

1st Timothy 3: 16, “Great is the Mystery of Godliness”, Sermon # 45 in the series – “To Honor God in the Church”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on December 1st, 2013, in the Morning Worship Service, as a Communion Sermon.

As we are now beginning to enter into the Christmas Season, I thought that it would be appropriate if we could, for a few weeks, turn our attention to the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. There is hardly a greater thing that the human mind can ponder than this truth; that God was manifest in the flesh. The verse that we will be looking at appears to have been an ancient hymn in the Early Church. Its placement after verses 14 and 15 is not accidental. The only way that the church can live out her divine calling as the pillar and foundation of the truth is by remembering that there is great mystery in the person of Christ Himself. We, as the church, will declare all the truth about Christ which is revealed to us in the Bible, and yet we do not fully understand the things whereof we speak. This is not something that should bother us, for the Apostle says, “Great is the mystery of our devotion”. This devotion is called godliness in our text. William Hendricksen says, “This word “devotion” is slightly different from piety or godliness when it is viewed as a quality or condition of the soul.” “It is here used in a more active sense.” “It is piety in action, godly living, the conscientious devotion of our lives to God; to God in Christ.” The mystery of godliness is bound up in Christ Himself. His incarnation and all the train of events which proved Him to be the Son of God, and our Savior and Lord, are the basis of all true godliness in His Church, His people. This is why Paul inserts this hymn of praise at this point. He is going to be speaking about Timothy living a life of godliness in Chapter 4. These words are the preface to that exhortation.

How does our confession of Christ as the mystery of our devotion affect our becoming godly people? That is the question that we want to answer this afternoon. Well, the answer is found in a nutshell in such a verse as 2nd Corinthians 2: 14 – “Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ.” These words of 1 Timothy 3: 16 describe for us, in a very small compass, Christ’s triumph in the work of our redemption. They describe the mystery of His godliness, which transcends our conception of Him. But this mystery of His godliness which transcends our conception of Him becomes a part of the fabric our soul when we trust in Him. We who trust in Him, ought to be able to confess Him before men. This ancient hymn helps us to understand Christ’s mission; of why He came into this world. He came to save us, and to keep us, and to bring us to glory. And His mission to this fallen world, shows us much about our own Christian life and pilgrimage through this word as well. So this afternoon we want to look at the mystery of godliness in 2 descriptive statements. 1st – The mystery of godliness began for His Church with Christ’s triumphal passage from heaven into this world. 2nd – The mystery of godliness continues for His Church, in His building them up into godly people.

1st – The Mystery of Godliness began with Christ’s triumphal passage from heaven into this world.

“Great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh.” Let us understand that the truth about God Himself is a great mystery; even the greatest of mysteries. There is only one true and living God. This God is “Spirit, infinite, eternal, unchangeable in His Being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice and truth”, it says the Westminster Confession and in our own 1689 Confession. In this Divine Being there are 3 Persons, or Subsistences - The Essence of God is undivided among these 3 Persons. The Father is of none, neither Begotten nor proceeding, the Son is Eternally Begotten of the Father, the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son; all 3 Persons infinite, without Beginning; therefore, He is but one God. This God, our God, is not divided in Nature and Being; but rather is distinguished by several peculiar relative properties and personal relations, which doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation of all of our communion with

God and comfortable dependence on Him.” (The 1689 Confession, Chapter 2, Paragraph 3) Let me ask you this morning, whether by faith, you experiencing a comfortable dependence upon God, as you think about the mystery of the Trinity? Ask yourself whether you are beholding by faith, the mystery of godliness, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the foundation of all of your communion with God? For your communion with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, is all based upon the mystery of the glorious interactions and transactions of the Father and the Son which took place in eternity past in the Covenant of Redemption, and which came to fulfillment in time and space, in the Son’s taking upon Himself human flesh in the Incarnation. The Father created all things for His good pleasure, and He is the giver of every good and perfect gift; but the greatest of His gifts was Christ. Christ, the Son of God, would become the Mediator; the One through whom all things were made, and for whom all things were made, would come into the world through the womb of the virgin Mary, in order that sinners like you and I could be saved. John 1: 1 - “In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” “The same was in the beginning with God.” “In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.” “And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.” O no! It was the greatest of mysteries; this mystery of godliness; how the perfect Son of God who was pure and perfect light, could come and manifest Himself, shine in the darkness, and yet men who are guilty, vile, and helpless sinners still could not comprehend His greatness and glory; His mercy and His love, unless the Holy Spirit shined into their hearts to give them that knowledge? The Son of God who is the perfect Word of God, who perfectly represents the Father, was spoken in the Incarnation. God the Son, the Word, was just as much God as was the Father and the Spirit. There was in the Godhead a true unity of Essence and Purpose, these 3 Persons of the Godhead, having taken counsel together, they moved forward in the creation of the world, and the redemption of man; Jesus was in the beginning with God. But He also walked in the garden in the cool of the day, after Adam had sinned, to give the fallen pair a promise. The promise was that He, the Son, would take on human nature; a body which was prepared for Him. Then in the fullness of time a very mysterious work took place in the womb of the virgin Mary when the power of the Highest overshadowed her, and the Holy Spirit of God fashioned the Lord Jesus. There in the darkness of her womb was formed the Light of the world. “Veiled in flesh, the Godhead seen, Hail Incarnate Deity, pleased as man with men to dwell – Jesus our Immanuel.”

Out of heaven our Lord Jesus passed in triumph; out from the Ivory Palaces of heaven, into a world of woe. Behold His condescension, His love; the great love of the Father to send him into our fallen and sinful realm. It is not only the basis of our salvation, that God was manifested in the flesh, but it is the real foundation of the grace which leads to our sanctification; our being made holy. Jesus came into this fallen world, not only to die on the cross for our sins, but in His doing so grand and glorious a work, He also purchased all the means by which all of those blessings would be conveyed to us; He purchased the gift of the Holy Spirit’s coming to dwell with us, and also do His good work in our hearts. He not only triumphed over sin and death in terms of His bearing the punishment due our sins, but there He also won the right of purchase over us altogether. We were bought with a price. We are owned by God; we no longer belong to ourselves. With the offering of His righteous life to take our place under the law, He fulfilled it all on our behalf. And then, as if that were not enough, He went to the cross. And by the means of His sufferings and death, He really and actually triumphed there, over the stubborn resistance of our sinful hearts. It was really so; that when the Father’s time to save us came, the Holy Spirit was sent into our hearts. Christ, through His Spirit’s working, and by His mighty power, He broke the power of reigning sin; He set the captive free. We who have believed have proved it to ourselves. His blood truly can make the foulest clean; His blood does avail for me. Christ has indeed come to live and to dwell in my heart as the hope of glory. He was manifested in the flesh in His Incarnation. But He now dwells in our hearts by faith. He is manifested in our soul; in our human nature. This is truly the mystery of

godliness. It is where it all began. And I pray that each one of us will give thanks for it even now, in our hearts.

2nd – The mystery of godliness continues for His Church, in His building them up into godly people.

Even though Christ has been “received up into glory” as our text says, He is still very active in relation to each and every one of His people. He takes a personal interest in them. He ever lives to make intercession for them. When Christ comes into the heart of any believer, He comes in to stay. He comes in to do a great and mysterious work in their hearts; a work which will go on throughout all of their earthly days. It is a work which will be consummated by their being made perfect when they enter heaven. Philippians 1: 6 says: “Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.” And in 1st Timothy 3: 8 and 9 it says that “Deacons must be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money, holding to the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience.” But although this is a must for a man who would become a deacon, it is most surely a “should” for all Christians. All Christians should hold to the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience. Truly this is a great mystery; how the life of God comes to live in the soul of man; how Christ and the Father are manifested to the soul, and how we are being transformed by the glory of Christ. Great is the mystery of godliness, that God commanded light to shine out of darkness in the creation of the world, is the same God who has shone in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. And once we have that saving knowledge, and once we have the presence of Christ’s glory in our hearts, we want more and more to sanctify Christ in our hearts. We want to keep His commandments, and to have His words living and speaking to us; to have Him manifested in our lives in all that we do and say.

Turn with me over to John 14: 19-24. “A little while longer and the world will see Me no more, but you will see Me.” “Because I live, you will live also.” “At that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you.” “He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me, and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him.” “Judas, (not Iscariot) said to Him, ‘Lord how is it that You will manifest Yourself to us, and not to the world?’” “Jesus answered and said to him, ‘If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word, and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him.’” “He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine but the Father’s who sent Me.” Great is the mystery of godliness. A godly man knows that Christ is the way to God because Jesus has said so in John 14: 6. A godly man knows that Christ was willing to suffer for him. He willingly went to the cross and died to make a way for him to come to God. A godly man knows that Christ was raised from the dead and because Christ lives, he lives. Christ is in the Father; He is seated as victorious at the Father’s right hand. A godly man has God’s commandments and keeps them out of love to Christ who first kept them perfectly on his behalf. He knows that in order to do God’s will consistently it will take more than his own commitment to be faithful. And Christ knows this too. He says in verse 21 – “I will love him and manifest Myself to him. “How can this be?”, a disciples asks in verse 22. Jesus answers, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep my word and My Father will love him, and we will come and make our abode with him.”

The Father and the Son making their home in us who believe is the mystery of godliness which Christ died for. His life was manifested; the eternal life which was with the Father, and which was manifested to the apostles is declared to us, that we also may have fellowship with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ. To have fellowship is to have spiritual communion with each of the persons of the Godhead in our spirit. We receive spiritual light and life from our Lord, each and every day. This is perhaps the most mysterious truth of all of our Christian life. How is the life and light of the Lord Jesus Christ conveyed to our soul, and yet we cannot see Him physically or converse with Him audibly, and yet, communion takes place. It is so, because Christ’s life has been

engrafted into our soul; His life into our life. This is the mystery of godliness. Turn with me over to John Chapter 15, verses 1-5. "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser." "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit." "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you." "Abide in Me, and I in you." "As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in Me." "I am the vine, you are the branches." "He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing." You can see how vital it is that you and I understand that being a godly Christian is not simply being taught the various doctrines and truths of the Bible; it is learning to abide in Christ Himself.

Listen to Jonathan Edwards on this: "Christ's incarnation, whereby this Divine Person, this branch of the bosom of the Father from whom He eternally proceeded or sprang, and was as it were cut off from Him, from the glory he had with Him before the world was; and emptied Himself in His humiliation, to be ingrafted into the mean, inferior race of mankind, that may fitly, by reason of the manner of its propagation, be compared to a tree with many branches from one seed or root, and is often compared to tree in Scripture." "Christ was as it were cut off in some sense, cut off from the glory that He had with the Father before the world was, during His humbled state." "And He took the human nature, that was comparatively a mean, worthless, barren stock." "This it dignified and its fruit exceedingly changed, even as the stock is nature still, and will forever be; Christ is true man still, as well as God, and so will remain to all eternity." "But this nature is infinitely dignified, and its fruit infinitely changed for the better, by virtue of the scion that is implanted into it." (a scion is a living shoot or twig of a plant used for grafting to a stock. It also means – A descendant, or a child; especially : a descendant of a wealthy, aristocratic, or influential family.) This is what Christ is, in His 2 natures. Edwards continues - "The nature of neither stock nor scion is changed, but both remain the same they were before, though both are united into one tree and live by one life." "So neither the human nature, nor the divine, are changed one into the other, though both are united in one person.

Edwards goes on to say: "Another thing intended is Christ's being ingrafted into the church of Christ, which was by His uniting Himself with believers in His incarnation, whereby He became a member of the Church, a branch of the Church, a son of this mother, and a brother of believers, agreeable to the Church's wish." Song of Solomon 8: 1, "O that thou were as my brother that nursed at the breasts of my mother." "the Church of Christ is often represented by a tree in Scripture." "The tree was planted in Abraham; every member of the Church is a branch of that tree, and Christ is the *seed* of Abraham." "He is the great seed of Abraham, to whom and in whom the promise was made (Galatians 3: 16, 19)." "And 'tis by this seed or this Branch that the blessing is to the tree." "All the fruit of the tree is by the ingrafting this tender twig into it." "This ingrafted branch bears all." "The tree in itself bears no good fruit; it is very sour, but this ingrafted branch sweetens it." "This fruit, or ability to bear fruit, is the blessing: there is fruit to God and His glory, and that we receive ourselves, in a harvest of joy and comfort, and in everlasting life." "The stock remains the same but the fruit is altered." "So, by Christ being ingrafted, the faculties of the soul are the same." "There is the same human nature still, but there is now fruit of grace, holy exercises, and practice and true blessedness." "The stock is the same, but the sap, by the union to the scion, is changed and made better." "So the soul, by a vital union with Christ and by the faculties being as were swallowed up in Christ, are altered, sanctified and sweetened." This, my beloved brethren, is what we need to have revealed to us, and then to live it out by the power of the Holy Spirit. Christ is our very life; spiritually speaking. And there is a very sweet mystery to our godliness which no mere knowledge of it can comprehend. Let us exercise our living faith in our living Christ and learn to abide in Him.