--*theos*) read, “God manifested.” Still others dropped the “Σ” to make the pronoun harmonize with the previous verse and thus they read, “he.” So is it “God” manifested or “he” manifested or “who” manifested?¹⁶

... ΜΥΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ ΟΣ ΕΦΑΝΕΡΩΘΗ ...

... ΜΥΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ ΘΣ ΕΦΑΝΕΡΩΘΗ ...

ΟΣ (ℵ* A*^{vid} C* G^{gr} and many others)

Ο (D* it^d, , , vg Ambrosiaster)

Θ ΟΣ (ℵ^e A² C² D^c K L P Ψ)

ΚΣ	for κυριος (Kurios) = Lord
ΙΗ or ΙΗΣ	for ιησους (Iēsous) = Jesus
ΧΡ or ΧΣ or ΧΡΣ	for χριστος (Christos) = Christ
ΘΣ	for θεος (theos) = God
ΠΝΑ	for πνευμα (pneuma) = Spirit

¹⁵ Bruce Manning Metzger, United Bible Societies, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament, Second Edition a Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament (4th Rev. Ed.)* (London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 573-74.

¹⁶ The picture in the table below is from Edward D. Andrews, “NTTC 1 Timothy 3:16: ‘God was manifest in the flesh’ or ‘He was manifested in the flesh?’” *Christian Publishing House Blog* <https://christianpublishinghouse.co/2019/03/12/nttc-1-timothy-316-god-was-manifest-in-the-flesh-or-he-was-manifested-in-the-flesh-02/>.

While many get all bent out of shape here, in my mind, it's a trick question. In the previous verse, the nearest antecedent noun is "the living God." "He" would refer back to *the living God*, "who" would refer back to *the living God*, and, of course, "God" would refer to *the living God*! So really, there is no theological problem with the variant.¹⁷

The amazing thing this teaches is that this God was "manifested in the flesh." This is clearly talking about the incarnation of Jesus.¹⁸ It echoes **John 1:14**, "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the father." It is beyond comprehension to fully understand how God manifested himself, how there is only one God, how the Father is God, and yet how the one manifesting is not the Father, but the Son. The Son of God *is* God, very God of very God. And now he has appeared in human flesh. This is basic creedal theology.

... *vindicated by the Spirit*

This language of Christ manifesting also echoes **Romans 1:3-4**, "... concerning his Son, who was descended from David *according to the flesh* and was declared to be the Son of

¹⁷ A good, but as far as I can tell, not published study of this that takes my view is **Desh Ansen**, "The Mediator, the Manifestation, and the Testimony," *The Trinity of God* (2017), <https://www.thetriunityofgod.com/1timothy-academic>.

¹⁸ See Beale's discussion.

God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.” But this opening in Romans also parallels line 2 in a remarkable way. The language, “was declared with power ... according to the Spirit” parallels “vindicated by the Spirit.” The word Paul uses here for “vindicated” is the verbal form of justification (*dikaioō*). But what is justification? It is to be “declared” righteous. So in both passages, Jesus is being declared something by the Spirit.

Declared what? I would suggest **declared innocent**, perfect, guiltless. This occurred throughout his earthly ministry, for example at his baptism and transfiguration when the Father and Spirit (bird and cloud) come together, and Jesus is called the beloved Son in whom God is well-pleased. But, as **Romans 1:4** says, he was also declared this *by his resurrection*. In other words, the resurrection of Jesus was legal proof (think justification again) that the Lord was innocent. And the Holy Spirit of God vindicated him by raising him from the dead. In doing this, “**He confirmed that everything Jesus ever said or did was true ... the resurrection was the Holy Spirit’s verification that Jesus is the Christ.**”¹⁹

¹⁹ Philip Graham Ryken, *1 Timothy*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Daniel M. Doriani, and Philip Graham Ryken, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 145.

... *seen by angels*

The third line tells us that Jesus was “[seen by angels](#).” Some suggest here that “angels” should be translated as “[messengers](#),” and that it refers to [humans](#), i.e. the disciples when Jesus rose from the dead. This is certainly a possibility. However, and this is the beauty of both the word “angel” and a poem, the word can do [double-duty](#).

The much more popular way of translating it is that he was seen by the *heavenly* messengers, that is the [principalities and powers](#) of the unseen realm. The angels appeared at his incarnation ([Luke 2:13-14](#)), attended him in his temptation in the wilderness ([Mark 1:12-13](#)), helped him in the Garden of Gethsemane ([Luke 22:43](#)), were present before any of the disciples at the empty tomb of Jesus ([Matt 28:1-7](#)), and they witnessed the ascension of Jesus into heaven ([Acts 1:9-11](#)). In this, the angels become [eyewitnesses to Christ’s glory](#) and majesty both hidden in human flesh and unbound in the resurrection.

It is also possible that this includes [the fallen angels](#) such as Satan. In saying this, I’m trying not to divorce this line too much from the previous. Paul tells us that if Satan and his cohorts had known about the resurrection and their defeat,

they never would have put to death the Son of God (1Cor 2:8). And the Psalms (68) and Paul (Eph 4) and Peter (1Pet 3) all hint that Jesus was seen by them during his descent into hell where he proclaimed his victory over them, and then in rising from the dead and then into heaven, he became seated at the right hand of power in heaven, having subjected these creatures to his will and power. They see him now, victorious over them.

... proclaimed among the nations

The idea that the messengers can be human becomes a nice tie-in to the fourth line. Jesus was “proclaimed among the nations.” Who proclaimed him but these very same disciples who saw him?

To “proclaim” him is to preach him, and this very clearly refers to the apostolic preaching of the gospel. It was just after his ascension into heaven that the disciples came back and were filled by the same Holy Spirit who vindicated our Lord. By his supernatural power, they were then filled with a message that transformed the world. Beginning at Pentecost when there was “from every nation under

heaven” ([Acts 2:5](#)), people present to hear, the message of salvation began to reach the ears of the Gentiles.

... believed on in the world

In turn, as they heard [the preaching of forgiveness of sin](#) and eternal life and fellowship with the living God, the world—not just Israel but the world of the Gentiles—began to believe in him. That’s the power of preaching the Gospel. There is a fascinating correspondence between this, [the fifth line](#) of the hymn and the [second](#). In the second, the Spirit “[justifies](#).” In the fifth, the people “[believe](#).” Justification and faith are embedded as twins in the song.

This, of course, [began with the Jews](#)—his disciples. [John and Peter](#) ran to the tomb and “believed” in the risen Savior though they had not even seen him yet ([John 20:8](#)). [Mary Magdalene](#) “believed” when Jesus himself came to her in his resurrected body ([John 20:18](#)). Jesus came the [twelve](#) ([Matt 28:17](#)) and finally to [Thomas](#) who also believed ([20:24-29](#)).

When [Peter began to preach](#) and the people asked him what they should do, having heard of their own guilt in the crucifixion, perhaps not directly as soldiers and governors, but indirectly as mocking bystanders and rebellious people

whose sin Christ was punished for, they were cut to the heart and asked what they should do.

Peter did not respond, “Go and obey all of the law of God, and then come back when you are more spiritual.” Rather, he said, “Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus” (Acts 2:38). And it says many thousands of people that very day “believed” (44). From that day until this, there has not passed a single day when God did not save someone new. Every day someone believes this same message for the first time, for it is the power of God to salvation itself. If you have heard this message and not responded, it is still not too late. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved. Know the power of God and of the truth contained in this song and in Christ’s church.

... taken up in glory

Thus far, the hymn does seem to work quite well chronologically. Then we come to line 6. He was “taken up in glory.” This is language used in Acts of the ascension of Jesus before Pentecost. But the ascension happened prior to the apostolic preaching. It is chronological, Phillip Ryken suggests that it is possible that this refers to the Second

Coming and that it is put in the past tense because it is a certain inevitability. “When Jesus returns to this earth he will come the way he left, trailing clouds of glory, to gather all his people to himself.”²⁰

Whether or not this is the case, the important thing is that Jesus is glorified. This is the opposite of line 1 where he humbled himself in human flesh. Now, his mortal flesh has put on immortality. As the Son at the right hand of the Father in heaven, he has become king and glorified himself in heaven and earth, as man and God, as Son and Servant, and King and Ruler of all.

The Church: Bulwark of the Gospel

As we begin to wind this up, I want to first tie this back to the church. Paul is not merely giving a creed to give a creed. Yet, he is giving us a creed and therefore, the modern creed, “No creed but Christ” flies in the face of our passage! This creed is the most central point of the letter and happens to be *the truth* that is housed inside the structure, the household of God, which is the church of the Living God, the pillar and buttress of the truth. This is precisely why we

²⁰ Ryken, 149.

confess the creeds that are so similar to this today. It is our job. Paul is giving **all of these instructions** to Timothy about how people are to behave, about how to handle heretics, how to worship God properly, how to order the offices of the church, and more that we will come to in the second half of the letter, **because it is in his church that this most central truth is housed**.

Those things matter in a way **analogous** to the OT **tabernacle** and furnishings and rules and laws and codes and order that accompanied it's dwelling in the midst of the people. God's law was placed in the very center of the Most Holy Place, the middle of the entire camp of Israel. Above that law was the throne itself, and the Angel of the LORD ruled from this place. As he radiated holiness outward to the people, **the people had to be holy in turn**, through sacrifices and rituals that provided atonement and cleansing from sin and from regular old impurity and decay created by a contaminated unholy world.

If Israel did not keep this properly, everything would fall apart. We see this with **Nadab and Abihu** when they waltz into the Holy Place and are incinerated. We see it with **Korah** and his rebellious rabble, whom God punished and the earth opened up and swallowed. We see it with the

Babylonian exile, with the people being taken away and slaughtered and sent into slavery in a foreign land. Holiness could not live with uncleanness. The two were ultimately incompatible.

In the same way, Paul is telling his church that **it houses something so precious**, so holy, so other-worldly, that it is vital its entire organization is structured properly, that the truth is preserved fully, and that its people behave godly. The church's singular job is **to buttress this truth**, to uphold it in a world pressuring it from above and outside, so that it remains firm and visible until Christ returns so that men and women and children from all over the world might be saved.

They Mystery of Godliness

But, you see, I opened up today with a thought that is, to me, **even more fundamental** in this passage than even the church's vital role in all of this. That thought was about **mystery**. The whole coming of Christ, including his birth, death, and resurrection are a mystery, and the Scripture contains every single element of a good mystery novel. But I'm no mystery writer, and this is no mystery novel. And yet, I have put before you **a few nuggets** that I hope you

have been able to chew on and that you might even now be wondering if I will finally answer. We've discussed another mystery: salvation. Paul talks about still another in our passage. Why did I bring up all this talk of godliness leading to salvation? What about that answer people did not want to hear about salvation?

When *that young man came to Jesus* and asked what he must do to earn eternal life, Jesus told him to *go and obey the Law* of God. He specifically mentioned the second table of the Ten Commandments: don't *murder*, don't commit *adultery*, don't *steal*, don't bear *false witness*, *honor your father and mother ... love your neighbor* as yourself (*Matt 19:18*). Incredibly, this man told the "good teacher" (*16-17*; see *Luke 18:18-19*) that he has kept all those! (*20*) (this is precisely why Jesus told him even before this that "no one is good except God alone).

But Jesus knew him, as he knows you. "If you would be perfect, go and sell everything you have and give it to the poor and come and follow me" (*Matt 19:21*). This is what made the man sad, for he was rich and *he could not do that!* Jesus then told the disciples the mystery. "*Only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle...*" (*23-24*).

“Who then can be saved?” (25). “Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man this is *impossible*’” (26). It wasn’t difficult, it was impossible.

So is salvation impossible after all? “... *but with God all things are possible*” (26b). No, it isn’t. Not with God. With God’s help? No. Jesus just said for you it is impossible. You can never measure up to perfection, as Jesus proved to this man. But Jesus can. And Jesus did. And Jesus offers that perfection to any who believe in him.

This now becomes the mystery of **1 Timothy 3:15-16**. **Why did Paul give us this hymn?** It is because in these six little lines, the mystery of salvation is expounded. Jesus came in the flesh. Jesus was vindicated by the Spirit. Jesus was seen by the angels. Jesus was proclaimed among the nations. Jesus was believed on in the world. Jesus was taken up into glory. Through Christ, God is pleased to save. Through Christ and Christ alone. It is difficult, but not impossible for the rich man to be saved. Impossible for him, but not for God. And he doesn’t even have to *do* anything to be saved!

But that’s the very thing he hated most. **He *wanted* the glory**. He wanted to do it. God says, “**No, but my Son is the Glory. He did it all. Believe on him and you shall be saved so that I might glorify my Beloved Son and give you the**

benefits of that glory, by raising you up with him in glory yourself!”

But not only is salvation like this, **so is godliness**. And this is the real mind-blower for people who want to begin with the Spirit but end with the Law. Paul calls this the “**mystery of godliness**.” What is the mystery of godliness? **The hymn!** The creed. The work of Christ. Whose godliness? *Your* godliness. But how? It isn’t that godliness leads to salvation (as the young man thought), but that **salvation leads to godliness!** That’s the mystery.

Go back to the deacons. They must hold to the “**mystery of the faith**” (**1Tim 3:8**). This is sandwiched between all of these qualifications for ministry where they are to be godly. Now we have the parallel to shine light on this. *Great indeed is the mystery of godliness* (**16**). You see? The two mysteries are the same. **The mystery of godliness is the same as the mystery of salvation**. Godliness is no more of you than salvation is. Godliness is not about you making yourself godly. Rather, it is about trusting in the work of Christ alone. And through this, you are united to God in Christ. His righteousness *becomes your own* in a mystery, a mysterious union. The Holy Spirit who vindicated Jesus now lives in you. Christ in you, the hope of glory. **You become the**

tabernacle, cleansed not by the blood of bulls and goats, but by the once-for-all shed blood of the Lamb of God. You are purified. Once-for-all. Christ's work does everything, past-present-and future for your salvation.

You say, “That’s too much for me to handle. It can’t be that easy.” It isn’t easy. It’s the hardest thing in the world to do to trust God alone that what he says about these things is really true and that by surrendering your own self-righteousness, he will create righteousness in you—a godly life.

People just don’t understand this mystery, that’s why they clamor for self-help. That’s why they want “how-tos.” Just tell me how to be a better person, what must I do? That’s why they even want theological sermons—void of Christ. Let me do it! Let me think all the right things, then I’ll be saved. Let me do all the right works, then I’ll be a better Christian. No. If you are in Christ, you are already a perfect Christian, positionally speaking. God declares you not guilty and holy. Now, through faith, God takes what is declared and begins working it out through continually revisiting, thinking about, internalizing, and most of all believing this six-hymned Gospel song.

Christ Jesus did it all. Not just some of it. All of it. And for it, he is to be praised and glorified by his people. He is the center of 1 Timothy. He is the Way, the TRUTH, and the Life. He is the center of Scripture. He is the reason any of us are here today. May you feel the paradox of this deep mystery. May you see why it is that *you must* fall short. And may you see how in your own emptiness, true godliness comes to Christ's church, so that at the end of the day, while she is supporting the truth in this world, she herself is actually being supported and grounded in the immovable Rock of Age, the Chief-Cornerstone of the church.

Appendix: Mystery and 1 Timothy

“Mystery” is a word that has received a lot of scholarly attention in recent years. In fact, G. K. Beale devoted an entire book to it.²¹ In the chapter on 1 Timothy, he shows how many of the lines of the hymn have OT counterparts. While it would be an interesting study to see if all of the lines have some kind of counterpart, it is without question that those

²¹ G. K. Beale and Benjamin L. Gladd, *Hidden But Now Revealed: A Biblical Theology of Mystery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014). See also Galen W. Wiley, “A Study of ‘Mystery’ in the New Testament,” *Grace Theological Journal* 6.2 (1985): 349-60, http://biblicalstudies.gospelstudies.org.uk/pdf/gtj/06-2_349.pdf.

which do focus on the person of Christ, either in the OT himself and/or in prophecy.

For the purposes of this Appendix, I wanted to include a comparison of other NT passages about “mystery” which have a semantic overlap with 1 Timothy 3:15-16. This in turn highlights even more that the greatest mystery of all isn’t salvation or sanctification, but Christ incarnate: birth, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension.

1Tim 3:15-16	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 : <i>He was manifested (φανερώω) in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.</i>
Rom 16:26	Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed (φανερώω) and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations , according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith --
Eph 5:32	This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church .
Col 1:24-27	Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church , of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed (φανερώω) to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory .

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