



Most of us have heard the expression, “Stop and smell the roses.” It means to take time out of your busy schedule to enjoy the beauty of life – the things that matter most. And nothing is more beautiful than the Rose of Bethlehem. Today we gather to savor Him.

The best resource to help us do that is the Bible, since all Scripture points to Christ. So, please turn with me to 1 Timothy 3:16 (p. 933). In this single verse, the Holy Spirit through the pen of the apostle Paul sums up in six short lines *the greatness of God Incarnate* – the Lord Jesus Christ. This may have been a creed or hymn of the early church:

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.*

This beautiful confession is God’s revelation to us. May he write its truth on our hearts!

A couple of weeks ago I received a card from a sweet little girl in our congregation. In it she had drawn me a picture, and under the picture was a handwritten note that included various questions and words of encouragement, followed by a list of pets she wanted. She already had a fish but also wanted a dog, cat, horse, hamster, lizard, bunny, and a bird. Then she wrote, “That’s all I can think of. My birthday is August 21.”

That’s a tall order. I wrote her back to thank her for her card and to tell her that if she got all those animals for her birthday, she could start her own zoo. She’ll probably get some of those animals over the course of time, but maybe not all of them.

But in Christ Jesus we have “everything required for life and godliness” (2 Pet. 1:3 CSB). The word “godliness” appears nine times in 1 Timothy, so it’s a key theme of the letter. “Godliness” is a deep reverence for God that is revealed in one’s behavior. Paul wants everyone in the church to behave accordingly, because the church is “the household God, ... the church of the living God, a pillar and support of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). Paul then summarizes the truth – the core of Christian doctrine – in verse 16. And it all centers on Jesus Christ, who said, “I am the truth” (John 14:6).

If you want to know what godliness looks like, Jesus is the perfect example. He is the ultimate standard. Jesus is as godly, as godlike, as a person can get because Jesus *is* God. He is God-in-the-flesh!

He was *manifested in the flesh.*

That's the first line of this hymn. The word "manifested" (*phanerōō*) means "to make visible." God the Son had pre-existed eternally with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. But God the Son became visible when he was miraculously conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary and was born as a human being. "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet [Isaiah]: 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel' (which means, God with us)" (Matthew 1:22-23; cf. Isaiah 7:14).

He was *vindicated by the Spirit.*

How do you know a person is who he claims to be? By seeing proof of his identity. The other day I went to the county jail to meet with some men for a Bible study. Before the police officer let me in, she requested proof of my identity. She wanted to make sure that I was who I claimed to be – that I was Matt Fletcher in the flesh. So, I handed her my driver's license. She looked at me and then at the picture on my license. She didn't seem very impressed, but at least she was convinced that I was who I said I was!

It's one thing to claim to be an average person, or maybe even some sort of celebrity. But it's another thing altogether to claim to be God. One would need to more than a driver's license or birth certificate to prove his divine identity. That would require *super-natural* proof, and that's what the Holy Spirit provided for Jesus. He was "vindicated by the Spirit." In other words, the Holy Spirit proved that Jesus was right – that he was who he claimed to be: God-in-the-flesh, God Incarnate.

The Holy Spirit proved Jesus' identity in many ways. He proved it at his baptism when he descended on Jesus from heaven like a dove (Matt. 3:16). He proved it by preserving Jesus from sin throughout his earthly life. The Spirit proved Jesus' identity whenever he performed miracles, especially when he cast out demons. Jesus said, "if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt. 12:28).

Jesus was "vindicated by the Spirit" in all these ways, but the most powerful way the Holy Spirit proved Jesus' deity was by raising him from the dead three days after he died on the cross for the sins of the world. In Romans 1:4, Paul states,

He was shown to be the Son of God when he was raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit. He is Jesus Christ our Lord.

That last statement is a straightforward declaration of Jesus' deity. This is the same pronouncement that the angels made at Jesus' birth. In fact, the very next line in the creed of 1 Timothy 3:16 is: "[He was] seen by angels."

He was *seen by angels.*

On the night of Jesus' birth an angel of the Lord appeared to shepherds and said,

"Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ

the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.’ And 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 among those with whom he is pleased!’

- Luke 2:10b-14

Jesus was “*seen* by angels” at his birth. They announced it to the shepherds and praised God! By the way, when the text says “seen by angels,” the word *seen* is a form of the Greek verb *horaó*, which means not only “to see or observe,” but it can also mean “to visit or attend to.” That’s what angels did throughout Jesus’ earthly ministry. Mark says that when Jesus was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan and was among the wild animals, “angels were ministering to him” (Mark 1:13). They took care of him.

They did so again in the Garden of Gethsemane, the night before Jesus was crucified. Jesus prayed in great agony as he anticipated the suffering he would undergo for the sins of the world. Then “an angel from heaven appeared and strengthened him” (Luke 22:43 NLT).

Angels witnessed the resurrection and told the women who had come to Jesus’ tomb, “Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here but is risen” (Luke 24:5b-6).

Angels appeared again at Jesus’ ascension, after Jesus commissioned his disciples, saying, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). In verses 9-11, Luke tells us what happened next:

And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹ and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

There’s one more thing I have to say about Jesus’ being “seen by angels.” There’s one other possible interpretation, which makes sense in light of the next line in the creed recorded in 1 Timothy 3:16:

He was *proclaimed among the nations.*

Who were the initial proclaimers of the risen Christ? The apostles, along with many others to whom Jesus appeared. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15,

He was seen by Peter and then by the Twelve. After that, he was seen by more than 500 of his followers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he was seen by James and later by all the apostles.

- 1 Corinthians 15:5-7 NLT

Acts 1:3 says, “He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.” Jesus was seen by all these people, who then spread the Good News about him.

Now, get this: The Greek word for “angel,” *angelos*, literally means “messenger.” It can refer to a *heavenly* messenger (an angel) or to a *human* messenger (e.g., an apostle). The context in which the word *angelos* is used determines its meaning. So, when Paul says in 1 Timothy 3:16 that Jesus was “seen by angels,” that clause could also be translated “seen by messengers” – *human* messengers who had seen the risen Christ and then “proclaimed [him] among the nations.” That’s exactly what the apostles did and what Jesus commissioned them to do before he ascended to heaven.¹

Jesus’ was first “proclaimed among the nations” at Pentecost, less than two months after his resurrection and just ten days after his ascension. Acts 2 tells us that when the day of Pentecost arrived, “there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews ... from every nation under heaven” (v. 5). Peter preaches, and the Holy Spirit works a miracle, causing everyone to hear the gospel in his their own language. Three thousand people believe the gospel, are baptized and added to the church (Acts 2:41). And the gospel continues to go forth from there – from Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria, to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

Within a few decades, the gospel of Jesus Christ had pretty much spread throughout the known world. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul wrote,

This same Good News that came to you is going out all over the world. It is bearing fruit everywhere by changing lives, just as it changed your lives from the day you first heard and understood the truth about God’s wonderful grace.
- Colossians 1:5-6 NLT

Later in this same chapter Paul reiterated, “the gospel that you heard ... had been proclaimed in all creation under heaven” (Col. 1:23). Paul wrote to the believers in Rome, “I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world” (Rom. 1:8; cf. 15:17-19).

These verses reveal not only that Jesus was “proclaimed among the nations,” but that he was also “believed on in the world.” That’s the next line in the early Christian creed recorded in 1 Timothy 3:16.

He was *believed on in the world*.

In the New Testament we see people from multiple nations putting their faith in Christ for salvation, believing that he died for their sins and rose again to make them right with God. The gift of salvation was purchased by the precious blood of Christ. All a person must do is to receive that gift by faith, like a child opening a present from her parents at Christmas. Scripture says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:23-24).

As the gospel was proclaimed among the nations, Jesus was “believed on in the world.” That same gospel continues to be preached and believed throughout the world today. If you are a Christian, you are living proof of that reality.

¹ See Acts 1:8-11; Luke 24:36-49; cf. Matthew 28:16-20; John 20:19-22; Mark 16:14-16.

Recently I read a newly published book titled, *Is the Commission Still Great?* The author is Steve Richardson, President of *Pioneers USA*, a missions organization focused on church planting among unreached people groups.² In his book, Steve tackles eight myths about missions. The final myth he addresses and dismantles is that “missions is failing.”

I wish I had time to read all the statistics regarding the growth of Christianity that Steve shares in this chapter, but let me highlight just a few, all of which are well-documented:

- *Operation World* estimates that Christianity is growing at an annual rate of 2.6%³ – more than double the growth rate of the global population (just over 1% in 2020).⁴
- The *World Christian Encyclopedia* states, “The number of Evangelicals in the world has increased from 112 million in 1970 to 386 million in 2020.”
- More encouraging statistics could be shared regarding the astonishing growth rate of the evangelical church in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Europe. But to give you just one example, “more Iranians have become Christians in the last 20 years than in previous 13 centuries put together since Islam came to Iran.”⁵

After sharing these and other statistics, Richardson remarks,

Clearly, the Holy Spirit has done a mighty work through the church in the last century, and He isn’t finished yet. The growth of the church is often hidden because God is on a stealth mission. He frequently works undercover, redeeming people and building His church quietly. God has an amazing ability to hide His work in plain sight. His kingdom grows slowly and inexorably, like a mustard seed.⁶

Just as Jesus said (Matt. 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32). He was and is “proclaimed among the nations” and “believed on in the world.” This takes us to the final line of the creed:

He was taken up in glory.

This is the only line in the creed that appears out of chronological sequence. The words “taken up” translate the Greek word *analambanó*, which is the same verb used in Acts 1 to describe Jesus’ ascension. Jesus was “taken up in glory” before he was “proclaimed among the nations” and “believed on in the world.”

If this line is taken out of chronological sequence, there must be a good reason for it. And I believe there is. The creed concludes by emphasizing Jesus’ enthronement and

² This mission was founded by my uncle Ted Fletcher back in the 1970s, and Steve Richardson is married to Ted’s daughter, my cousin Arlene.

³ Jason Mandryk, *Operation World*, 7th edition (Colorado Springs: Biblica Publishing, 2010), 3. Cited by Steve Richardson, *Is the Commission Still Great? 8 Myths About Missions and What They Mean For the Church* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2022), 156.

⁴ “Population Growth (Annual %),” The World Bank, accessed August 3, 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.GROW>. Cited by Richardson, 156.

⁵ Mark Howard, “The Story of Iran’s Church in Two Sentences,” The Gospel Coalition, July 30, 2016, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-story-of-the-irans-church-in-two-sentences/>. Cited by Richardson, 157.

⁶ Richardson, 157.

exaltation as the crucified and risen Savior. Hebrews 1:3 says, “After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high

The baby in the cradle became a man who died on the cross and now wears the crown. He is “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Rev. 19:16). That is the high note on which this hymn ends. “What better way to end a hymn than with the glorious praise of the glorious Christ?”⁷

“Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness” (1 Tim. 3:16)! What tremendous implications this confession has for us who have believed on the Lord Jesus Christ and have embraced him as our heaven-sent Savior.

- ⇒ Since Jesus was “manifested in the flesh,” let us glorify him with our bodies.
- ⇒ Since Jesus was “vindicated by the Spirit,” let us rejoice be glad that by God’s grace we too will be vindicated on the Day of Judgment, having received by faith a righteousness that is not our own, “but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith” (Philippians 3:9).
- ⇒ Since Jesus was “seen by angels,” let us join them in worship as we gaze upon the King of glory.
- ⇒ Since Jesus was “proclaimed among the nations,” let us testify to his grace in our own lives, sharing the Good News of salvation with others and participating in the work of world missions so that all peoples might praise him.
- ⇒ Since Jesus was “believed on in the world,” let us trust him fully for our salvation and for everything else we need in life.
- ⇒ Since Jesus was “taken up in glory,” let us await his return with eager expectation, longing for the day when we will see great mystery of godliness, the greatness of God Incarnate, for ourselves.⁸ “Even so, come, Lord Jesus!”

Would you stand with me, please, as our music team makes their way to the platform. If you are a true worshiper of Jesus Christ, I invite you to recite with me this Christian confession before we sing our final song:

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.

⁷ Philip Graham Ryken, *1 Timothy*, Reformed Expository Commentary, New Testament edited by Daniel M. Doriani, series editors Richard D. Phillips and Philip Graham Ryken (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 150.

⁸ These bullet points were adapted from Ryken, 150-151.