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THE MYSTERY OF GODLINESS

BY RICHARD JORDAN

"These things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly:

"But If I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God' which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.

"And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory"(1 Tim. 3:14-16).

THE NONCONTROVERSIAL CONTROVERSY

Even though the Apostle insists that "without controversy great is the mystery of godliness" there does in fact seem to be a great deal of controversy surrounding this mystery. No doubt because of the phrase "God was manifest in the flesh," it is commonly taken to be a reference to the deity of Christ. We are convinced however, that the basic facts of the passage demonstrate this not to be the case.

First, the deity of Christ was no mystery--an antinomy, yes; but not a mystery in the Scriptural sense of the word. Rather it had long been predicted that Messiah would indeed be "God manifest in the flesh." Consider just a few passages:

"Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth.

"In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is the name whereby he shall be called THE LORD (Heb., JEHOVAH) OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS" (Jer.23:5,6).

"AND THE LORD (Heb., JEHOVAH) SHALL BE KING OVER ALL THE EARTH: In that day there shall be one Lord [Jehovah] and His name one" (Zech. 14:9).

"And she shall bring forth a son and thou shalt call His name Jesus: for He shall save His people from their sins.

"Now all this was done THAT IT MIGHT BE FULFILLED WHICH WAS SPOKEN OF THE LORD BY THE PROPHET, saying,

"Behold a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they SHALL CALL HIS NAME EMMANUEL, WHICH BEING INTERPRETED IS' GOD WITH US" (Matt 1:21-23).

The list of Scripture passages could go on and on to indicate that it was no mystery--no "secret previously hidden but now made manifest"--that Jesus Christ was God indeed the Jehovah of the Old Testament, manifest in the flesh.

Beyond this is the simple fact that the items listed in 1 Timothy 3:16 are not easily made to fit the life and ministry of our Lord. Commentators are in a strait to explain in just what sense it could be said that Christ needed to be "justified" or how He was "preached unto the Gentiles" and "believed on in the world" before He was "received up into glory."

Further, the subject of this mystery is clearly said to be godliness, not the incarnation or deity of Christ. This should be noted carefully for godliness is actually the subject of the whole chapter. Paul first details the standards of character and conduct to be found in bishops and deacons and then closes the chapter with a description of godliness in the local assembly itself.

Since the context is so clearly the Church it seems most consistent to view "the mystery of godliness" as a reference to it--to "the Church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." This Church is not a building of wood or stone, but an assembly of people, an assembly of believers, in whom "the living God" dwells. Indeed' it is called a "holy temple in the Lord" and is said to be the "habitation of God through the Spirit" (Eph.2:19-22).

THE GREAT MYSTERY

God manifest in the flesh: The basic function of the Church on earth is thus identified as being the place where God manifests Himself. This fits with Paul's exhortation that believers are:

"Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, THAT THE LIFE ALSO OF JESUS MIGHT BE MADE MANIFEST IN OUR MORTAL BODY.

"For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, THAT THE LIFE ALSO OF JESUS MIGHT BE MADE MANIFEST IN OUR MORTAL FLESH" (2 Cor. 4:10,11).

What better definition of true godliness than this: the manifestation of the "life of Jesus" in our lives (see Gal 2:20)! Such godliness is the means whereby God Himself is made known.

An illustration of this is found in the earthly ministry of our Lord Himself. Speaking to His apostles on the eve of His death He says:

"If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also: and from henceforth ye know Him, and have seen Him.

"Philip saith unto Him, Lord, shew us the Father, and it sufficeth us.

"Jesus saith unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? HE THAT HATH SEEN ME HATH SEEN THE FATHER: and how sayest thou then, Shew us the Father?

"Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? THE WORDS THAT I SPEAK UNTO YOU I SPEAK NOT OF MYSELF; BUT THE FATHER THAT DWELLETH IN ME, HE DOETH THE WORKS" (John 14:7-10).

Because Christ's words and works were those of the Father who sent Him, it was in reality the Father who was manifested through His life and ministry (See also John 5:19, 6:38, 12:49, etc.). And so it is today Just as God the Father was manifested through Christ, in like manner God the Son is manifested through "the Church which is His body." Hence Paul could declare:

"According to my earnest expectation and my hope, that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but that with all boldness, as always, SO NOW ALSO CHRIST SHALL BE MAGNIFIED IN MY BODY, whether it be by life or by death.

"FOR TO ME TO LIVE IS CHRIST, AND TO DIE IS GAIN" ((Phil. 1 :20,21)).

God is working today through the Body of Christ and it is through it that He is made real and tangible, indeed made "manifest in the flesh." It is an awesome thought to realize that the character of God is placed on public display in the lives of believers who walk by faith in the Word rightly divided. Paul describes it thus:

"Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God" (Phil. 1:11).

Godliness, then, is a topic which should be of supreme importance to each individual believer, to say nothing of the Church as a whole. We must ever be on guard "that the

name of God and His doctrine be blasphemed" (1Tim 6:1) because of our action or attitudes; but rather that we "adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things." Tit 2:10

And how is such godliness to be attained? How is "the life of Jesus" to be made manifest in my poor, mortal flesh? If we were left to ourselves, this would be utterly impossible! Ah, but we are not thus stranded, but "our sufficiency is of God" and thus Pau lists the next element in the secret of godliness:

Justifies in the Spirit: This is no doubt a reference to what Paul spoke of in 1 Corinthians 6:11:

"...but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God."

By God's grace we have been washed, sanctified and justified by the Spirit, through the redemptive work of Christ. And it is just for this reason that we are both exhorted and enabled to live lives that honor Him. But the "fruits of righteousness" can be borne in our lives only as we "walk in Spirit"--only then can we hope not to "fulfill the lusts of the flesh" (See Gal 5:16). Consider Romans 8:10-13 here:

"And If Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin: but THE SPIRIT IS LIFE BECAUSE OF RIGFTEOUSNESS.

"But If the Spirit of Him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, HE THAT RAISED UP CHRIST FROM THE DEAD SHALL ALSO QUICKEN YOUR MORTAL BODIES BY HIS SPIRIT THAT DWELLETH IN YOU.

"Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the fresh, to live after the fresh.

"For If ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but IF YE THROUGH THE SPIRIT DO MORTIFY THE DEEDS OF THE BODY, YE SHALL LIVE."

Because our sins have been righteously dealt with by Christ and His righteousness imputed to us the Holy Spirit within us is now our life and it is His presence that enables us to overcome the desires of the flesh and to live victoriously for the Lord. If we "live after the flesh" the joy, peace and blessing of our Christian experience will wither and die, our lives will disintegrate and go to pieces--"corrupt" and "die" (See Gal. 6:8). On the other hand, our Christian lives will flourish and prosper, bearing the precious "fruits of righteousness" as we focus our attention on what God has done for us and is doing in us--all, of course, in Christ.

In the dispensation of grace, God is not working through the supernatural interventions and miraculous demonstrations of former days. Rather His way is the quiet working of godliness, the working of the Spirit of God as He takes His Word and transforms believers into the image and likeness of Jesus Christ--thus making Him manifest:

"But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, ARE CHANGED INTO THE SAME IMAGE FROM GLORY TO GLORY EVEN AS BY THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD" (2 Cor. 3:18).

Thus, just as Jesus Christ was ..declared to be the Son of God" by the Spirit (Rom. 1:4), so we, His body, are declared to be His and His righteousness is placed on display in our lives as we walk in the Spirit.

Seen of angels: The whole angelic creation is able to observe "the manifold wisdom" of God's ..eternal purpose" as they view believing Jews and Gentiles being "reconciled to God in one body by the cross" and functioning together there as "one Body in Christ." See Ephesians 3:10,11.

Preached unto the Gentiles: The natural result of this never before revealed way in which godliness was to work (i.e., through the Body of Christ) is that "Christ is preached" Indeed "the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men" (Tit. 2:11).

Believed on in the world: It should be noted that Paul does not say, "Believed on by the world" for the world at large goes on its Christ-rejecting way. The "not many" of 1Corinthians 1:26, however, do believe:

"For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe" (1 Cor. 1:21).

Received up into glory,: Finally, at the rapture, the Church of the living God will be "received up into glory" and our "blessed hope" will be a wondrous reality as we are "manifested with Him in glory" (Col. 3:4). Then Ephesians 2:7 will begin to have its fulfillment:

"That in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace, in His kindness toward us, through Christ Jesus."

Thus the Church on earth is to be "the pillar and ground of the truth" God would have proclaimed today. We are not to change it, hide it, water it down but to stand for it--to live it, model it, maintain it, protect it and proclaim it. The Church is thus to be the very center of godliness in this present evil world. How solemn, then" are Paul's words to the Corinthians and to us:

"...YE ARE THE TEMPLE OF THE LIVING GOD; AS GOD HATH SAID, I WILL DWELL IN THEM, AND WALK IN THEM; AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE" (2 Cor. 6:16).



THE STARTING POINT

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ" (Eph. 1:3).

This is not some goal to which we are to attain. This is nor some high standard which we are to reach. Rather this is where we start as believers, and it is here we would do well to stand, for on this standing we can rest quietly, wait patiently and "rejoice evermore."

If we do not see and know this blessed truth of the believer's perfect and complete standing in Christ, we start far below our privileges and with all our efforts we shall never attain to anything like this height of blessing.

Our temptation, of course, is to focus on ourselves but this can only cause disaster. To be occupied with our state is to shut out from view the standing which is ours in Christ. Then, instead of a life of "rejoicing" and "giving thanks" for what God has done, ours becomes a life of disappointments and regrets for what we have not done.

It is surely not by accident that Paul, after having enumerated a portion of our "all spiritual blessings," would intensify his teachings and show forth their reality and depth by recording the Holy Spirit's prayer for us through him:

"That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of HIM:

"The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of HIS calling, and what the riches of the glory of HIS inheritance in the saints,

"And what is the exceeding greatness of HIS power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of HIS mighty power" (Eph. 1:17-19).

Notice carefully that from the very first petition our thoughts are taken entirely out of ourselves. He would teach us that God would have us taken up with Himself--with the knowledge of Him, calling, His inheritance, His power.

When the Holy Spirit thus prays for us all is focused on what God has accomplished in Christ--and it is here that this Divine prayer differs so greatly from all human prayers. We are full of ourselves--our needs, our blessings, the knowledge of ourselves, the hope of our calling or inheritance, our power. We are the center, the focus and the circumference which bounds our view.

It is only as we get to know Him and all that He is to us and all that He has for us that we can start from His purpose and not from ours; then--and only then--will we begin with His fullness and not our own need.

In the words of Helen Lemmel's familiar verse:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face;
And the things of earth grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace.

WHAT WE NEED

BY: DAN GROSS

"For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I" (Rom. 7:15).

Some have taught that this statement was made by Paul in reference to his life prior to being saved. This is certainly not the case, however. Notice that Paul speaks in this verse of "What I hate" No unsaved person hates sin. Furthermore, in verse 22 Paul says, "I delight in the Law of God." This is assuredly not the statement of an unsaved man!

Romans 7 is a penetrating look at the struggle every believer encounters between living under the law and living under grace. Living under grace causes us to lose all confidence in the flesh. The very thing that the inward man hates, the flesh does. Grace leads us to rely totally upon Jesus Christ our Lord. Many trust in the lord for salvation but then begin to trust in the flesh in their Christian life and service. Many make commitments and promises to the Lord only to find "what I would, that do I not."

How grateful we should be on a daily basis for the finished work of Jesus Christ. He did the work that we could never do ourselves. He has given us all that we need to enable us to walk "after the Spirit." Truly He is the One deserving of all praise and honor!
