



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

1st Timothy 3:14-16

“The Secret of Godliness, the Truth We Defend”

TRANSCRIPT

[Prayer] Father, we ask Thy blessing upon us again in the study of the Scriptures. We thank Thee for the truth that they contain and for the privilege of the exposition of them. We ask that the spirit may teach us and guide us into the truth as the Lord Jesus has promised us. And we ask that the particular needs that we each have as a result of our condition in Adam and our continuing condition in the flesh, we pray that through the ministry of the Scriptures we may be strengthened and built up in our faith. We commit the hour to Thee. In Jesus' name, and for his sake. Amen.

[Message] Tonight our subject is “The Secret of Godliness, the Truth We Defend.” And we are turning to 1 Timothy chapter 3 and reading verses 14, 15 and 16 for the Scripture reading. Now you remember I'm sure in the study of 1 Timothy that we have just considered the office of elder and then the office of deacon. And now we come to the conclusion of this first great section of the letter that Paul has written to Timothy.

“These things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly: But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the

church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the nations (or Gentiles), believed on in the world, received up into glory.”

Now before I begin I notice a little bit of an echo in the microphone, so would somebody who has some authority [Laughter] just one. [Laughter] You know they say that the way to preach is to start low, rise higher, strike fire then retire. [Laughter] Now I know that it is very difficult for preachers to retire, but one of the speech patterns that I have is starting low and rising a little higher. So I manage to fulfill about two of those points, and if I start off with a little bit of a ring in the microphone, it can be bad for you who are sitting in the audience. Well, that feels a little better.

1 Timothy chapter 3 verse 14 through verse 16, “The Secret of Godliness, the Truth We Defend.” Let us just presume for the sake of an experience in our minds in fantasy that we are in the city of Ephesus, the city of the amphitheatre and Temple of Diana. And that we are there on a Saturday, or probably a Sunday night, and as we move through the great city of Ephesus in the shadow of that most unusual and probably most significant temple of ancient times, we move into one of the humbler parts of the city. And in walking down one of the streets we hear some simple singing as we come closer to the door of one of the homes, we hear the words coming from within the house sung by old men and young men and women and children. And as we listen, we are able to make out the words, “Great is the secret of godliness and then specifically on the chorus, “God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the nations, believed on in the world, received up into glory.”

It is the belief of a lot of New Testament scholars that what we have read in the latter part of verse 16, beginning with “God was manifest in the flesh,” is a part of an

ancient hymn composed by some very early Christians. And that the Apostle Paul has included this in his letter to young Timothy.

Now it would be very interesting if we could prove that this were true because it would justify all preachers in quoting stanzas from hymns in their sermons, I presume. But we are not of course sure that this is really the truth of the matter. There is a great deal that one can say for this. I'm looking at the Greek text of the New Testament which we call for the sake of a shorter name the Bible Societies Edition, and these clauses which begin with “He who was manifested in the flesh,” are put in the text in the form of a poem, in conviction on the part of the elders that this is the part of an ancient hymn. And there is some support for this because as you probably in reading that text in the English text notice there is a great deal of rhythm to those clauses. Then in addition the 16th verse begins with a word translated in the Authorized Version without controversy, but in the Greek text the word, *omologoumen* s means “confessedly.” So it is possible that what we have here is an ancient confession, a stanza of a hymn, something like a creed perhaps which was confessed by the Christians as expressing their particular convictions concerning the Christian faith.

In addition the word that opens those last clauses translated in the Authorized Version “by God,” is found in most of our modern translations as something like, “he,” or “he who.” Now the reason for this reason for this difference that the Authorized Version has “God was manifest in the flesh,” and our modern versions have, “He is manifest in the flesh,” is that these translations are based upon two different texts. In some of the ancient Greek manuscripts we have the word, “Theos” which means “God.” They are much later manuscripts generally speaking. And then in the most ancient of the Greek manuscripts we have the word *hos* which is the relative pronoun and means literally, “he who,” could be rendered “he.” In some of the manuscripts we have the neuter “ho.” And since the word mystery is in the neuter, it is the opinion of some that this “ho” which means, “which” is a reference to the term mystery. “Confessedly great is the mystery of godliness

which,” some scribe anxious to make the relative pronoun agree with what he thought was the antecedent has written a “ha” which means “Which,” instead of a “who.”

Now we’re going to say something about that in a moment, but I merely say this in order to point out that it is possible that this was part of an ancient hymn, or part of an ancient creed which the earliest Christians were familiar with. It does contain, of course, some important revelation concerning the Lord Jesus and regardless of whether it was a part of an ancient hymn or part of an ancient creed, it is part of our inspired New Testament and so we read it as coming from the hand of the Apostle Paul. If not directly at least, with his direct approval in that he included it in this letter to young Timothy.

The fact that it is possible that this was sung at one of the meetings of the early churches is also substantiated by the letter that Pliny the younger wrote concerning some of the earliest Christians. He told the emperor in a very famous early letter written in the 2nd century that, “The Christians were accustomed to meet together on the morning of a fixed day, evidently Sunday, when they took vows not to rob or steel or lie or commit adultery, and that they sang,” and these are his words, “a hymn of praise to Christ as God,” “A hymn of praise to Christ as God.” Now this is found in one of the, as I say, the letter of Pliny the younger in the 2nd century addressed to the Roman Emperor. He had had under his observation the meetings of some of the earliest Christians. Now this particular hymn, if it is a hymn, is a hymn of praise to Christ, and if the original were really, “God was manifest in the flesh,” it’s very plainly a reference to the deity of the Lord Jesus. But I’m going to try to show in a moment that whether this begins with “God was manifest in the flesh,” or “He was manifest in the flesh,” it still teaches the deity of the Lord Jesus. So, Pliny’s words that the early Christians met and they sang a hymn of praise to Jesus Christ as to God might by a stretch of accidents perhaps be a reference to just what we find here in 1 Timothy chapter 3 and verse 16.

The Apostle Paul often rises from the ordinary to the sublime, and with apologies to the deacons in the audience, he rises from discussion of the deacons to discussion of

the ministry of the Lord Jesus. He has been speaking of church order and discipline and explaining that he wishes Timothy to know how to behave in the church. And he calls the church, as you can see from the 15th verse, “the pillar,” not pillow, but “pillar,” “the pillar and ground of the truth.” A lot of people do think of the meetings of the church as an opportunity to sleep and in that sense I guess we could speak of the church as a pillow, but Paul is not speaking of anything like that. He is speaking of the church as a “pillar” that is something which is designed to hold up a structure and “the ground,” or “the foundation,” of the truth.

Now the thing that he has in mind, evidently, is the disciplinary protection of the truth. It might seem strange in thinking about the expression, “the pillar and ground of the truth,” that the church should be the bulwark of that upon which it, the church, is founded because we all would grant that the Christian church is grounded upon the truth, that we are in existence because of the truth, that we have actually come to the possession of new life, individually and as a body by virtue of the preaching of the word, or the truth of the word of God. How can we then speak of the church as the ground of the truth when the truth is responsible for the church? Now, that is a most interesting question. “The pillar and ground of the truth,” and mind you he is speaking about the local church. How can the local church be the foundation of that which has called it, the local church, into existence? Well I think to answer that question is not very easy, but is probably best answered by saying that the thing that the Apostle Paul has in mind here is the defense of the truth that has called the church into existence. It is true that we as a body and as individuals have come to life through the truth, but at the same time, God has given us the responsibility and the local church as a body the responsibility of defense of that truth.

Now I want you to take your Bibles with me for just a moment and I want to look at a few passages which stress in these Pastoral Epistles the necessity of the defense of the truth of God. And first of all I want you to turn with me to 1 Timothy chapter 6 and verse

5, 1 Timothy chapter 6 and verse 5. The apostle is speaking here about men who do not consent to the wholesome words of our Lord Jesus Christ. He speaks about the results. He refers to the false teachings of men, and he writes, “Perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself.” Now notice, he says here in this verse that the heretics have lost their grip of the truth, “Destitute of the truth.” That really is the meaning of it. They’ve lost their grip of the truth. Then turn over to 2 Timothy, chapter 2 and verse 18, here speaking of Hymenaeus and Philetus, he says, “Who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some.” 2 Timothy verse 18, notice again the expression concerning those who have made mistakes with reference to the truth, “Concerning the truth they have erred,” that text could be rendered “have shot wide of the truth.”

Then 2 Timothy chapter 3 and verse 8, the apostle writes, “Now as Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses, so do these also resist the truth.” The word means to defy the truth. So here again is an expression of the attitude of the false teachers. 2 Timothy chapter 4 verse 4, “And they shall turn away their ears from the truth.” This may be rendered, “They shall stop their ears to the truth.” And then in Titus chapter 1 and verse 14, the apostle says, “Not giving heed to Jewish fables, and commandments of men, that turn their backs upon the truth.”

So, what we have here then is, in the city of Ephesus and in the experience of young Timothy, men who are with respect to the truth, they have lost their grip upon the truth. They have shot wide of the truth. They have defied the truth. They are stopping their ears with reference to the truth. They have turned their backs upon the truth. So when he calls upon young Timothy in the epistle to resist, he speaks of the church as the pillar and ground of the truth in the sense that it is the responsibility of the church to defend the truth of God.

There are two designs that the church should have in mind as expressed in these words that the apostle uses in the 15th verse. He speaks of the church there as the house of God. Now that would seem to indicate that the apostle conceived of the local body as very much like a family. It is the house of God. And we should never, as a local church, be so formal in our relationships to one another that we do not have something of this relationship of members of the same family. Now that's important.

Between then the other thing that he says is that the church is the preserver of the truth for it is the household of God, the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth, the preserver and defender of the truth of God. Now that means that so far as the defense of the truth is concerned, we do not defend the truth if we simply put it in a creed. We do not defend the truth if we simply put it in a book. But there is a definite need for the defense of the truth in a personal confrontation of the error that arises in the midst of the believing group.

Well now we're going to turn to our text here. The following words really explain to us what the truth is and tell us exactly what we are to defend. Mr. Spurgeon has a sermon on 1 Timothy chapter 3 verse 16 which he calls the Hexapla of Mystery. And it is based upon these words, “And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness,” and there follow the six clauses that explain what is godliness or the truth.

Now before we look at the six clauses, let's notice two or three words that open it up. “And without controversy,” now there should not be any controversy over these questions. Paul says, “Without controversy,” or “confessedly,” “Great is the mystery of godliness,” but actually many people do contend and have controversy over these truths that are expressed here. But we all should as Christians agree that these things are parts of the truth and that they express truth that may be described by the adjective “great.” “Great is the mystery of godliness.” He calls this a mystery.

Secondly, what is a mystery mean? Well it does not mean something simply mysterious. A mystery is a secret. A mystery is a divine secret hid from eternity and time,

but now revealed to believers. There are a number of mysteries set forth in the Pauline writings. We don't have time to speak of them. Six or eight things are said to be divine secrets. For example, the rapture of the church is a divine secret, not revealed in ancient times, but now revealed. The apostle speaks of it in that way. He calls this a secret of godliness. Some of the headings in your New Testament translations translate this religion. For example, in the Greek text that I have this paragraph is entitled “The Mystery of Our Religion.” The secret of godliness, here is the content and here is the obligation with reference to the truth that we are to defend.

Now to explain these six affirmations of the truth or of godliness and we begin, of course, with the first one, “The Incarnation of Jesus Christ.” “God was manifest in the flesh,” the Authorized Version says. The Greek text that I am reading says simply, “He who was manifest in the flesh.” Now you could say this of no mere man. You could never say of Lewis Johnson that he was manifest in the flesh. You could not say this of Moses, that he was manifest in the flesh. You could not say it of Socrates. You could not say it of Paul. You could not say it of Calvin. And you could not say it of John F. Kennedy, or any other individual who is simply a man. What is stated in this express is that there is someone who does not by virtue of his being necessarily involve existence in the flesh. He was manifested in the flesh. So, what we have here is something that is far more significant. And it's not too much of an exaggeration to say that all of Christianity depends upon the fact of the incarnation of the Lord Jesus.

“Great is the mystery of godliness, he who was manifest in the flesh.” Now I said in the introduction that some of our manuscripts of the Greek New Testament have the word, “God,” “Theos.” And that's the basis of our Authorized Version translation. “God was manifest in the flesh.” As I look, for example, at the critical apparatus at the bottom of the page in the Greek testament and look at the evidence for the term “God,” there are a number of manuscripts that have it, but all of these manuscripts are relatively late in time.

Now there is a very interesting question. I wish I could have a black board just for one moment, to show you what is involved in what I'm going to say, but the ancient Greeks when they wrote in their manuscripts, they often abbreviated just as we do. And the abbreviation for God was a simple, oh I'll write it so that you will be able to read it from left to write, for God the abbreviation was, something very similar to our simple “o” and then a line through in order to be the theta and usually a line over that theta to signify that it was an abbreviation, and then they wrote the final “s” as our “c.” So it would be something like this. So it would be written this way, and like a “c.” That would be *Theos* abbreviation for God. You'll find it in many ancient manuscripts. If you read ancient manuscripts, that's the characteristic way of abbreviating “Theos.” But the relative pronoun in Greek is an “o” and an “s,” “omicron” and an “s.” So it would be written this way, without the line in the center, no line above it, and then a “c” just like the other. Now you can see the only difference between God abbreviated and “He who,” or “He” was the line through the center of the omicron transforming it into a theta and the line above to signify an abbreviation.

Now in ancient manuscripts, of course, when a manuscript is left and exists for hundreds of years without anyone looking at it, the writing often becomes very dim. And sometimes writing that was there finally disappears entirely because of the disappearance of the ink. Now it so happens that there is a very well known outstanding Greek manuscript of the New Testament called Codex Alexandrinus. And many of you in this audience have been in the British museum, no doubt. The British museum contains Codex Alexandrinus. It is a manuscript which the British purchased for, if my memory serves me correctly, about five hundred thousand dollars, and they bought it from the Russians, one of the few times that the Russians have been taken in a commercial transaction. [Laughter] And the British did it because that manuscript is probably worth several million, at least, now. When you go into the ancient manuscript section of the British museum you will see Codex Alexandrinus under glass.

Now that happens to be a very good manuscript, and it is the contention of some textual critics that that manuscript reads *Theos* instead of *bos*. And it's a long story, no need to go into it, but scholars have debated whether the line in the “omicron” which transforms the omicron into a theta was there or not. One well known scholar, about a hundred years ago, saw this manuscript when it was in Russia. He looked at it, and he saw, he said, the line making the “omicron” a theta and thus “Theos.” Another went shortly afterward and said he did not see it, and so on the basis of these first hand looks at the manuscript, the debate has continued.

And for example, in my Greek New Testament here, looking at the apparatus at the bottom of the page, in support of the relative pronoun there is listed Codex Alexandrinus, but then a little tiny Latin abbreviation is found, and it is *vid*. Now, that means, as probably some of you know that's an abbreviation for, *videtur*. Do you remember? In your Latin, do you remember? *Widetur*, comes from the Greek word *video* which means “to see.” And so that's the passive voice. It means it is seen or it appears to be. Now that indicates that there is debate over that, but it does appear that that manuscript supports the reading, “He who” rather than “God.”

Well I just, this is part of the interesting work of a textual critic. There's no need to discuss the whole thing because I want to try to show you that regardless of what rendering we take here, we must refer this to our Lord Jesus and affirm that this is a reference to him as the Son of God manifest in the flesh.

Now let's just take this, for a moment and look at it. And let's assume that what the Apostle Paul wrote was, “He who was manifest in the flesh.” Let's suppose that he really did write this *bos*. Now then the question arises, “Well, to whom does it refer?” There are some who think that if we can show that this is really, “He who was manifest in the flesh,” then we destroy this passage as a text in support of the deity of Jesus Christ. Now you can see that if the *Theos* is genuine, “God was manifest in the flesh,” this is one of the great texts of the New Testament on the deity of Christ. And at least we would

have to say that this text teaches the deity of Christ. But if we can argue that the text doesn't say, “God was manifest in the flesh,” but “He who was manifest in the flesh,” then it is the opinion of some that we have weakened the testimony to the deity of Christ. I'd like to show that that's not necessarily true.

Now who could be manifest in the flesh? Well, let's just assume for the sake of discussion that here is a text that says, “He who was manifest in the flesh,” and the possibilities are man, an angel, the devil, or God. Well, now let's read it. Man was manifest in the flesh. Well now in the first place, if this is a reference to man it would be a reference to every man. Every man in the sense in which that would be understood; every man is manifest in the flesh. So we don't have anything unusual about a man being manifested in the flesh. But strictly speaking men are not manifested in the flesh. Men have flesh. They are flesh, but they're not manifested in the flesh. But I say if it does refer to man, then it refers to every man, and then of course it doesn't have any meaning.

Well, let's then say it refers to an angel perhaps. “He who,” and angel, “was manifested in the flesh, justified in the spirit, seen by angels.” Why, of course, angels are seen by angels. There's nothing unusual about that, that an angel should be seen by an angel. So, that doesn't fit.

Now, let's suppose that this is a reference to the devil. “He, who was manifested in the flesh, justified in the spirit.” I hope the devil is not justified. [Laughter] You see when it comes right down to it; this text can only fit one person, the Lord Jesus Christ. And when we say, “He was manifested in the flesh,” we are saying by the use of the term manifested, that he is absolutely unique and that this expression, “manifest in the flesh,” implies his preexistence and thus that he is more than a man and different from an angel and can only be God himself. And as you know this is the characteristic expression used of the Lord Jesus. “He was manifested in the flesh,” and many times I've said to you that the two characteristic words that our Lord used to speak of himself were, “I have been sent,” and “I have come.” Only once does he ever speak of himself as being born, and

then he spoke of himself as being born to a Roman prefect palate and then to correct what might be a false impression if he said simply, “I was born,” he added, “to this end came I into the world.” So when we read here that, “He was manifest in the flesh,” whether it is he or whether it’s God it must be a reference to our Lord Jesus Christ and when we say that “He was manifested in the flesh,” we are saying that he existed before hand, that for a time he was here in our midst, manifested in flesh.

Bronson Alcott, the New England dreamer and seer, made a visit to England many years ago. He had a conversation with Carlyle. And in his conversation with Carlyle, he said he could, “Sincerely say just as much as Jesus Christ, ‘I am one with the Father.’” “Yes,” replied Carlisle, “But Jesus got men to believe him.” [Laughter] It is ridiculous for us to think of men as possessed of deity. “He who was manifested in the flesh,” can only be a reference to the Lord Jesus, and this term “manifest” implies his preexistence.

Now we know that he did exist previously. We know also that as the servant of Jehovah, he made and paid visits to our human scene. In the Book of Micah we read, “Thou, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.” Now, notice that expression. “He shall come forth,” in the Hebrew text that’s the same root as the word translated “goings forth,” that follow, “He shall come forth out of Bethlehem,” a reference to his human origin, “Whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting,” not one, but many, probably a reference to his many visits to this earthly scene during the time of the Old Testament period, in which he appeared as the servant of Jehovah. He appeared to Abraham. He appeared to Manoah, Samson’s father. He appeared, according to the Book of Daniel. There are many other references. He appeared to Gideon. So, “Whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.” But, there came a time when the great and final manifestation took place when the Lord Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea. All of those

appearances of the angel of Jehovah were designed to prepare Israel for the great incarnation of the Lord Jesus.

Now he appeared in the flesh. As a result of the fact that he has been manifested in the flesh and as a result of the fact that he has taken flesh to himself permanently forever, man has been brought into relationship to God. Now we should never forget that either, that man is finally in relationship with God. The second person of the Trinity has taken to himself human nature and has taken it to himself permanently and forever. As someone has beautifully put it he has wedded human nature, and that wedding is a permanent and eternal thing. Think of the great condescension of the second person of the Trinity to take to himself human nature forever, forever. And as a result of that humanity has been brought into relationship to God. And as our great representative, as the last Adam, who stands for his people, he has also brought them into relationship to God. So this is a great truth here.

And when we read that he was manifest in the flesh, we do not intend that we should understand this as if he did not really take flesh. He did not appear as a phantom. Christians are not Docetics who believe that the Lord Jesus was a kind of phantom and only appeared to be like men. No, he was thoroughly and completely man apart from sin. So God was manifest in the flesh. That expresses the truth of it, the second person of the Trinity.

Well now the second thing of the sixth. This is the second line of our little stanza or hymn. The vindication in his spirit, “Justified in the spirit,” in the light of the fact that the first clause says, “He was manifested in the flesh,” a reference to his human nature, we would, I think, be intended to understand, “Justified in the spirit,” as a reference to his human spirit, not the Holy Spirit. Now if you have, for example, the New International Version, I think the New International Version misses the point here by rendering it in the “Spirit,” capitalized. If this is a reference to the human spirit then that “s” should be a little “s.”

“Justified in his spirit,” vindicated in his spirit, what’s the meaning of that? If it means vindicated in his human spirit, remember our Lord had a human spirit, had a body, a soul, and a spirit, completely human just as you and I, apart from sin, what does it mean when we say that he was vindicated in the spirit? Well there are many reasons why men might have doubted the claims of the Lord Jesus while he was here upon the earth. He was here in poverty and yet he claimed to be rich. He was here in weakness and yet he claimed to be the Son of God. He was here in disrepute and yet he claimed to have a name that was above every other name. There are many reasons, then to doubt the claims of the Son of God as he went about his ministry in humiliation. In fact, many, and as you know finally he was crucified as an imposter, as a person who claimed to be Messiah, but was not Messiah, as a person who really was a blasphemer and a slanderer of the divine person.

Now the fact that we read here, “He was justified,” or vindicated, “In the spirit,” is the answer to those claims that were lodged against our Lord Jesus Christ. When was he vindicated in the spirit? Well when on the resurrection morning he came forth from the grave possessed of resurrection life, vindicated in his body, in his soul, and in his spirit, brought to life in the human sphere. God never dies, of course. And the only way in which our Lord Jesus can die is in his human nature. When he cried out, “My God. My God. Why hast Thou forsaken me?” “It is finished.” and gave up the spirit, that death, of course is accomplished in his human nature. But he was vindicated in his spirit, and raised again from the dead. As Paul puts it in Romans chapter 4 and verse 25, “He was delivered for our offenses and raised again on account of our justification.” I think that the apostle’s statement in Romans chapter 1 verse 3 and 4 applies to this too because there he says, “Concerning his Son who came to be of the seed of David according to the flesh; But who was appointed Son of God in power, according to a spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.” That was the time when he was vindicated in his spirit.

The third of our lines that we read is that he was, "Seen of angels." Now, when the Lord Jesus was here in the flesh, he worked for men, but he worked in the presence of angels. Angels foretold his birth. Angels sang over his birth. Angels strengthened him in his temptation. Angels consoled him in Gethsemane. Angels sat by the empty tomb. Angels proclaimed his resurrection. Angels comforted the disciples at the ascension. Angels preached the Second Advent, "This same Jesus that you see going into heaven shall so come again in like manner, as ye have seen him go into heaven." So the work of the Lord Jesus was done for the angels as well as for us. And the Scriptures tell us that the angels are very much interested in the things that were accomplished by the redeeming work of the Lord Jesus. Peter says, when he talks about the salvation that we have he adds the expression, "Which things the angels desire to look into."

Isn't it an interesting thing that the angels are interested in things that Christians often show no interest in whatsoever? Christians don't study the Bible. Frequently that's true of Christians. They don't study the Bible. They carry the Bible. They open the Bible at 11:00 Sunday morning, but really studying the Bible, many Christians don't. Many evangelical Christians don't. Now I'm going to get real nasty. Many people in Believers Chapel don't study the Bible. Many of them don't. But the angels are interested. They desire to look into these things.

And furthermore whether we like it or not, the Scriptures tell us that we are of interest to the angels as means of instruction of them. Paul in Ephesians chapter 3 and in the 10th verse says, "That now by the principalities and powers in heavenly places by means of the church might be made known the manifold wisdom of God." So that the church is the means by which God is demonstrating his manifold wisdom to principalities and powers in heavenly places. How much are they learning from us? I wonder if they really learn anything from Believers Chapel of the manifold wisdom of God.

One of the purposes for which the church is here is to be the means of instructing angels. Think of that. Now Paul in another place in his writings, over in 1 Corinthians

chapter 4 in about verse 9 makes another statement that bears on this question. He says, “That God hath set forth us the apostles, as appointed unto death,” and then he adds because “We have become a theater,” a spectacle, “To the world, and to angels, and to men.” The apostle is saying in a sense that what is transpiring in the apostolic ministry is something that is a drama like a drama on a stage. And men, and God, and the angels are observing what’s happening. That’s an interesting thing to realize that everything that happens in the Christian church is under the close observation of the angels, “Seen of angels,” the self exhibition of the angels.

There’s a hymn which has a stanza, “Angels in fixed amazement around our altars hover, with eager gaze adore the grace of our eternal lover.” Now there’s some fast doctrine in that. That angels as far as I know don't know anything about to grace of God in experience. I’m sure they’re greatly puzzled by it. I imagine that the angels having observed the things that have happened among people who have been converted have wondered what it really means to be converted because they don't know what it is to be lost and saved. One great group of angels knows what it is to be lost, [Laughter] and another great group of angels knows what it is to be elect angels, but there aren't any angels so far as I know who know what it is to be lost, elect and saved. They don't know that. So I just imagine that they sit around and say I see these tremendous transformations that take place in these fellows, and they begin to worship our God, but what it means, they’re puzzled. Only the saints know that. Only the saved know what it really is to be lost and saved. Boy the angels are really missing it aren't they? [Laughter]

Now the fourth line, the proclamation among the Gentiles, “Preached unto the nations.” Notice that he says here, when he says, “Preached unto the nations,” he’s talking about this person, “He who was manifest in the flesh,” he who was “justified in the spirit,” he who was “seen by angels,” he who was “preached unto the nations” or God was “preached unto the nations.” Notice it’s not a program. It’s a person who is

proclaimed. Now I'm not going to say it's a person and not a doctrine. You cannot preach this person if you don't preach a doctrine.

Some four or five years ago I was holding some meetings in California. There was a group of young Christians who were real fine young Christians, but they were young Christians. And young Christians are great. They have a lot of enthusiasm, and we ought not to lose that enthusiasm, but they also need to grow. And in the enthusiasm of becoming a Christian and then being faced with the hard work of the study of the word of God, and the study of the word of God is hard work, they thought perhaps there's an easier way. Stress the person of Christ and don't stress doctrine. So I had some mutual friends with this group of people and so, they were brought to one of the meetings that I was having at Westmont College, and after the meeting, I was introduced to the leader of this group of young people, very fine young people. And we began to talk, and this man spoke up first, and said, “We enjoyed the meeting this morning, but of course, we don't in our meetings stress theology.” Well you know that's like waiving a red flag before a bull. [Laughter] So, I said, “You don't stress theology? Well there's very interesting.” I wouldn't say that was good. I said it was very interesting.

“Incidentally do you believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God?” “Oh yes, oh yes, we believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” “Do you believe he died for the sins of sinners?” “Oh yes, oh yes, we preach that he died for sinners.” “Do you think that the Lord Jesus was both God and man?” “Oh yes, we believe that he was both God and man, though we have some differences of opinion about this question.” And then I could see that something was beginning to play over his face. So I asked him only one more question. And I don't remember whether it was concerning the Scriptures or concerning some other doctrine concerning Christ. “Do you believe in the substitutionary atonement of Christ?” I may have said. And when he said that, he himself realized that he was really preaching theology. He was just saying the he was not stressing theology that he was

preaching Christ, but he really was preaching theology because you cannot preach Christ without preaching doctrine. You cannot do it.

So when we say here that he was preached among the Gentiles and we say it's a person who is preached, we are not saying we are preaching a person and not a doctrine, but we are preaching a person as he is revealed in the doctrines of the word of God. And if we do not preach him as he is revealed in the doctrines, we are not preaching the biblical Christ. You get the point? He can only be preached, truly, as a person if he is preached in harmony with the doctrines of the Scriptures. So you cannot sever those two things. Why is it a mystery that he was preached among the Gentiles? Why because until the Lord Jesus came the ministry of the word of God was not preached among the Gentiles. Salvation was of the Jews, as he himself said. And so in his own ministry he went to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, but as a result of the coming of the Lord Jesus he has been preached to the Gentiles.

Incidentally he has been preached. We are living in a rather strange period in evangelicalism. There's a great deal of stress on liturgy, art, drama, and I want to say that it's possible for us to give a testimony to Christ in art. It's possible for us to give a testimony to Christ in music, provided we have some words. It's possible for us to give a testimony to Jesus Christ in drama, providing of course, there are words. But in the word of God we are told right here and in other places, that the communication of the truth of God is by preaching. So, it is by preaching, not by portraying the gospel in liturgy, not by drawing the gospel in art, not by playing the gospel in drama, but by preaching.

Now as I understand it, and I'm not attacking drama and I'm not attacking art, and I'm not attacking certain forms of liturgy, we have the Lord's supper ourselves every Sunday night here, we take the bread and the wine, that communicates something to us because we have words of explanation that go along with it. And I do not think that it is good for Christians to be so narrow that they cannot express their faith in art, in music, and in drama, but we must be careful that we are expressing the faith that there is word,

explanation attached to it. But notice the great stress is on preaching. And as I understand the whole of the New Testament and really the whole of the word of God, central in the ministry of a church is the pulpit. Now I mean by that, preaching, preaching of the truth, giving the word of God, doctrine. And as I conceive of the meeting of the local church on Sunday night it should be central in the meeting of the church. I'm not sure that we have attained that yet in Believers Chapel. I'm not suggesting we substitute some of the things that are true of our meetings now for this, but that this should perhaps even have a stronger stress for the saints need to be built up in the word of God, “preached among the Gentiles.”

Line five, “Believed on in the world,” in the light of man's nature, that's a very remarkable thing. Oh, I did want to say one other thing in connection with the pulpit. We notice in many of our evangelical churches, evangelical in the broadest sense, that have history of evangelicalism. The pulpit it moved to the side and not in the center. That's a very significant thing. That is evidence in most cases of a de-emphasis of the word of God. The reformers set the pulpit right in the center of the meetings of the church, and what that expresses is what I think that Scripture teaches. But “Believed on in the world, isn't it a remarkable thing in the light of man's nature that he should be believed on in the world, because after all the gospel story is not only strange, but it is contrary to all of the prejudices of the flesh, and it is an actual insult to our self esteem. What does the gospel say to us? Why the gospel says, “You're sinners.” The gospel says, “You're dead.” The gospel says, “You're weak.” The gospel says, “You're without strength.” The gospel says, “You're ungodly.” All these things are insulting. The gospel says, “You must be born again.” And yet the text of Scripture says, “Believed on in the world.” That's a mystery still, how people believe. Why the mystery is only solved when we understand the work of the Holy Spirit in making the unwilling man willing, the work of effectual grace by which a person is brought from rebellion and unwillingness to trust in willingness.

Finally, for our time is about up, “Received up into glory.” The Greek text here, incidentally, has the preposition, “in” probably, rather than “eis.” Again the manuscripts differ slightly, “Received up in glory,” rather than “into glory.” Now if this text is to be translated, “Received up in glory,” what it means is “Received up into glory,” and is therefore now “In glory.” So it is a reference to the ascension and the session of our Lord Jesus at the right hand of the Father. So what does this mean? Why this means that our covenant head has finished the work and that he has ascended to the right hand of the Father, and he has taken his seat there. And being our covenant head and being the God man, and being specifically the last Adam who represents all of the redeemed, it means that the redeemed are with him as their representative at the right hand of the throne of God. In other words, every redeemer, every redeemed person has a representative at the right hand of the throne of God, a man has gone into glory and is actually at the right hand of the Father, and you and I by being related to him have access to the Father by virtue of the Son who is in glory. Isn't that great? Tremendous, and the simple petitions of our lips are petitions that are heard by him at the right hand of the Father and he represents us there. That's why the Scriptures say that we are heard by the Father.

I don't like to tell stories about Abraham Lincoln, as you know. Abraham Lincoln was a great President. It would be great if we had another President like Lincoln. But I'm a southerner. [Laughter] South is in now, for a while, until November. When Mr. Lincoln died, the Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton was in the room with him, and when on the morning of April the 15th, eighteen sixty-five he died, the Secretary turned to the window, pulled down the blind to shut out the bright sunlight and then turned again and looking down at the silent form said, “Now he belongs to the ages.” There is no person, really who belongs to the ages...

[RECORDING ENDS ABRUPTLY]

“The Secret of Godliness, the Truth We Defend” by S. Lewis Johnson
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