

THEOLOGICAL TEXTUAL DISPUTATION

**Concerning the Great Mystery of Piety, God Manifested in the
Flesh, 1 Timothy 3:16**

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Translated using AI by Confetti

§I. Knowledge through works becomes vain and idle speculation; knowledge through the Law is terrifying, pressing consciences with an intolerable burden; but knowledge through Revelation leads us to our Redeemer, Immanuel, God with us; which, although it may be held as a mystery, is nevertheless light by which the figments of the human brain vanish, a sweet breeze by which the fabrications of false religions are scattered: without doubt great is the mystery of piety, God manifested in the flesh.

Two things are here proposed for our examination. I. For we shall examine this general proposition, "without doubt great is the mystery of piety," in its individual parts with a devout balance of mind. II. We shall attempt to investigate in order the explanation of this mystery (God manifested in the flesh).

§II. Paul writes to Timothy, upon whom the most serious duty rested, in the preceding passages, so that he might know how he ought to conduct himself in the Church which is the house of God, the pillar and foundation of truth. Now indeed, that Timothy's diligence might be more greatly stirred up, he proves the dignity of the Church from the sublimity of the mystery which must be explained in it.

§III. What a mystery is, I think no one is ignorant. This word signifies two things. I. That the matter being discussed, as to demonstration τὸ διότι (the "why"), is not clear. II. The reason τὸ ὅτι (the "that"), why the thing is so from what follows. Therefore, mystery is properly that which, although it so presents itself to human minds that there is no place for doubting about its truth, are joined together, they are not made known.

§IV. But a manifold mystery is given with God.

I. For there is a secret in the divine essence, when three persons in one essence are proposed to us for knowing: without which knowledge a naked and empty name of God would flutter about in our brain.

II. Providence is a mystery to us, by which God not only enlivens the parts of this universe with some universal inspiration, but by a certain singular nod sustains, cherishes and cares for each individual thing which he has created, which is always efficacious and active, attentive to individual and particular motions. Infants hanging from their mothers' breasts proclaim this. Psalm 8. Does not a little sparrow fall to the ground without the will of the Father? Matthew 10.

III. The decree of predestination is a mystery which blunts all the sharpness of human genius. For God does not adopt all promiscuously unto salvation, he gives to some what he denies to others, not from the one willing, nor from the one running, but from God's mercy alone.

IV. There is given an eternal secret of piety and peace, which is the mutual covenant between the Father and the Son; by which the Father gives the Son as λύτρωμα (ransom); the Son presents himself to accomplish δελύτρωσιν (redemption); the Father stipulates from the Son the assumption of human nature, even unto death, and promises to him a kingdom. The Son in turn is present to do the Father's will, and stipulates in return the salvation of himself and of the people peculiar to him.

Therefore in this respect it is the highest mystery both in the ordination and in the manifestation of the Word in the flesh. For what mortal would ever have conceived that Jehovah himself would be born from a Virgin? Who would have believed that the Word, once born, would dwell with us? Certainly human reason would have withheld assent from that truth

for eternity, unless God had prophesied concerning it through the Prophets many ages before, unless Angels had announced that the Word was made flesh, unless a star had designated the place, unless John the Baptist had pointed him out with his finger, unless the Father himself had acknowledged his most beloved Son from heaven, unless finally the true Messiah had confirmed his doctrine both with signs and miracles and with his glorious resurrection and ascension into heaven. It is openly evident that men would have remained uncertain about this mystery, and fixed with confused principles, would always have worshiped an unknown God.

Moreover, the mystery is of the flesh and blood, for the natural man does not receive the things that are of God, inasmuch as he contracted a hereditary stain from corrupt Adam. Hence it is that although the image of God was not completely destroyed in him, nevertheless what remains is a horrible deformity, and he is blind in the midst of darkness, until the second Adam restored him to the true path of integrity by the light of the Gospel.

§V. But that doctrine was also a mystery to the Jews. A veil was drawn over their minds, for the Israelites still saw that light which illuminates every man only from afar and obscurely, until indeed, with the Sun of Righteousness having risen, they might attain a clearer brightness of revelation and perspicacity of understanding. For intelligence never came to them which did not partake in some degree of the obscurity of that age. Hence Christ proclaims his disciples blessed, because many prophets and righteous men desired to see what they saw and did not see, and to hear what they heard and did not hear. Matthew 13.

Children do not possess distinct knowledge of their paternal inheritance; all things are wrapped in mysteries for them. Therefore Paul marks this

thinness of understanding with the term childhood, which God exercised with the elements of this world and external little observances, as if with rigid discipline, until Christ was pointed out with the finger, the Lamb taking away the sin of the world. Yet nevertheless in substance the same covenant, the same justification through Christ enacted before the foundations of the world were laid, the same Spirit and pledge, the same inheritance reserved in heaven.

But that covenant varies in administration. Everywhere there is mystery, in prophecies, in promises, types and figures, so that from these a clearer revelation of heavenly mysteries might emerge. They expected that very thing which was more obscurely made manifest under the Old Testament to be exhibited in full splendor in the Gospel. Not that the Fathers were allotted to walk in the darkness of death, but because by a new kind of embassy, a living exhibition of the promised things was made through Christ on the cross, of which they had only the foreshadowing.

The heavenly inheritance, to be tasted in some manner under earthly benefits, was exhibited to them. Therefore the fathers valued this mortal life so highly, not because they looked upon it as their only hope, but because they recognized the testimonies of God's grace impressed here. Moreover, that doctrine of our Redemption doctrine is a mystery to us, and will be for eternity. What sharpness of mind can ever penetrate that vindicating power of death in Christ's Resurrection? Every soul is blind in darkness regarding the manifold Wisdom of God by which he called the nations to salvation. But indeed concerning the dispensation of this calling, it is still a mystery; whence the Apostle's exclamation in Romans 11: "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!"

And in Ephesians 3 he confesses that the love of Christ far surpasses all knowledge of human genius.

§VI. Therefore the Apostle adds that this mystery is occupied with piety, the mystery of piety. For we ought to examine it with a devout balance of mind. A mystery is rather to be adored than too scrupulously investigated, one which may have a fruitful root in our hearts, may affect us with efficacious feeling toward faith, hope, charity, obedience, and may bend the rash spirit. Therefore it is not a secret of curiosity; for we would be imbued with all sciences and disciplines in vain, if we did not have solid knowledge of our satisfaction and justification. The Devil is the most subtle of all philosophers, but also the most wretched: his knowledge is not the mystery of piety, but rather makes a conscience in him pierced with eternal stings.

Whence it is evident that piety exerts its power in the innermost heart; for the Apostle opposes it to bodily exercises in 1 Timothy 4: "For bodily exercise profits little, but piety is profitable for all things, as it has the promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come." Because a sinner, ulcerated by the sting of sin, ought to be so much refreshed by the internal sense of divine mercy, that by interior renewal of mind and serious correction of his previous life, true piety may manifest itself. But here the Apostle places a manifest antithesis between the mystery of piety and the mystery of iniquity, or impiety, which are one and the same. For just as piety is the parent of all virtues and the expeller of vices, so iniquity or impiety is the pestiferous source of any crime. The architect of this mystery is the Devil, the most dreadful enemy of the Church, because the craftsmen whom he has under his dominion undermine the foundations of truth, since they attempt to make void the mystery of piety which properly consists in the satisfaction of Christ and justification through faith.

But that mystery of piety is diametrically opposed to it, for Christ, around whom it revolves, is the efficient cause of the same, whose example of immense piety we ought always to set before our eyes for imitation. Indeed, it is the mystery of piety in itself, because it raises men who have fallen into prodigious inventions of vices with hope in the Messiah.

§VII. For this reason, the Apostle calls this mystery of piety great.

I. Great in itself (which is to be seen in Thessalonians 4).

II. Great because the temporary priesthood of the Old Testament and the ineffective observance of shadowy ceremonies had only external righteousnesses of the flesh, but could not bring to perfection. But the New Testament exhibits present truth and a solid body: Hence the Savior in Matthew 26 calls the New Testament "in his blood," because then the truth of God's Testament truly stood firm, when it was sealed with the blood of the victim. It follows therefore that the former covenant ought to have been antiquated and abolished by reason of dispensation, so that the great mystery of piety might be manifested.

III. Great in respect to the mysteries which were celebrated annually among the Athenians. There were other great sacred rites, in which men were initiated who were grave both in authority and age, who, in order to win the favor of propitious Bacchus, threw themselves indiscriminately into the turpitude of all vices. No one was permitted to enter the temple sacred to Bacchus except a few initiates. For this reason, Paul imbues Timothy's mind with most wholesome precepts, and shows that all those things which the human brain devised among the pagans are proof of most foul idolatry, inasmuch as God does not deign to count them in his

flock, but delivers them to Satan to be governed, so that the Devil drags them subjected, and exercises his dominion in their souls and bodies.

But the incarnation of Christ is a great and salutary mystery. Therefore the Son of God came forth clothed with our flesh so that in it he might offer an expiatory sacrifice, exhibit the price of satisfaction, bear the punishments owed to us, placate the Father's wrath, and take away all our guilt.

IV. This mystery is called great in respect to extension: for God deigned to honor the Jewish people alone with knowledge of his name, with covenant, with the presence of his divinity, especially with the communication of his word, and bound them to himself, while he permitted other nations to walk in their own vanity. Acts 14. But when the fullness of times came, with the middle wall broken down, peace was announced to all without discrimination of places. Therefore the calling of the Gentiles is a notable token by which the magnitude and excellence of this mystery is illustrated, by whose virtue and energy all the wisdom and eloquence both of Greeks and Romans fell silent; the mysteries of Satan, oracles strengthened by a long series of years, were struck down; temples erected to unknown gods were utterly undermined, so that at last the thresholds of heaven might be opened to all.