

"The mystery of piety"

1 Timothy 3: 15-16

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One blessed feature of our calling is that we are in integral part of the House of God. Please read these two verses of Scripture from the N. Tr. by J.N.D. Note, Timothy was not exhorted as to how *he* should behave, rather that he should know how *one* should behave — any one who would take account, for this is an abstract statement, albeit having very practical results on the part of any who obey it. When would such knowledge apply? Constantly, for we are always in the House of God, as we learn elsewhere, we form part of it, 1 Corinthians 3: 9, "Ye are God's building," also, "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?" Further, we read in Ephesians 2: 22, "Ye also are builded together for an habitation of God in the Spirit." also, 1 Peter 2: 5, ". . . yourselves also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house . . ."

As the Pillar, the function of the Assembly is to bear witness to all who are without. First, for the pleasure of God who dwells there, then for the lasting blessing of all who receive the testimony in faith. For the God of the House of God, is a Saviour God and, as such, would have all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

The pillars of Solomon's temple Jachin and Boaz, were conspicuous, being eighteen cubits high, their heads being ornamented with pomegranates and lilies — fruit and purity. Similarly, we apply these features to the Assembly as the Pillar of the Truth. It was also the Ground of the Truth. The outstanding witness of the Assembly as the House of God is to the manner in which that truth had been witnessed to by our Lord. The Assembly then is the vessel in which is deposited the Truth, according to 1 Timothy 1: 10, 11; Acts 2: 42; Ephesians 2: 20 — apostolically. In 2 Timothy days when, in contrast to 1 Timothy days, the break-down, even in Paul's time, is beyond recovery in any general way, we are responsible to maintain it individually as before God. for this see 2 Tim. 1: 8, 13, 14; 2 Tim. 2: 1, 2, 19-22; 2 Tim. 3: 14-17; 2 Tim. 4: 1-5.

What then is the Truth? "Confessedly the mystery of piety is great." One of its blessed features is the holding of what the apostle Paul spoke of as "my Gospel," and further, "my Doctrine." Piety may be professed in its form, an outward semblance, indicative of pretence, whilst its power may be denied. As to such as practice this kind of hypocrisy the apostle plainly says "from such turn away." It may truly be said that while in the first epistle this character was more or less limited, the apostle saying as to it, "*some* shall depart from the faith" (1 Timothy 4: 1), when we turn to the second epistle the decline has gained momentum, and he sadly writes, "This thou knowest, that *all* they which be in Asia be turned away from me" (2 Timothy 1: 15). Yet piety has been seen livingly in this world and we may truly say that, while it is never attributed to God, it is though to man in his conduct Godward.

When our Lord is introduced to us in this passage of Scripture our hearts are immediately engaged with One who in His every thought, word, and deed, lived entirely for God. Hence the first expression, "God was manifested in flesh." He who had spoken creation into being had Himself entered creation!

There had been manifestations of God in Old Testament days as in the case of Abraham in Genesis 18, "And the LORD appeared unto him . . . and he lift up his eyes and looked, and lo, *three* men stood by him: and when he say them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed himself to the ground, And said, My Lord . . ." This was certainly a Theophany — a manifestation of God to man. By

the way, note Abraham's mode of address. While he greeted them in the singular, he treated them in the plural. Significantly, the Lord appeared in threefold form on this occasion, long before the truth of the tri-unity of the Godhead was revealed in New Testament days. However, it may have been implied in the language of the first verses of the Bible in the use of the plural (at least three) noun, Elohim. However this may be, profound field for faith's consideration as it is, here in 1 Timothy 3: 16 we are not told of a manifestation of God by any means whatever, rather we are taught that "God has been manifested in flesh." Surely this is allied with such a Scripture as John 1: 1, "and the Word was God," also verse 14 of the same chapter, "and the Word became flesh." Obviously, the Deity of the Word is spoken of in the first verse, then the actuality of His incarnation in the fourteenth verse.

Thus was fulfilled the prophetic pronouncement of Isaiah 7: 14; being realised in Matthew 1: 23, as there predicted, ". . . and they shall call His Name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us."

To return to 1 Timothy, why "in flesh"? Read Hebrews 2: 13, 14, "Since therefore the children partake of blood and flesh, He also, in like manner, took part in the same," and in verse 16, "For he does not indeed take hold of angels by the hand . . . it behoved Him in all things to be made like to His brethren." Proverbs 8 speaks of Wisdom personified being before God's works of old, "rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth, and my delights were with the sons of men." Someone has said, "Because the predilection of God was with men, God became man." The same also said, "The creation of man necessitated Bethlehem, and the fall of man necessitated Calvary."

Time and again, as we consider the Gospels in their presentation of our Lord, we are constrained to confess, "of a truth God is here." When the great tempest arose He was asleep in the ship, His disciples came to Him and waking Him, said, "Lord, save us; we perish. And He said to them, Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith? Then He arose, and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm. But the men marvelled saying, What manner of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him!" (Matthew 8: 23-27).

Creation's God was there, the Master of the elements! On that other occasion when that woman of the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat in the house of a Pharisee, at meat, came and stood at His feet behind Him weeping. "He said unto her, Thy sins are forgiven. They that sat with Him at the table, began to say within themselves, Who is this that forgiveth sins also?" The forgiving God was there! He who had been sinned against, being there in fashion as a man, was such in riches of grace. We shall never fail to bless God for becoming Man. He had done so that He might draw near to men in wondrous revelation and that, in response to the wonder of His grace which had brought Him so low, men might draw near to Him in spontaneity of adoration. We thank Him then for what He has done, we praise Him for the way He has done it, we worship Him for Who He is.

We next read that He "has been justified in the Spirit." We know that, so far as we are concerned, being justified we are made right with God, judicially, and that by sacrifice on the principle of faith. This cannot be so with respect to God! The sweet Psalmist of Israel, in Psalm 51: 4, justified God in acknowledging his own guilt saying, "that Thou mightest be justified when Thou speakest, and be clear when Thou judgest." The publicans justified God by receiving baptism at the hands of John the Baptist (Luke 7: 29). Indeed, "Wisdom is justified of all her children" (Luke 7: 35).

Each of these citations indicate that God was declared right. Being justified in the Spirit says as plainly as possible that God has done the right thing in having been manifested in the flesh, and thus has the stamp of the Spirit's approval been put upon that life of spotless worth. According to Romans 1: 4, our Lord lived His life, in every detail of it, "according to the Spirit of holiness." In His entry into the

human estate He was conceived by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1: 35). Following His baptism by John the Baptist, the Holy Spirit came upon Him in dove-like form, anointing Him for His public service (John 1: 32). In John 6: 27, we learn from His own lips, ". . . for Him hath God the Father sealed" (Matt. 12: 22). Throughout the entire course of His path of holy service He ever acted by the power of the Spirit. Did He not say, ". . . if I cast out devils by the Spirit of God" (Matt. 12: 28), referring to His healing of the demon possessed, blind and dumb man in the synagogue.

Before leaving this matter of His having been justified in the Spirit it may be profitable to review the manner in which the Spirit comported Himself towards the Lord — especially in His wilderness temptation. It is well known that each of the four gospels has its own peculiar presentation of Him. For instance, Matthew sets before us His regal rights as King of Israel — Matt. 2: 12, "Where is He that is born King of the Jews?" Mark, as the Servant-Prophet. Luke, as the Perfect Man. John, as Son in the glory of Godhead.

Hence, Matthew wrote, "Then Jesus was *carried* up into the wilderness by the Spirit" (Matt. 4: 1 N. Tr.). Mark says, "And immediately the Spirit *drives* Him into the wilderness" (Mark 1: 12). Luke, in his account, tells us, "But Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit . . . was *led* in the wilderness." John, who emphasises His Deity as the Word and as the Only-Begotten Son, does not record the wilderness temptation, but tells us, "And John bore witness, saying, I beheld the Spirit descending as a dove from heaven, and it abode upon Him. And I knew Him not; but He that sent me to baptise with water, He said to me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending and abiding on Him, He it is who baptises with the Holy Spirit. And I have seen and borne witness that this is the Son of God."

In the gospel of the King, the Spirit exercises due deference to Him — He *carried* Him. In the gospel of the Servant of Jehovah, the Spirit *driveth* Him. In the gospel of the Perfect Man, He was *led*. In the gospel of His Godhead, He is described as *using* the Spirit. While we do not carry servants, we order or drive them. We do certainly carry kings. The Man of Luke's gospel is neither carried nor driven yet He, in perfect obedience, is led. In the gospel of John, He who is so early presented as having brought all things into being, is gladly served by the Spirit.

We pass now to another facet of the heart affecting truth that God has been manifested in flesh. He "has appeared unto angels." Those unfallen beings, ever His willing servants in pre-incarnation times, first looked upon their Creator when He became flesh. For instance we read of those seraphic beings with their six wings, Isaiah 6: 2, "With twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he flew. And one called to the other and said, Holy, holy, holy, is Jehovah of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!" They uncovered their faces when God was manifested in flesh. Note the threefold cry, "Holy, holy, holy" — why? Not once, nor twice but thrice. Could there be here the acclamation of the triune God? He Who was seen of angels when in subject Manhood was ever reverentially saluted by them. It was an angel who had brought the news of His impending birth to Joseph (Matthew 1: 20, 21). Gabriel was sent to Nazareth to the virgin to intimate to her that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and "wherefore the Holy Thing also which shall be born shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1: 35).

And in Luke 2: 8, an angel was there by the shepherds to herald the birth of a "Saviour . . . who is Christ the Lord." Also, "Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good pleasure in men" (Luke 2: 13, 14). Thus God, manifesting Himself in flesh — whatever consternation and trouble laid hold of men in Jerusalem, that city where God had placed His Name (Matthew 2: 3) — set the heavenly host agog with joy and praise, bringing into the world the pledge of ultimate peace as the fruit of coming

reconciliation.

Later, in the wilderness temptation as recorded in Mark 1: 11, He was with the wild beasts and angels ministered to Him. When at a later date still He went into the garden of Gethsemane and anticipatively faced the horror of being made sin, sacrificially, "an angel appeared to Him from heaven strengthening Him" (Luke 22: 43).

When one of His disciples drew his sword and smote off the ear of the bondman of the High Priest, Jesus said to him, "Return thy sword to its place; for all who take the sword shall perish by the sword. Or thinkest thou that I cannot now call upon my Father, and He will furnish Me more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matt. 26: 52).

That heavenly host that had throbbed with joy and adulation at His birth were now ready, did the Father give them word, to hasten to His help! A legion of Roman troops numbered anything from 3000 to 6000 fighting men — just think of it, more than twelve legions of angels — but the Father gave no such word, nor did our Lord ask for them. He certainly wrought no miracle to preserve Himself from death, indeed He wrought a miracle in dying! (c.f. John 10: 18).

When He had been crucified and lain in the borrowed tomb (we pass over the account of His death, for it has no place in these facets of the truth that God has been manifested in flesh) those women who, in their affectionate concern for their expectantly entombed Lord, were saying one to another, "Who shall roll us away the stone?" need not have so wondered, "for an angel of [the] Lord, descending out of heaven, came and rolled away the stone, and sat upon it" (Matt. 28: 2).

Forty days after, whilst the disciples stood gazing up into heaven, as He was going up, "behold, also, two men stood by them in white clothing, which also said, . . . why do ye stand looking into heaven? This Jesus . . . shall thus come in the manner in which ye have beheld him going into heaven" (Acts 1: 10, 11).

Thus, then, was He seen of angels! Throughout His entire course here in flesh, even when no human eye beheld Him, He was ever the object of occupation and adoration to those heavenly hosts.

He, "has been preached among the nations" — the impact of God having been manifested in flesh was too great to be confined to Israel. The testimony of it must be widespread. As risen from among the dead the Lord had commissioned and commanded His own that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His Name, beginning at Jerusalem. For this witness they would require power from on high. The Spirit having come upon them they would witness to their Lord in Jerusalem, all Judaea, and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. We might add that in this would be an extension to His being justified in the Spirit. From then on we trace their activity in witness, moving on in the early chapters of the book of Acts, in Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria and, following the conversion of the erstwhile persecutor Saul of Tarsus, the uttermost parts of the earth or, as he wrote in Colossians 1: 23, "the hope of the glad tidings, which ye have heard, which have been proclaimed in the whole creation which is under heaven." Praise God! the witness continues still — "God is one, and the Mediator of God and men one, the Man Christ Jesus, Who gave Himself a ransom for all, the testimony to be rendered in its own time" (1 Tim. 2: 5, 6).

"Has been believed on in the world." Blest triumph of grace! He had come into the world and though the world had been made by Him, it knew Him not (John 1: 10). Such though has been the issue of God having been manifested in flesh that its truth in witness has been exceedingly fruitful. No longer the land of the Jews but to the whole wide world has been the witness. The results shall shortly be seen and heard for "They sing a new song, . . . thou hast redeemed to God . . . out of every tribe, and tongue,

and people, and nation" (Rev. 5: 9).

"Has been received up in glory" What a reception! Despised and rejected here, midst ignominy and shame, how fitting the answer to it all. Blest answer to reproach and scorn — no room in the inn! only a cattle shed! Room, well deserved in heaven! And there He has been received in glory.

Thus, with worshipping hearts we have considered this mystery of piety. Yet, there are but six facets of the fact that God has been manifested in flesh. Surely we should expect seven! For six savours of the imperfection of man morally, soon to be consummated in "the man of sin" who shall bend all his efforts to securing idolatrous worship. And, also, to bring about the deifying of the head of the fast forming and reviving Roman empire — the number of whose name shall be "six hundred and sixty-six," the number of a man. See for this Revelation 13: 11-18.

Yet, after all, in the sequence we have followed, it could well be that there are seven features. The seventh being the first that we read of in 1 Timothy 3: 15, "God's house, which is the Assembly of the living God, the pillar and base of the truth." This assuredly is the repository of the truth of the mystery of piety, which confessedly is GREAT. May we all receive the needed grace which will enable us to conduct ourselves as worthy to hold the entrusted deposit, for His Name's sake.