

The Church *as the Household of God in Ephesians*

by Witness Lee

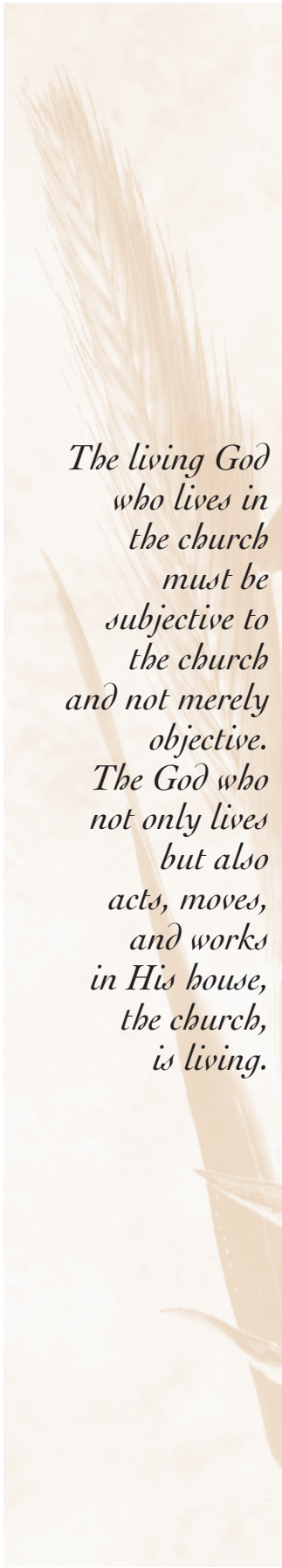
In this article we shall consider the status of the church as the house of God. In the Bible there is the principle that the house of God is closely related to the kingdom of God. In fact, the house of God and the kingdom of God cannot be separated.

The first mention of the house of God in the Bible is in Genesis 28. One night, when Jacob was escaping from his brother, he had a dream. In his dream he saw “a ladder set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it” (v. 12). When he awoke from sleep, he said, “Surely Jehovah is in this place, and I did not know it” (v. 16). Jacob was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (v. 17). Then Jacob “took the stone that he had put under his head, and he set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. And he called the name of that place Bethel” (vv. 18-19), which means “the house of God.”

This first mention of the house of God in the Bible is a seed that grows and develops elsewhere in the Scriptures. The Lord Jesus referred to Jacob’s dream in His word to Nathanael in John 1:51: “Truly, truly, I say to you, You shall see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” This is the fulfillment of Jacob’s dream, for Christ as the Son of Man with His humanity is the ladder set up on the earth and leading to heaven, keeping heaven open to earth and joining earth to heaven for the house of God—Bethel.

Jacob poured oil (a symbol of the Holy Spirit, the ultimate expression of the Triune God reaching man) upon the stone (a symbol of the transformed man) that it might become the house of God. In chapter 1 of John we have the Spirit (v. 32) and the stone (v. 42) for the house of God with Christ in His humanity. It is significant, therefore, that according to the record of John 1, when Simon was brought to Jesus, the Lord looked at him and said, “You are Simon, the son of John; you shall be called Cephas (which is interpreted, Peter [a stone])” (v. 42). The Lord referred to this word of His when He spoke to Peter in Matthew 16:18 about the building of the church. Peter never forgot what the Lord said to him in John 1:42. It must have been from that word that Peter obtained the concept of living stones for the building of a spiritual house (1 Pet. 2:5), which is the church.

In the Old Testament the house of God, the temple, was in the city of Jerusalem. The holy temple was in the holy city. In two of the recovery books, Ezra and Nehemiah, this is emphasized. Ezra’s return to Jerusalem was for the rebuilding of the temple, but Nehemiah’s return was for the rebuilding of the city. God first has a house, and then this house is expanded, enlarged, into a city. In the Bible a city signifies a kingdom. The temple is a symbol of God’s house, and the city of Jerusalem is a symbol of God’s kingdom. Hence, the temple and the city, the house and the kingdom, are inseparable. Eventually,



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the church
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the church,
is living.*

at the end of the Bible, in the book of Revelation, the house will be enlarged to become a city, the New Jerusalem. Because the temple has become the city, John tells us that in this city he did not see a temple (21:22). This indicates that the house of God has become the kingdom of God. God begins with the house. As the consummation of His work, the house becomes the kingdom. Therefore, God's house cannot be separated from God's kingdom, nor can God's kingdom be separated from God's house. These two are a pair. Eventually, in the New Jerusalem, this pair becomes a single entity, for the entire kingdom will be God's house. This means that the New Jerusalem will be a city-house, that is, a kingdom-family. This is the principle concerning the relationship between the house of God and the kingdom of God.

Three verses revealing that the church is the house of God are 1 Timothy 3:15, Hebrews 3:6, and 1 Peter 4:17. In 1 Timothy 3:15 Paul says, "If I delay, I write that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and base of the truth." As God's dwelling place, the church is both God's house and His household, His family. In the Old Testament the temple and God's people were two separate things, but in the fulfillment in the New Testament, the dwelling place and the family are one. According to God's New Testament economy, God's house is His family.

Another verse that speaks of the church as the house of God is Hebrews 3:6. This verse refers to Christ "as a Son over His house, whose house we are." In Old Testament times the house of God was the house of Israel (Lev. 22:18; Num. 12:7), symbolized by the tabernacle or the temple among them (Exo. 25:8; Ezek. 37:26-27). Today the house of God is the church. The children of Israel, as people of God, are a type of us, the New Testament believers (1 Cor. 9:24—10:11). Their history is a prefigure of the church.

The church has a twofold function. To Christ, the church is the Body; to God, the church is the house. Christ is the Head, and the church is the Body of the Head. This is one function of the church. God is the Father, and the church is His house. This is another function of the church. Just as Christ is the Head and the church is His Body, so God is the Father and the church is His house. The church as the Body of Christ is an organism. In like manner, the church as the house of God is a living entity, a living house.

First Peter 4:17, another verse that refers to the church as the house of God, says, "It is time for the judgment to begin from the house of God." Here we see that disciplinary judgment begins from God's own house. God's house, or household, is the church composed of the believers. From this house, as His own house, God begins His governmental administration by His disciplinary judgment over His own children, that He may have strong ground to judge, in His universal kingdom, those who are disobedient to His gospel and rebellious to His government.

In speaking of the church as the house of God, Paul specifically refers to God as the living God. The living God who lives in the church must be subjective to the church and not merely objective. The God who not only lives but also acts, moves, and works in His house, the church, is living. Because God is living, the church is also living in Him, by Him, and with Him. A living God and a living church live, move, and work together. The living church is the house of the living God. Therefore, in our meetings, service, and ministry, we should give people the impression that the living God is living, moving, speaking, and acting among us.

The church, the house of the living God, is living in the Father's name and in the Father's life. This means that the church is living in the Father's reality. God's house is a living

composition of His many children in the Father's life and reality. This means that where the house of God is, there is God the Father with His life and reality. This is similar to the church being the Body of Christ. Christ is not separate from the members of the Body, for, as the Head of the Body, Christ dwells in all the members. For this reason Christ should not be counted as a separate member of the Body, because He is in all the members of the Body. The principle is the same with the church as God's house. The Father is not a separate member of the household, the house, but is in all the children.

The first characteristic of the status of the church is that it is an assembly called out of the world. The second characteristic is that the church is God's house composed of those who have been born of God. This second characteristic is a matter not merely of separation but of a spiritual, divine birth. In order to be the assembly, we need to be sanctified, that is, separated from the world. But to be a component of the house of God, we need to be born of God. Anyone who has not been born of God cannot be part of His house, part of His family.

The Dwelling Place of God

As the house of God, the church is the dwelling place of God. Ephesians 2:22 says, "In whom you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in spirit." The word *you* here refers to the local saints. Paul is saying that the local saints, the saints in Ephesus, were being built together in Christ into a dwelling place of God.

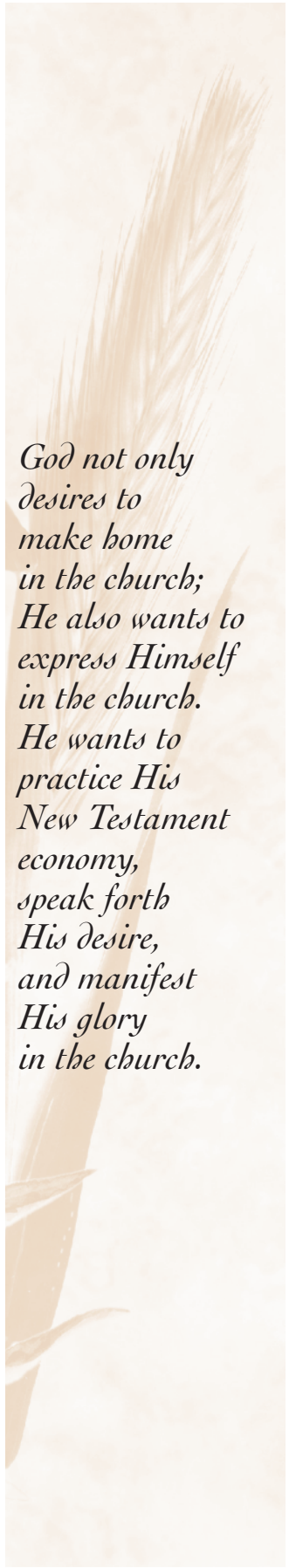
The church, the dwelling place of God on earth, is the place in which God can have His rest and put His trust. In this dwelling place God lives and moves to accomplish His will and satisfy the desire of His heart.

Because the church is God's dwelling place, the church is where God expresses Himself. A house is always the best place for a person to express himself. The kind of person you are is expressed by your house. Hence, if you look at a person's house, you will be able to tell what kind of person he is, because a person's house is his expression. The principle is the same with the church as the dwelling place of God. In His house, His dwelling place, God expresses Himself on earth. This is the reason 1 Timothy 3:16 reveals that the church is God's manifestation in the flesh. God not only desires to make home in the church and to have a resting place there; He also wants to express Himself in the church. He wants to practice His New Testament economy, speak forth His desire, and manifest His glory in the church. All that He is, all that He is doing, and all that He wants to obtain are to be manifested, expressed, in the church as His dwelling place.

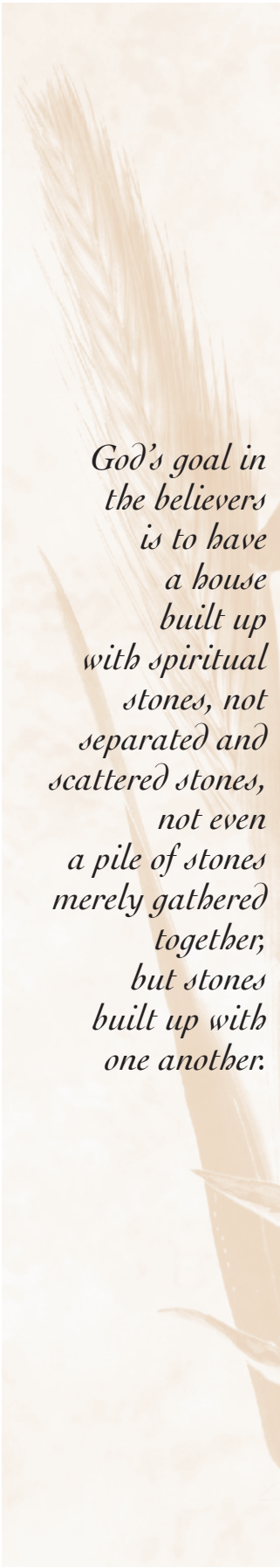
In the Believers' Spirit

Ephesians 2:22 tells us that God's dwelling place is the believers' spirit. Here Paul says that we are "being built together into a dwelling place of God in spirit." This refers to the believers' regenerated human spirit indwelt by God's Holy Spirit. God's Spirit is the Dweller, not the dwelling place. The dwelling place is the believers' spirit. God's Spirit dwells in our regenerated spirit. Therefore, the dwelling place of God is our spirit. Our spirit is the place of God's habitation.

We all need to see clearly that God's dwelling place is our spirit, not our heart or our mind. Realizing that we have a spirit and that God dwells in our regenerated spirit is crucial. If we do not know how to exercise our spirit, it will be impossible for us to understand anything concerning God's house, because this house, the dwelling place of God, is the believers' spirit.



*God not only
desires to
make home
in the church;
He also wants to
express Himself
in the church.
He wants to
practice His
New Testament
economy,
speak forth
His desire,
and manifest
His glory
in the church.*



God's goal in the believers is to have a house built up with spiritual stones, not separated and scattered stones, not even a pile of stones merely gathered together, but stones built up with one another.

A Spiritual House

First Peter 2:5 says, "You yourselves also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house." The word *spiritual* here denotes the qualification of the divine life to live and grow (v. 2). The house of God subsists mainly by the divine life; hence, it is a spiritual house.

As believers in Christ, we need to grow and be transformed for the building up of God's spiritual house. God's goal in the believers is to have a house built up with spiritual stones, not separated and scattered stones, not even a pile of stones merely gathered together, but stones built up with one another. Hence, feeding on Christ by the nourishing milk in the word of God (vv. 2-3) is not only for growing in life but also for building up. Growing is for building up. Although the nourishing milk of the word is for the soul through the mind, it eventually nourishes our spirit, making us not soulish but spiritual, suitable for building up a spiritual house for God.

The Temple of God

The dwelling place of God is the temple of God. First Corinthians 3:16 says, "Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" Here *the temple of God* refers to the believers collectively in a certain locality, as in Corinth, whereas *the temple of God* in verse 17 refers to all the believers universally. The unique spiritual temple of God in the universe has its expression in many localities on earth. Each expression is a temple of God in that locality.

God's building (v. 9) is not an ordinary building; on the contrary, it is the sanctuary of the holy God, the temple in which the Spirit of God dwells. We, the builders of such a holy temple, should realize this so that we would be careful to build not with the worthless materials of wood, grass, and stubble but with the precious materials of gold, silver, and precious stones (vv. 10-12), which correspond to God's nature and economy.

Another verse revealing that the habitation of God is the temple of God is Ephesians 2:21: "In whom all the building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord." The Greek word translated "temple" denotes the sanctuary, the inner part of the temple. Because God's building is living, it is growing. It grows into a holy temple. The actual building of the church as the house of God is by the growth in life of the believers. Furthermore, the entire building of God's house as His temple, His sanctuary, is in Christ the Lord.

The Household of God

The church is a composition of the believers, and the believers are children of God, born of Him and having His life and nature. Thus, they become members of the household of God.

In Ephesians 2:19 Paul says, "So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens of the saints and members with the household of God." Both the Jewish and the Gentile believers are members of God's household. God's household is a matter of life and enjoyment; all believers were born of God into His household to enjoy His riches. The members of God's family added together become the household of God, which is the house, the dwelling place, of God.

God's dwelling place is His household, His family, and His family comes into being by God's begetting. If we had not been begotten of God, God could not have a family. But God does have a great family, the largest family in the universe, composed of those

who have been born of Him to be His children. Eventually, God's children will grow up to be His mature sons, and then they will become heirs.

We would emphasize the fact that the church is not only the assembly of God but also the household of God. The church is not only something separated from the world but something born of God, regenerated by Him. God does not simply separate sinners from the world and put them together to be His household. In addition to separation, there must be a change of life and nature through regeneration. For this reason, after God separated us from the world, He put Himself into us, germinating us, begetting us as His children. It is in this way that we have become His household. This household then becomes God's house, His dwelling place in our spirit. Intrinsicly speaking, therefore, the church as God's household is in our God-created, God-regenerated, and God-indwelt spirit. It is crucial for us to see this.

The Pillar and Base of the Truth

In 1 Timothy 3:15 Paul tells us that the church as the house of the living God is "the pillar and base of the truth." The church is the supporting pillar and holding base of the truth. Here *truth* refers to the real things revealed in the New Testament concerning Christ and the church according to God's New Testament economy. The church is the supporting pillar and holding base of these realities. A local church should be such a building that holds, bears, and testifies the truth, the reality, of Christ and the church.

God's New Testament economy is composed of two mysteries: Christ as the mystery of God (Col. 2:2) and the church as the mystery of Christ (Eph. 3:4). Christ and the church, the Head and the Body, are the contents of the reality of God's New Testament economy. As the pillar that bears the truth and the base that upholds the pillar, the church testifies the reality, the truth, of Christ as the mystery of God and the church as the mystery of Christ.

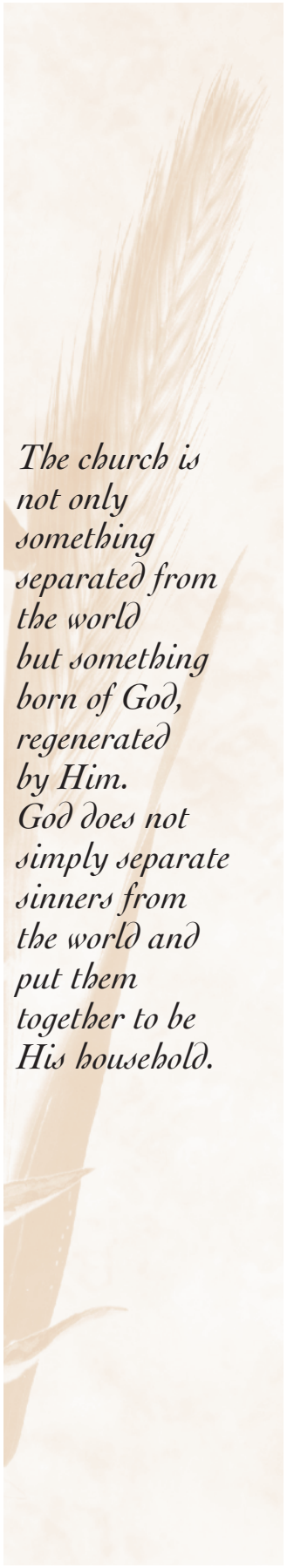
According to the context, we may say that *the truth* in 1 Timothy 3:15 denotes the mystery of godliness, the manifestation of God in the flesh, in verse 16. The unique truth, the unique reality, in the universe is the manifestation of the Triune God in the flesh. This manifestation is not only in Christ but also in the church.

The Manifestation of God in the Flesh

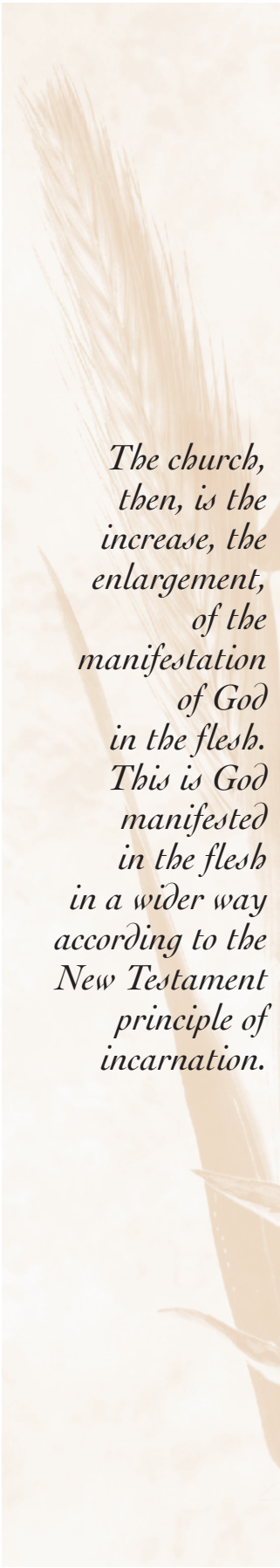
First Timothy 3:15 and 16 indicate that the church as the house of God is also the manifestation of God in the flesh—the mystery of godliness. God is manifested in the church, the Body of Christ and the house of the living God, as the enlarged, corporate expression of God in the flesh.

First Timothy 3:15 and 16 say, "The house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and base of the truth. And confessedly, great is the mystery of godliness: / He who was manifested in the flesh, / Justified in the Spirit, / Seen by angels, / Preached among the nations, / Believed on in the world, / Taken up in glory." In Greek, the antecedent of *who* is omitted but easily recognized. The antecedent is Christ, who was God manifested in the flesh as the mystery of godliness. The transition from *the mystery* to *who* implies that Christ as the manifestation of God in the flesh is the mystery of godliness (Col. 1:27; Gal. 2:20). This mystery of godliness is the living of a proper church. Such a living is also the manifestation of God in the flesh.

First Timothy 3:15 and 16 imply that not only Christ Himself as the Head is the manifestation of God in the flesh but also that the church as the Body is the manifestation



The church is not only something separated from the world but something born of God, regenerated by Him. God does not simply separate sinners from the world and put them together to be His household.



The church, then, is the increase, the enlargement, of the manifestation of God in the flesh. This is God manifested in the flesh in a wider way according to the New Testament principle of incarnation.

of God in the flesh. When the church grows in Christ with the growth of God (Col. 2:19), it will function as the house of the living God for His move on earth and as the supporting pillar and holding base of the truth, bearing the divine reality of Christ and His Body as a testimony to the world. Then the church will become the continuation of Christ's manifestation of God in the flesh. This is the great mystery of godliness: Christ lived out of the church as the manifestation of God in the flesh. Such a church is the continuation, the enlargement, and the expansion of God manifested in the flesh. The church, then, is the increase, the enlargement, of the manifestation of God in the flesh. This is God manifested in the flesh in a wider way according to the New Testament principle of incarnation.

The conjunction *and* at the beginning of verse 16 indicates that Paul's speaking about the church in verse 15 is not finished. This conjunction indicates that, as the house of the living God, the pillar and base of the truth, the church is also the mystery of godliness. According to the context, *godliness* denotes the living of God in the church, that is, God as life lived out in the church to be expressed. This means that the church life is the expression of God. Both Christ and the church are the mystery of godliness, expressing God in the flesh. Therefore, the mystery of godliness is the living of a proper church, and such a living is the manifestation of God in the flesh. This manifestation began with Christ when He was on earth, and now it continues in the church. May we all see this vision of the church as the house of God. **ATC**

The Mystery of Godliness and the Church

Paul concludes [1 Timothy 3:16] with the phrase *taken up in glory*. This refers to Christ's ascension into glory (Mark 16:19; Acts 1:9-11; 2:33; Phil. 2:9). According to the sequence of historical events, Christ's ascension preceded His being preached among the nations. However, it is listed here as the last event of Christ being the manifestation of God in the flesh. This seems to indicate the church taken up in glory. Hence, it implies that not only Christ Himself as the Head, but also the church as the Body, is the manifestation of God in the flesh. When a church is well taken care of according to the instructions given in the first two chapters [of 1 Timothy], with the oversight of the elders and the service of the deacons fully established, as revealed in chapter 3, the church will function as the house and household of the living God for His move on the earth and as the supporting pillar and holding base of the truth, bearing the divine reality of Christ and His Body as a testimony to the world. Then the church becomes the continuation of Christ's manifestation of God in the flesh. This is the great mystery of godliness—Christ lived out of the church as the manifestation of God in the flesh!

I wish to emphasize the fact that although Christ was taken up in glory (Acts 1) before the preaching of Him began in Acts 2, Paul mentions this last, not only after the preaching, but even after being believed on in the world. This indicates that "taken up in glory" may include not only the ascension of Christ, but also the rapture of the church. The Head, Christ, was taken up before the preaching of Him began; however, the Body, the church, will be taken up only after Christ has been preached and believed on in the world. Therefore, in verse 16 there is a definite indication that this verse refers not only to the Head as the manifestation of God in the flesh, but also to the Body as the continuation of this manifestation... The Head, Christ, has been taken up in glory, and the Body, the church, will also be taken up in glory. Both the Head and the Body are the mystery of godliness. This is the manifestation of God in the flesh.

From *Life-study of 1 Timothy* by Witness Lee, pp. 59-60