

The church's confession

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[0 : 00] 1st Timothy chapter 3 and verse 16. The last verse in 1st Timothy chapter 3.

Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great. He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.

I believe that last Sunday night you heard a sermon from Reverend W.D. Graham on words of Jesus recorded in Matthew 16.

And on this rock I will build my church. And the gates of hell or the gates of Hades will not prevail against it, will not overcome it.

Now I haven't as yet heard that sermon but I'm sure that it was a very able address and a very profitable address indeed. But as I wondered what to take as my text this evening, my mind went to this passage where the apostle is speaking of the nature of the church of God.

[1 : 39] He speaks of God's people as those who gather together to worship him. And he makes it clear that the church must be founded upon the truth.

And forged together by the truth. He looks at the question of what is truth.

And he looks at what the church believes. Now in the verse that I've taken tonight, I believe that he is giving us in a sense the sum and substance of what the truth really is.

If you want a one word answer to the question, what is truth? That word would be Christ. Christ is truth.

He is the truth about God. He is himself the truth of God. It is only because of Christ that the church exists.

[2 : 45] It is only as a result of the greatness of Christ that the church is also great and glorious.

Christ himself, I believe, is the mystery of godliness. And what it means to be a Christian is simply this.

That we belong to Christ. That we be in Christ. We need to be in Christ before we can take the name Christian to ourselves.

And those who are Christians will be the first to acknowledge that there is much that is mysterious about knowing the Lord.

That there is much that we cannot grasp. Much that we cannot understand. Much that is too wonderful for us to be able even to grasp.

[3 : 47] The Bible tells us that his name is wonderful. And the Bible tells us that all his works are wonderful.

Coming to our verse this evening. The wonder of godliness. The mysterious nature of godliness. Is beyond all question great.

I believe that in this verse we have the confession of faith of the Christian church. In the authorised version the opening words of the verse read and without controversy.

In the NIV they read beyond all question. The Greek word actually says confessedly. That's the best possible translation of that Greek word.

Confessedly. The mystery of godliness is great. So what we have in this verse is the confession of faith of all who are in Christ.

[5 : 01] And as we will see Christ himself is the one whom we confess. We have the greatness of Christ and the glory of Christ.

Brought before us in a superb way in this verse. And I just want to look at it with you for a few minutes this evening.

What is it that the church confesses? What is it that is so mysterious and yet so great? What is it that we affirm and believe?

What is it that we hold dear? It is the truth about Jesus. And here the apostle tells us several things about him.

That I simply want to look at it with you on this occasion. He says six things about Jesus.

[6 : 02] He appeared in our body. He was vindicated by the spirit. He was seen by angels. He was preached among the nations.

He was believed on in the world. He was taken up in glory. That's what we confess. That's what is so great.

That is what is at the same time so mysterious. Let's look at each of these phrases in turn. And see what we can learn from it tonight.

He appeared in our body. He was manifest in the flesh. This is a great mystery.

God taking to himself human flesh. God taking to himself human nature. How two natures who could come together in one person and be united together in one person forever is mysterious beyond our comprehension.

[7 : 20] It is a marvellous truth that we confess without reservation without qualification the eternal son of God took our nature to himself and subjected himself to all the weariness to all the pain and to all the misery that we are subjected to in our human experience.

and went to the stage where he at last subjected himself to death. Experienced all that we experience in our human lives as the one who although he was the eternal son of God took the sins of all his people to the end of time on himself willingly and lovingly and bore them all the way to the cross.

The curse of sin resting on God in the flesh till the ransom was paid. this man making himself of no reputation is none other than very God of very God.

And although we assert that he was prepared to make himself nothing for us that we might become hosts and receive all that God has for us in him yet at the same time what we have here is a manifestation of what God is like.

What you have as you look on Jesus is God manifested revealed appearing in the flesh in a human body so that he says without fear of being contradicted he that has seen me has seen the Father so that as we gaze on this incarnate deity we are looking on God himself and this is something that we must confirm and confess mysterious though it is it is marvellous in the estimation of all who know the Lord and it is indeed on this very question that the reality or otherwise of our

[10 : 16] Christian profession is tested. Remember the words of John beloved he says don't believe every spirit but try the spirits whether they are of God because many false prophets have gone out into the world this is how we know the spirit of God every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God this John says is that spirit of Antichrist of which you have heard that it would come and even now it is at work in the world now I want to take this home to your heart and to my own heart this evening and I want to ask this question of you as I ask it of myself is your spirit confessing that Jesus

Christ is God come in the flesh is your spirit testifying tonight that Jesus is none other than God's son is that the confession of your soul is that what you profess is that what you believe is that what you know to be through if it is God wants you to know tonight that you are of God and if it's not God wants you to know that it is only those who are convinced of this who have God's spirit within them those who believe that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself

God was manifest in the flesh God appeared in our body that's the first great point which the church affirms that's the first great point which the Christian affirms that's the first great item brought before us here as the apostle sums up what the true confession of God's people is but that's only the first point he goes on to say not only that he appeared in our body he tells us next that he was vindicated by the spirit or justified in the spirit and there can be little doubt as both the AV and NIV translators clearly believe that the reference is to the

Holy Spirit the fact that the spirit is given a capital letter is evidence of that that was clearly their mind although there are some who suggest that the spirit that has been referred to here is simply his own divine nature by which he performed miracles but that I don't believe is really the case I believe that the reference here is indeed to the spirit of God himself remember how the spirit ministered in the life of our saviour remember his baptism remember how the Holy Spirit came down from heaven in dove like form remember the words that were heard this is my son whom I love listen to him this is my son whom I love and with whom I am well pleased there we have

vindication of his passion being given justification for all that he made himself out to be the voice heard from heaven the spirit coming down in attestation of the fact that Jesus was indeed the Lamb of God who was to be slain for the sin of the world think too of how the scriptures tell us that it was by the spirit's ministry that he preached and performed his miracles

Isaiah said hundreds of years before Jesus came that the spirit of the Lord God was to be upon him and Jesus himself took up these words in the synagogue opened the book and read that passage from Isaiah that says the spirit of the Lord God is upon me because he has anointed me to preach to proclaim the gospel to the poor to heal the broken hearted to preach deliverance to captives to restore the sight of the blind this day Jesus said this scripture is fulfilled in your ears there we have again the spirit testifying remember the sermon preached to Cornelius Jesus spoken of us the one whom

[16:17] God anointed with the Holy Ghost and with power and as we follow Jesus to Calvary do we not read that his very death is an offering of himself through the eternal spirit to God everything Jesus does is justified by the spirit vindicated by the spirit attested to by the spirit and if we are among those who truly confess his name we too need that spirit without the spirit we cannot make a valid confession of faith it is the spirit who quickens the spiritually dead it is the spirit who brings life to the soul it is only the spirit whose ministry brings us to

God it is the spirit who shows us Jesus who reveals those things to us it is only by the ministry of the spirit that we realize that Jesus having suffered once for sins the just for the unjust that he might bring us to God was put to death in the flesh it is the spirit who vindicates who justifies the ministry of Christ in the life of the believer and we have of course that tremendous reference to the vindication of Christ's ministry by the spirit with reference to his resurrection from the dead in Romans 1 we read these words that he was declared to be the son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead tonight

I want to ask you as I ask myself as the scriptures speak to us of what Christ has done as the spirit of God who justifies his ministry in every way revealed these things to us can we say tonight that this is our confession that the spirit has shown us Jesus and the things of Christ that we have been enlightened by the spirit as to what Christ has done and why he's done it that we have been brought by the spirit to know the Lord for ourselves this one who appeared in a body and who was justified or vindicated by the spirit was also we read thirdly sinned by angels now there are many myths about angels circulating here there and everywhere many people have many weird and wonderful ideas as to what angels look like and as to what angels do there is much that is quite beyond that which is biblical spoken of when angels are referred to but when we open the pages of the Bible we read there of the ministry of angels we read there of those beings who are spiritually ministering to Christ and to his people those beings who were created by God and who spoke of and chanted even when our saviour was born they spoke of his birth they bore testimony to the fact that the child born at Bethlehem was the Holy One of God glory to God in the highest we hear them chanting on that wonderful day but more than likely the apostle is here pointing us forward beyond the birth of

Christ to another rotation when the ministry of angels is spoken of namely his resurrection from the dead as you read the accounts of our Lord's resurrection you read there of how the angel of the Lord said to those who are looking for the body he is not here he is risen you read of two men in dusting white clothes who appeared and stood beside those who had come to the tomb these angels saw that the Lord was risen indeed and then as you go forward still further to the ascension of our Lord into heaven and us those whom he had left behind stood gazing up towards the sky the angels came and stood alongside them and said you men of

[22:27] Galilee why are you standing gazing up into heaven the same Jesus who has taken up from you will come in the same way as you have seen him go into heaven and the bible tells us in another place of the quite amazing interest that the angels have in the salvation of God's people you know the passage in Peter where he speaks of our salvation and says that these are things that the angels love to peer into and the idea that Peter has in using the language as he uses it there is of these beings as it were standing at the window and looking in so as to try and grasp what's happening inside you know what it is to look through a window to peer in to see if you can make out what's going on inside and the ideas of these angels as it were standing at the windows of

God's through church peering in because the salvation of God's people is something that they don't understand as God's people understand it because the angels haven't experienced salvation there

were angels who remained in their original condition who didn't need to be saved there were angels who fell for whom there is no salvation but there is salvation for men and women made in the image of God and that which the angels peer into that which the angels as it were see through a glass window is that which we have seen for ourselves and come to know for ourselves and come to experience for ourselves namely that salvation which is in Christ when the angels take such an interest in men and women boys and girls being saved that we read that there is joy in their presence in heaven over one sinner repenting there is joy in the presence of the angels of God when they see the salvation of God in the lives of men and women boys and girls and I want to ask tonight have you seen what the angels see have you seen it as the angels can ever see it have you seen the light have you seen Christ have your eyes been fixed upon him who calls on all the ends of the earth to look to him that they might be saved there is no doubt that the gospel is believed in the spirit world believed by the angels and believed by the devils the devil believes and trembles do we know and do we believe has this our confession has this one who appeared in our body and been vindicated by the spirit been seen by us and we read next that this one was preached among the nations or preached to the

Gentiles in the Old Testament as you read through it there is a genuine concern among God's people that the world know the salvation of God the psalm 96 which we sang earlier this evening and many other psalms too and the prophets and innumerable passages too many to begin to mention at present speak of salvation for the world you turn the pages of your New Testaments and you read there and we've been seeing it relatively recently in Ephesians how Jews and Gentiles who were divided and who were hostile to the other were brought together in Christ sometimes God's servants found it difficult to believe that he meant to bless the Gentiles as he blessed the Jews so much so that for example

Peter in Acts 10 had to be shown a vision that convinced him that God meant through him to reach those whom he and many others would have regarded as unclean we're told clearly in the New Testament that all who are in Christ are one in him that in whom Jew and Gentile are one that there is no division in Christ we're all one and that's the result of having had the privilege of the gospel being preached to us the gospel is for everybody without exception go preach the gospel to every creature said Jesus are you not glad tonight that you have this gospel preached to you that you have been told of

[28 : 31] Christ is that not how you were brought to faith are you not thanking the Lord that he has indeed been preached among the nations and are you not praying that the day will come when all nations will enjoy this privilege as we have enjoyed it for so long tonight the greatest privilege that we could have is the privilege of having God's good news preached to us the privilege of having Christ crucified and risen proclaimed in our ears the duty of the Christian church is to proclaim Christ the duty of the Christian preacher is not to proclaim himself but Christ we preach not ourselves but

Christ Jesus our Lord and just in case you haven't heard it just in case it's new to you we tell you again who Jesus is we tell you again why Jesus came we tell you again what Jesus did and we tell you what God requires of you in response to that revelation we tell you tonight the old story of Jesus and his love we tell you tonight of what he did at Calvary we tell you tonight how the punishment that you deserve to pay for your sins and that I deserve to pay for my sins was taken by him you're a sinner I'm a sinner we're all sinners there is none righteous no not one and you say well in the light of that if

God is righteous then my sins must be dealt with my sins must be punished there is no hope for me and we say there is hope because Christ took our sins Christ took the sin of every man woman boy and girl ever who will believe upon him and on that cross he bore these sins away so tonight for you as for me among the nations among the Gentiles there is this good news being preached being heralded being proclaimed being made known good news the greatest news the greatest news ever and God is saying you believe this good news you accept it don't just stand back and admire it accept it take it to yourself take him as he is just as you are Billy

Graham's autobiography just off the press the other week well worth a read I will get a look at it it's called just as I am just as I am without one plea but that thy blood was shed for me and that thou bidst me come to thee O Lamb of God I come have you come this is the good news this is the Christ who has preached to you how shall they hear without a preacher you've heard because God's message has been preached and you know what God requires of you what's that point

number five was believed on in the world God requires that we believe it is through trusting in the Lord that we are made right with God do you believe Christ has been believed on I remember once just come to me in my last congregation we had a kind of wayside text up on the church wall and I remember on one occasion the text being believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved and I went down the village the next day and I met somebody and he said see that text on the wall of your church and I said yes is it right I said of course it is right well he said I just thought there was a mistake in it oh I said can you tell me what the text is he said yes he says it says believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved but he said I always thought that what should be written is believe in the Lord Jesus is it right to say believe on him and it was a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate that yes we're to believe in him and on him and to point out that believing on him among other things suggests that we put our whole weight on death that we lean upon him as the only one who can hold us up and keep us from going down into the pit that we put our whole weight on to

[34 : 06] Christ we rely on the Lord and on him alone and we can be assured of this that all who believe on him believe in him too and that all who believe in him believe on him the two go together and here we're told that he was believed on in the world yes God has fulfilled his promises to bring many to himself throughout the world again in the Old Testament there are all these references to God's kingdom stretching from shore to shore to God bringing many to faith from across the globe and we have all the promises they shall come he says I have many people in this city I have other sheep who are not yet of this fold the fields are white and ready to harvest the gospel is

God's power and to salvation for all who believe and as these few fishermen and other unlikely lads were sent out by our Lord with a gospel that turned the world upside down as these men who were transformed by God's grace went out more came to faith than we can begin to calculate are you one of them are you one of them and we look at our day and generation and we look at Tulloch and you look at Glasgow and you look at Bishop Ritz and you look at Thershow and you look at all the other places that you that you've come from here tonight and you take the promises of God's word you'll be encouraged by the fact that he's already been believed on by many in the world and will be believed on by many more and you confess this

Christ before men so that when they ask you why you have hope regarding heaven you tell them the reason you give the reason for the hope that is in you when you're asked don't hide it and if you find yourself unable to say very much just speak of Christ that's enough that's all that's needed to convince them as God's spirit applies the message to their souls all you need to do is speak of Christ you can leave the results with God you speak of how God was made manifest in the flesh of how God appeared in our body of how he was vindicated by the spirit seen by angels preached among the nations and believed on in the world and you point them to where he is tonight sitting as we saw in our reading in Hebrews 1 at the right hand of the majesty on high he was taken up in glory not long after the shouts were heard away with them crucified crucify him crucify him perhaps we could almost say as I heard someone once say the shouts of crucify him crucify him had hardly faded away when heaven's gates opened and received him into God's presence the head that once was crowned with thorns is crowned with glory now what did

God do for him for him who was obedient to death even death on a cross God has highly exalted and given him a name that is above every name our sins have been purged his work has been accomplished he's finished what was given him to do and he's established in heaven as the head of his church and he's there tonight for us to come to God through he ever lives to make intercession for us we come to God through this Christ who has been taken up into glory received into heaven and is the head of the church in heaven and on earth this evening that's the confession of faith of the people of God that's the

Christ whom we seek to make known to you we may belong to the church as viewed by men and not belong to Christ at all but if we belong to Christ we belong to the church as viewed by God and if we belong to Christ and to the church as viewed by God then he wants this to be in fact this will be our confession of faith why because on account of what God has done for us in Christ we are no longer foreigners and aliens but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ

[40 : 17] Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone and it is only in Christ that the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord and it is only in him that we can be built together to become a dwelling in which God dwells by his spirit this is the confession of faith of

God's people it's great indeed it's mysterious indeed but this is what it is all about may God grant that this would be our confession of faith tonight in this place and for as long as God leaves us in the world for I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ do you know it as his power to save you tonight may we all do so for the sake of his glory amen