

Christ: Mystery of Godliness

Jonathan K. Dodson | Timothy 3:16 | January 19, 2020

We're looking at the near and far side of three essentials to Christian faith: Church, Christ, and Mission. Today we're looking at Christ in an early Christian creed or hymn. Creeds and confessions function like an accordion. They compress a lot of meaning into a short amount of space, but when you pull on them they expand and fill out. Let's pull on this confession and see what we find. It begins with an introduction, *Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness*. A confession is *a unified agreement on a set of propositions or beliefs*. This is our confession... but the funny thing about this confession is that it's also a *mystery*. A mystery is something not entirely known, elusive. The mystery here is reflected in the structure of this confession. Contrasting things are placed side by side: flesh/spirit; angels/nations; world/glory. The contrasts meant to get us thinking. Why are they here? The creed breaks down the way we see the world and reassembles it *with Jesus at the center*, revealing the mystery of godliness. Let's take a look, phrase by phrase.

Manifested in the Flesh

He was *manifested in the flesh*. Who? The referent is absent but it's clear from Paul's citation that "he" refers to Jesus. Jesus, the second person of the Godhead, did not appear; he *manifested*. The word means to reveal or show one's self. There's a Hindu story of a woman who encountered two identical versions of her husband. One was an avatar (a god taking the form of her husband) and one her true husband. She's asked to pick which is her actual husband. She lingers for a while, makes her choice, and chooses the right one. How? She says when I saw the bead of sweat on his face, I knew *that* was my husband *because gods don't sweat or leave footprints*. That's how most religions handle their gods. They appear but they don't manifest. But in Christianity the God does sweat. He does even more: He sleeps, eats, weeps, fasts, doesn't sleep, and he's abandoned by his closest friends in his hour of greatest need. He bleeds. Jesus is no avatar; he is the genuine article, in touch with humanity. Not a projection of God but the real deal, flesh and blood, 100%. Why are drawn to this image of Jesus? We want a God who gets us, knows what it's like to be in our skin, especially when we face illness, disappointment, or pain. We want to be understood, known. So, whatever you're going through know God isn't just in control; he's in touch with

your pain. He's not just sovereign; he's *present*. This sets Christianity apart. God comes to us in Christ. If you doubt it, look at his anguish in the wilderness, his tears in the garden, his groans from the cross. Jesus was manifested in the flesh *for you*. I was meeting with a woman who was betrayed by her best friend, her husband. He verbally abused her, disappeared for weeks, shamed and mocked her. I asked her how did you get through it. Smiling she said: Jesus, he was there, with me, all the way through. Never left, never stopped loving me. Jesus is the better friend, the better spouse. Jesus is God, in the flesh.

Vindicated by the Spirit

Jesus was also *vindicated by the Spirit*. The word *vindicated* is the same word for justify. Why did Jesus need to be justified? The verdicts of Roman and Jewish trials found him guilty, mere "king" of the Jews, but Jesus' resurrection proves he was much more. Three days later, as he predicted, Jesus rose from the dead. Only a God can defeat death. How did he do it? By the *Spirit*. Jesus doesn't act alone. He comes with the Trinity attached. He did not raise himself from the dead, not because he is unable, but because he is essentially and relationally dependent on the Spirit. This is Jesus, Jesus of the Spirit, the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead, *If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you* (Rom 8:11). When the Spirit raised Jesus he vindicated his claim as the Son of God and Savior of the world. Now that is stunning. If the Spirit raised Jesus from the dead, then he is not only very flesh of very flesh (manifested), but very God of very God (vindicated). It means he's worthy of our worship, our devotion, our meditation, our awe. Do you struggle with that? I do. Sometimes my desire lags way behind this awesome reality. I find myself unmoved by Scripture, flat in prayer. What should we do? Ask for grace. Not a generic grace but a particular grace. *Grace for love and faith in Jesus*. And in chapter one Paul—St. Paul—is in need of the very same thing, *the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus* (1:14). This particular grace gave him faith and love in Jesus. Do you lack faith? Do you lack love for Jesus? Then ask for grace. Not just any grace. The word is superabounding grace. Lord give me your superabundant grace to love and trust Jesus. He's deserves it. The Spirit will do it. The Spirit raised Jesus, and he will also raise you. The power of the Spirit will so suffuse your

atoms that they reorganize and reanimate you into a glorified version of yourself. What would happen if we lived as though this is true? We'd depend on the Spirit, praying earnestly and with expectation. We would ask God to do great things. What will you ask of the vindicated Christ? What will your City Group ask Jesus to do this year? Pray big specific prayers! (salvations, justice/mercy, a downtown building, KL renewed). But we won't do it if we don't believe in both aspects of this confession: manifested in flesh *and* vindicated by the *Spirit*, incarnation and *resurrection*. See, these aren't ideas many Greeks or Jews would put together. For many they were opposite and unequal, the spiritual superior to the material, something eventually called *Gnosticism*. If your Instagram feed is all spiritual things (verses, prayers, books), then you may have fallen into gnosticism. But the opposite is also a trap: privileging the *material* over the spiritual, *Materialism*. If is your feed is all (kids, work, city, you), you may have fallen into materialism. Either way, this divided way of living doesn't honor the creed—manifested in the flesh *and* vindicated by the Spirit—which means it doesn't honor *Jesus*. We may believe something about Jesus—he exists, he was incarnate, rose from the dead, but if it doesn't affect our political engagement, view of work, intellectual life, moral conviction, charitability online, or spiritual vibrancy then it's hollow and empty. How do you know? Symptoms include prayerlessness, infrequent meditation on Scripture, and occasional worship. The more transcendent elements of the faith fall away under the weight of ME: my life, my views, my work, my future, my, my, my. Despair and anger quickly follow. But this poetic theology is here to right all that. To put us in check, to bring the material and spiritual together. And not just to right our wrong beliefs, but to move us to worship, to stand in awe of the God who was manifested in the flesh and vindicated by the Spirit, in touch with *and* transforming our humanity. *This* is the mystery of *godliness*: Jesus reveals God *and* makes us godly.

Seen by Angels

This brings us to the final phrase for this week, *seen by angels*. It's a cryptic reference to the ascension of Christ, *And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, 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"* (Ac 1:10–11). The two men standing by the disciples are



angels who witness the ascension of Christ. Now, the important thing isn't the angels but who they serve—the ascending Jesus. The ascension also brings the material and the spiritual together. *First, it is an embodied Jesus that ascends to heaven.* This is important because Jesus is the physical proof our vindication. Without his presence before the Judge, we are not justified to be in God's presence. With his presence, God can hear and see our verdict, *righteous*. This means what God says about us is more important than what others say about us. When people tear you down, gossip about you, remember Jesus stands in heaven says I accept you. You are justified. *Second, Jesus ascends into heaven.* He ascends not only as our vindication but also to take his rightful place over all things. There he rules to this day. Where is his rule and power?—where the gospel is proclaimed and demonstrated—in his people. Did you know that 9 of the top 10 hospitals in America were founded by Christians?—from Mayo Clinic to Johns Hopkins. No matter how you feel about Christians, if you're facing cancer or life-threatening surgery, you want to be in their hospitals. Turns out you also want to be in their countries. According to the World Economic Forum, the top 10 countries for women's rights are nations that have been significantly influenced by Christianity, with the ten worst—a marginal presence of Christians. And did you know Christianity is the largest religion? How will you manifest the rule and power of Jesus? Manifested in the flesh: *in touch with humanity*, vindicated by the Spirit: *deserving of worship*, seen by angels: *lord of all*--three densely packed doctrines that change the world: incarnation, resurrection, and ascension. Questions is: Will you believe, will you show them, will you share them with the world and unveil the mystery of godliness?