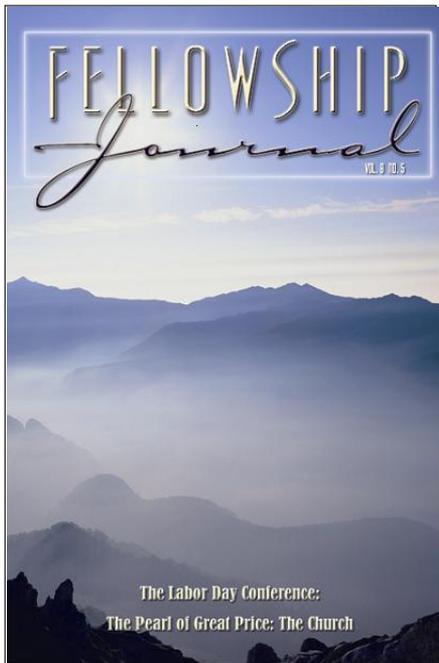


FELLOWSHIP *Journal*

VOLUME 8, NO. 5 • OCTOBER 2009



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Conference:

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Pearl of Great Price

The Ministry
of John

Published by the Church in Cleveland Literature Service.
3150 Warren Road, Cleveland, Ohio 44111
Telephone: (216) 251 - 8832 Fax: (216) 476 - 9699

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A Testimony

One matter that impressed me from the Vision Week Training (Fellowship Journal 8-4) was the necessity of being able to say, "The Lord led us" for whatever is decided in the church life. We are constantly in danger of simply doing whatever has been done or what we see others doing rather than seeking the Lord for His own leading. If someone asks us why we do what we do, we should be able to reply, "The Lord TOLD us to". Whoever can say this has full assurance in whatever they do for they know it is from the Lord Himself, and whoever hears their claim should realize it is not to be easily touched or criticized, WHATEVER it is. Let every church have such boldness concerning whatever direction is taken.

This, of course, requires prayer until the Lord's leading is clearly known. The practice of "praying through," or praying strongly with desperation until the leading in life is granted, is something that I personally remember practicing more of in the past than today. Perhaps over time we just become more settled. That may be why the Lord allows certain situations to arise and shake us up. Without such times we could remain distant from what Christ seeks or is doing and yet be satisfied, totally oblivious to our real situation.

Sometimes we focus on what others are doing, and simply do likewise. We certainly should be open to learn from others what they are experiencing from the Lord, but how the Lord leads in one locality will not necessarily be how He leads in another. What one locality learns provides something to be considered by all, but no two localities are in identical circumstances and the Lord is He who walks among the churches and speaks to them one by one.

Perhaps the Lord might lead someone to use a certain form of music or manner of playing music that has not been commonly used before. The point made is that it must be the Lord who leads.

Whatever is new of the Lord will add to rather than replace what the Lord has already delivered to us. The spiritual riches we have are cumulative. It is not that what is new supplants what we have gained. A new hymnal's worth of songs does not replace all the songs we have received thus far; it adds to them. (I personally would like to see every song saints have produced through the years preserved for everyone somehow. Hopefully none would be forgotten, but available to be rediscovered.)

This past Labor Day conference in Michigan (in this issue) what impressed me most was the need to pay the price necessary to pursue the Lord for His testimony's sake. As an American, I have a real problem with this. I am stuck in what I find comfortable, and our children's welfare is uppermost in my mind. Am I able to follow the Lord however He leads, believing that He has everything covered, including what is His best for my children? When I was single, or after marrying but before children, there wasn't that much I had to trust the Lord *for*. If the way was clear, I just did my best to follow. Now, it seems there are so many more considerations. May the Lord have mercy!

My impressions from both these times of ministry are related, of course. There is no use praying to ask the Lord to lead us if He does not have our willingness to follow. The Lord has sacrificed Himself for us and provided Himself to us, and has honored us by choosing us for the fulfillment of His plan. Will we continue to prove His grace and wisdom so others might see His testimony on the earth?

How we need the Lord's mercy that He might remain preeminent in the church life, always having the first place in our hearts!

These were the primary things impressed upon me by the Lord's servant during these two times of ministry.

John Berglund

Labor Day 2009

MESSAGE ONE

THE CHURCH: THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE GOD HAS SOLD ALL TO GAIN

GOD SEEKS A TREASURE THAT MATCHES HIMSELF

Of all the untold items in the universe, only God is unique and truly precious. The world, however, tries to convince us that so many other things are more precious (and it often succeeds, for many end up pursuing other things until they are able at least to buy a more precious coffin for themselves). Nothing has eternal value, however, beside God Himself. Yet though God Himself is such, He is not satisfied. He seeks something to match His preciousness. And that thing is the Church.

This is quite amazing! The quality of God's person, nature and existence is eternal and unspeakably sublime. Even so, God would say, "I am so very great and wonderful, but... I am lonely. I need to produce something that matches Me."

Therefore, if you were to offer yourself to God merely as the holder of multiple PhD's or as some billionaire, God would not be interested. Even if you were to come to God as a "good" Christian, God would not be interested. God is very simple. He desires to possess something He treasures.

THE SEEKING MERCHANT

In Matthew 13:45-46 we read two very simple verses. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man seeking goodly pearls." God Himself is the merchant in this portion. In these verses God is not one who simply creates what He needs, but one who works and pays a price to gain it. When this merchant finds one pearl of great price, he

goes and sells all that he has in order to purchase it (v. 46). In other words, our God went and sold everything He had in order to gain the Church for Himself. This equals the kingdom of the heavens, which, beginning with the New Testament age, stretches unto eternity. The kingdom of the heavens is the age of the Church. As long as the Church is going forward, the heavens are reigning. The more prevailing the Church is, the more the heavens reign!

“The kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man...” God here is likened to a man, but not just any man. He is likened to a man who is willing to pay a high price for the worthy investment. Compared to him, all our worldly investment strategies and practices must appear quite foolish! The Lord says, “I am the real Investor. You don’t know in what to invest, but I do. You don’t know how much to invest, but I do. You do not know what will yield the best return, but I do. I am familiar with everything in this universe, and I know that only one thing is worthy of all My investment.” What should this tell us regarding what we ought to invest ourselves in?

We may feel we have found something that is truly worthy of our life and invest ourselves into it. It may have to do with music or economics or some field of science or so many other things. God, however, will not agree with our assessment, for He has found the thing that is of far greater value. He has found the Church as the Pearl of Great Price.

THE CHURCH: THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE

We simply place value on too many other things. Some people even value studies to the point they earn degree after degree, and end up accomplishing nothing else. When people are happy in other pursuits, we should not be happy for them. Instead, we should realize that there is only one Pearl of Great Price. Those who “buy” other things are going to find they have purchased empty stock. During the recent turmoil, many people continued to buy stocks in companies that had already become bankrupt. They simply didn’t know the situation. Many Christians do the same, investing themselves in things that ultimately will yield them no return. They should declare, “Look at my house, which is going to burn! Look at my car, which is going to become outdated and turn to rust! Look at my career field, which will one day be replaced with something else!” The Lord has already searched all things (including whatever we may have found) and yet His choice as to what is of value shall never change. After searching all things, this wise Merchant’s judgment as to what is of value is the Church! To Him, the Church is of such great value that He went and sold all that He possessed in order to buy it.

Do we not love the Lord more after reading such a verse? Seeing the Church, the Lord decided to leave all that He had to become a lowly man (Phil. 2). He denied Himself all divine privilege and lived a human life. Finally, He went to the cross and paid the price with His own blood. He “sold all” that He might buy the Church. How clear is the situation now, based on the price that the Lord paid for us! What a wise Merchant He is! We, in contrast, wish to gain a dollar’s worth of blessing after paying a penny’s worth of price. Why are we like this? Simply because we do not see the value of the Pearl, which is the Church constituted with Christ Himself! When we see the value of what the Lord is after, we are able to say, “Lord Jesus, I would like to be as You. If You sold all to gain us, we also would sell all to gain ourselves with You.”

THE UNIQUE PEARL IN THE UNIVERSE

What is this treasure? What is this pearl? The Pearl of Great Price is the Church, the Body of the resurrected, ascended, and reigning Christ. How can God in Christ gain this treasure? We ourselves as the Church, Christ’s vital Body, are the focus and center of the divine operation of God the Father in eternity past. This is simply something beyond us. We have no idea what eternity is. We can remember something of a few years past, and we have learned of events in human history, but who can know what stretches back into eternity? Time is part of eternity, but how does one think of what was of eternity before time began? Yet our God had something in Him before anything else existed. He, as the mighty, all-wise One, was seeking something that would bring Him satisfaction. This is why He created the universe with all its galaxies, including our Milky Way. All the wonders of astronomy do not satisfy Him, however. People may want to visit Mars or other planets, but what interests God is not found in such places. Even the beauties of our wonderful earth are empty to God. They are not the treasure He is seeking, for none of these wonders match God Himself.

GOD’S OWN REPRODUCTION AND ENLARGEMENT

What God is seeking is something that is His own enlargement and reproduction. He is after something that comes out of Himself, and that something is the Church. For that, God has created the galaxies and planets and the earth and all that the earth contains. Why has God done all this? He has done it to gain His counterpart, the Church, the Pearl of Great Price. The Church was the focus of the divine operation of God the Father in eternity past.

ALL THINGS FOR US, WE FOR GOD

If you were to ask God why He created the first day when light came forth, He would answer, "For you." If you were to ask Him why He brought forth the second day when the sky separated, or the third when dry land appeared, He would likewise reply, "For you." God created the trees, the animals, and all the other things that exist for us! But if you were to ask, "Why did you create humanity?" His response would be, "For Me." Everything God has created is for us, but we are for God.

CHOSEN TO BE HOLY

In light of all this, it must be frustrating to God when we nullify all this by declaring, "Everything is for me, but I am NOT for God." This is a foolish kind of logic, yet it dominates the human race. According to how most people act, God is here for us; we are not here for God! Even Christians are like this: they believe in Jesus because Jesus loves them, they trust in Jesus because Jesus will take care of them, and they follow Jesus because they believe Jesus will increasingly lead them to comfort and good fortune. God's thought, however, is to gain something that totally corresponds to HIM. He wants to gain something that totally matches Him. This is why He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world to be holy and without blemish (Eph 1:4). Among all the items in the universe, God has chosen a group of people to be His Body (1 Cor. 12, etc.) and His Bride (Eph. 5:24-25). They are that very treasure and satisfaction. To become His treasure, however, those whom He has chosen must become totally one with Him. This is what "holy" means in Ephesians 1:4. To be holy is to be just like God Himself, and to be without blemish is to be free of all that is not God (for anything that is not of God Himself would only mar that which is of God).

UNTO SONSHIP

God's choosing us in love has our sonship in view (Eph. 1:5). Sonship involves the expression of God's life and nature in us. In many of us the Lord still has a long way to go, for although we are all children, not many exhibit this matter of sonship! Today the Lord has to use all kinds of "psychology" to get us to cooperate with Him, but one day hopefully we will be able to work with Him as those who possess a greater measure of maturity in life. The Lord has so many sons upon the earth today, but not much sonship is seen among them. The Lord has predestinated us, however, not merely to be saved or to go to heaven, but to grow up!

GOD'S ETERNAL GOAL IS THE CHURCH

Even before creation, God's desire was to produce a vital organism or entity that matched Him. In that entity, we as the constituents of that organism are predestinated to be matured in Christ. This is something according to the good pleasure of His will (Eph 1:5). His goal, purpose, will, desire and economy are according to His good pleasure. God is so happy when He thinks on the Church, for it is the fulfillment of this desire in God's heart. Apart from the Church, everything in existence is empty and purposeless as far as God is concerned. But when God sees the Church, He becomes so joyful! All His angels must have wondered what it was that God was after as they watched His plan unfold. Now this purpose has been made known (Eph 3:5).

What is this purpose? It is the Church!

Once we realize that God's purpose is the Church, it should seem very odd when anyone asks, "What church do you go to?" The Lord's desire goes far beyond what we may desire, which may simply be to enjoy a good meeting! His goal is to produce the Church as the fulfillment of His good pleasure! Everything we go through in time is to produce what God desires in eternity. Today we are in the process, and whatever we end up doing for "a living" is for our reaching full sonship! We should therefore not aim at some kind of success in the world, for that will ultimately be meaningless. We need to wake up and realize that we are not insignificant or small or hopeless... we have been given eternal life, and the purpose of everything we do in this age should be done with the purpose of gaining sonship! This is how the Pearl of Great Price that the Lord is after is produced.

Even after the Fall, mankind remained the object of God's love. By means of time, God became a man so that He might gain those He had chosen for His desire. Then, one day, He was put on the cross and died and resurrected and went back to God. Who is this Person? He is Jesus Christ. Now in resurrection, however, He is no longer alone. In resurrection, He is now with His enlargement, the Church! Now He has one who matches Him, and He is no longer alone in the universe!

CREATED IN GOD'S IMAGE AND ACCORDING TO GOD'S LIKENESS
AND **HAVING RECEIVED GOD HIMSELF**

God created mankind with the idea that mankind would express

Him, so He made mankind in His image and likeness (Gen. 1:26). Inwardly we were created in God's image (with a spirit) and outwardly we bear God's own likeness. Thus, human beings are very great! On one hand, people seem to be a dime a dozen. To God, however, they are beautiful, being made in His image and after His likeness. And those of us who have Him living within them are even MORE beautiful, and we become more and more lovely to Him as we grow unto sonship.

What is our hope for the future? It is this divine life of God within us. We who have believed have received the Spirit Himself. We had the image of God since we were created with a human spirit, and now God Himself dwells within us. While we may decline physically in this lifetime, one day we will be transformed! The amount of Christ we have gained up to this point, however, determines the sonship we are able to exercise today. The Christ we possess within is what forms this Pearl He is after. Ultimately, we all will be glorified, and the Lord will have His Pearl in full. The manifestation of this Pearl will take place when all the believers are brought into glory.

GOD WENT THROUGH A PROCESS TO PURCHASE AND PRODUCE THIS PEARL

The Lord became a man and lived among humanity. Eventually He died on the cross and was resurrected. When He entered into that glory as a man in ascension, He was the prototype in miniature of the Church in glory. Now, today, we, His Body, exist as He does—with the nature of glory! The Lord Himself is the treasure within us. As He went through the process to gain the treasure He sought, He Himself was that treasure! The process He went through was so that we also might be holy and without blemish before Him in love. When He was on earth, no one could point to anything in Him that could be blamed in the sight of God. In fact, at one point those around Him actually beheld His glory!

During those thirty-some years on the earth, there was one man in whom God could completely be found. In eternity, there shall be many! The Church shall become Christ's total reproduction. Just as He is without blemish as a man, the members of His Body shall also be without blemish. Today, there may be many problems and "blemishes," but God does not see as man does. (Balaam's prophesying concerning Israel in Numbers 24 somewhat indicates how God sees His Church. Balaam could not speak of any fault in them, even though from man's side there were surely many flaws!) If we want to be foolish and be a friend of Satan in the church life, we should gossip concerning all the seeming problems; but if we want to be wise and build up the Church, we should praise the Lord for what He is doing in all His saints and for

all His virtues that are expressed. (This does not mean we are granted a license to fail or to sin, but the weaknesses and failures we see are not quite seen by God, for to Him the Church is without blemish. Man says everything is messy, but God says, "How good is the Church!")

THE CHURCH MANIFESTING GOD'S LOVE AND WISDOM

The Church will manifest God's wisdom through His sovereignty and His love through His dispensing. When you look at the Church, you can say it is a production of God's wisdom, and you can also say it is a dispensing of God's love. How was it that each one of us came to salvation? You can say it was something of God's wisdom. Every person is qualified to be saved, and yet for some reason some do not receive salvation. The Lord was so wise to gain those whom He has gained for His treasure. When you finally see the Lord, the Lord will not be interested in hearing how gallant we were in following Him or how successful we were in giving ourselves to Him. He will want to see that we are HIS expression, not our own. It will not be that we can boast in ourselves for eternity, but rather that we can boast in HIM. Thus, in His wisdom, God saves us, upholds us, and even allows us to fail so that He might recover us again, caring for us all the way until we achieve His aim.

Love is the motivating factor behind the exercise of God's wisdom towards us. He does everything to raise us up to bear the sonship. He was willing to sacrifice everything for us because of His love. Eventually our praise will be in all He has done for us, for we will have nothing to boast of in ourselves. Praise Him! You may feel you were faithful and worthy enough to claim, "Lord, I opened my heart to you" or "I followed You all my life." The Lord will show each one of us that it was all due to His wise operation that kept us from failing and that He lifted us up when we needed it. Because it was all done in love, we were gained. The result of the Lord's wisdom and love is this precious Pearl that He seeks.

The result will be to the praise of the glory of His grace (Eph. 1:6). One day, all the angels, including all the fallen angels, will have to praise God for what He has accomplished. The whole universe will have to praise God because of this Pearl, the Church.

In the meantime, we have the power of the Lord's blood to cover our failures. We are still sinners. God is marvelous, and we are so unworthy. Thus, we cling to Him and dare not look at ourselves. When we see how peculiar we all are, we will praise the Lord even more for how He loves us, and how He in His wisdom is able to take each one of us all the way until we all become this Pearl of Great Price that God has sold all to gain.

- Titus Chu, September 5 2009 in Troy, Michigan

Labor Day 2009

MESSAGE TWO

THE CHURCH AS THE FULFILLMENT OF GOD'S PLAN CARRIED OUT IN HIS ECONOMY

IN HIS HUMANITY,
CHRIST IS THE PROTOTYPE AND MINIATURE OF THE CHURCH

God desired to have us, but we failed. Therefore Christ came to be the first miniature, the prototype, of this Pearl, His treasure. What is the Church? The Church is Christ. If you want to know what that Pearl is just look at Jesus Christ, for to God He is that Pearl. Where is the Church? God would say, "Look at Christ. He is that Church." The Pearl is God and man joined together in one new creation. Outside is the creature. Inside is the Creator. Thus the Lord Jesus was a miniature of the Pearl God is seeking. Thus we must treasure the Lord Jesus. In resurrection the Lord released His life to His believers, making them all "mini-Christ". Outwardly we have a physical body of the creature; inwardly we have the divine life of the Creator.

When Jesus walked on the earth He was inwardly God and outwardly a man. Today every regenerated Christian can testify the same. Look at us! Inwardly we have Christ, and outwardly we are very common men. Isn't that marvelous? God desires to be the content, reality and substance of all those He has regenerated with His life. But are we not yet sinners? We are, but we now have divine life in us. This is the treasure and this is that Pearl. We have to thank the Lord for His marvelous work.

Whatever is not of Christ or with Christ as the reality is not the Church. Whatever we practice has to be of Christ, for whatever is not of Christ is

not the Church. The Church is inwardly God and outwardly man. Jesus was the prototype, and we are His enlargement. We express this Christ through our physical body. When all the saints are expressing Christ, together they are His glorious Church. In this way, the Church eventually becomes “to the praise of the glory of His grace” (Eph 1:6).

OUR BURDEN: TO HELP PEOPLE GAIN CHRIST ALONE

Because of events we have recently passed through, many have lost heart in what they believe (even though they know it is from the Lord), and have turned their focus to other things such as how to make the meetings more attractive. It is as though some think that Jesus no longer works, but rather some form of music. They take the “megachurches” as their example, but being a “megachurch” has never been our aim. (Few in the “megachurches” come only for Christ; most come for the entertainment and social life. In other words, they come for “Christ...plus”. Our burden, however, is to help people to know, see, enjoy and have only Christ!) We must know how to have Christ inwardly and to manifest Christ outwardly through our lives.

GOD’S GRACE ABOUNDING TO US IN ALL WISDOM AND PRUDENCE

The grace the Lord supplies to us abounds to us in all wisdom and prudence (Eph 1:7-8). God has never asked the Church to perform something, but rather live a life filled with Christ as grace according to His wisdom and prudence. God is all-wise. Everything you think, God knows, and He knows exactly where your thoughts lead. His blueprint is all-wise and His operation is all-wise. To our thought, God being all-wise is all that would seem necessary. In addition to wisdom, however, prudence is necessary in doing things, and God possesses prudence as well as wisdom.

What is the difference between wisdom and prudence? It can be argued, for example, that there was wisdom in Mao’s view that everything be cleared away so China could have a new start. Due to his lack of prudence in how he attempted this, however, three generations of Chinese passed through great turmoil and deprivation, and millions of lives were lost. God, however, is not lacking in either wisdom or prudence. This is why He gives us all the things we experience in our lives. What God envisions in His wisdom is marvelous, and what He does to carry it out in His prudence is just as marvelous. With regards to His purpose, God is not only wise—He is prudent! And it is in relation to His wisdom and prudence that He causes His grace to abound to us. In

the Church as God's plan we see God's wisdom, and in the day-to-day carrying out of the church life, we see God's prudence.

DECLARING THE MYSTERY OF GOD

What is the church life for? It is to declare the mystery of God. God is a mystery, and yet the mystery of God is declared by the Church. He made known to us the mystery of His will. As we follow this and carry this, doing what we do according to His desire as unveiled to us, something is declared among us. When people see this, they realize they are witnessing something marvelous! When someone comes to a meeting and sees the brothers and sisters enjoying God and being crazily joyful, their feeling is that something wonderful is going on. What they are witnessing is a declaration of God, for the church life is a declaration of Christ. When others see Christ in the church life, they are seeing the mystery of God! This is not a matter of how "mega" or "mini" you are, this is a matter of how much reality of Christ is conveyed through the church life. Having Christ becomes our declaration.

You may not be an apostle or a prophet or an evangelist or such, but if you are someone who enjoys Jesus with the other brothers and sisters, and stand for Him and fight to experience Him with the others to the extent you express Christ, your experience of Christ becomes a declaration of the mystery of God! The Church's existence is something enjoyable. When you see saints together enjoying God and exhibiting Christ your sense should be, "This is the Church, because God's mystery is being declared!"

ACCORDING TO GOD'S GOOD PLEASURE TO MEET HIS NEED AND SATISFY HIS HEART

The existence of the Church is according to the good pleasure God determined for Himself. What we in the Church seek and enjoy is the very thing God seeks and enjoys. What He wants, we want. What He enjoys, we enjoy. Whatever He is after, we are after. Our lives are joined with His in such a way that we experience a real and peaceful life. Enjoy what God has planned for you, for if you deviate from it you will find yourself in a chaotic existence. The Church is something heavenly of Christ. If you bring the church life into things that are earthly instead, the situation will become chaotic.

The typical difference between what God has shown *us* and what is taught in other Christian groups (they being our dear fellow-Christians) is that we always minister according to Christ's need, while others often

minister according to man's need. If we were to minister to man's need rather than Christ's, Christ could no longer be with us. We may say, as Paul did, "Praise the Lord that at least Christ is announced!" (Phil 1:14-18). Even so, we have to ask whether Christ is really getting what HE is after. Even if thousands were saved from a gospel preaching campaign... then what? We are very happy to see people get saved, but we should desire to see brothers raised up who can make the Lord happy even as they are happy for their own salvation. When we have God's existence as our existence, we surely know joy!

My granddaughter drew a picture of Cinderella that really pleased me, and gave it to me. I intended to frame it, because it just gave me a certain satisfaction. When I was away, however, someone who was cleaning for me threw the picture out, not knowing its value. I asked my granddaughter to draw me another picture like the one I had lost, but even though she drew many fine pictures, she could not recapture that one that I so enjoyed. She drew and drew, but I was waiting for that Cinderella. Instead of Cinderella, however, many other things came out. With the Lord and us it is the same. When we hit what the Lord is after, it makes Him very happy so He asks us, "Would you please abide in and develop this?" We reply, "We still love You, and we are still preaching the gospel. We are doing many things which we think You will appreciate." The Lord, however, asks, "But is it really what makes Me happy? I am only truly happy when your existence matches My purpose. My purpose is that you inwardly gain Me that I am outwardly seen in you. Until your existence matches My purpose, I will not be totally satisfied."

TO HEAD UP ALL THINGS IN CHRIST

The more our existence matches God's purpose, the more the church life becomes the channel for God to head up all things in Christ (Eph. 1:22). God desires that everything would be headed up in Him. When He tried using the angels for this, there was rebellion. Then He gained us with the intention that through our maturity, as the Bride made ready, He would be able to head all things up, even in the heavenlies. Eventually, in spite of the chaos created by Satan in his rebellion, all things in heaven and earth will be one day headed up by God. What will be the unique channel for this? The Church.

Therefore, we should enjoy the church life! The Church should be our living; it should not merely be some gatherings to us. As we live such a church life, we become the channel by which God can head up all things in Himself.

God and the Church eventually mutually inherit each other. This is marvelous!

Once I visited a brother who was a highly-placed executive at his office. The brother who drove me also came in with me. I was dressed in a suit, whereas the brother who was with me was dressed in a somewhat sloppy manner. The brother we were visiting invited me in, but paused as he saw the other person with me. To invite the other brother put him on the spot; for to invite him in would cause him to lose some face, whereas to not invite him would mean losing a brother. He invited him in, but that incident illustrated something to me. The Lord cannot joyfully celebrate us as His inheritance until He is totally happy with us. In order to be happy with us as His inheritance, we must match Him. Eventually, every part of us must match Him.

We may think the Lord is happy with something we do in His name (such as playing an instrument in a meeting). The Lord, however, is after you, not your playing. The Lord enjoys you because Christ is in you. The Lord sees in each one of us the miniature of the Church. In a sense, each one of us is a small Church, since each of us, as a human being created by God, contains Christ. (Of course, all of us together are the Church, but whether individually or corporately, the principle is the same.) What the Lord is seeking to inherit is just Himself in us. The One we received and inherit becomes the One He also inherits! This is why we call this a "mutual inheritance": the Creator who became incarnate, and God was in that man, Jesus, from the very beginning. Now we, who were fallen human beings, may receive Him since He has died and resurrected. After we receive Him, and after He does all His work in us, we become just as He is! What a sweet situation! Our whole life is for one thing: to prepare us with this in view.

It would be a sad thing, however, if the Lord eventually is only able to find a small bit of Himself in us. He expects to see that He becomes very rich and mature in us. The Christ we each experience should become a bountiful, abundant Christ! Then our experience of this mutual inheritance will be very rich. The Lord will be able to say, "I am very appreciative for all you have done for Me, but what I inherit is you, not your ability." On that day we should be able to say, "Look! This is my Lord!"... because we look alike! For the same reason, the Lord would be very glad to say, "Look! This is My son!"

In view of this, we should ask "Can this be inherited by Christ?" for everything we do. Everything we do must have gaining Christ in view, for as we gain Christ, Christ gains us as His inheritance, just as He becomes ours.

TO THE PRAISE OF HIS GLORY BY MEANS OF THE SPIRIT'S WORK

All of this results in the praise of His glory. We disappear, and He alone is seen. In this age the Church becomes sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, which is the pledge and foretaste of our inheritance (Eph. 1:14). The Holy Spirit works with us essentially and economically. What He is, we have, and what He does, we do. What His essence is, we enjoy, and what He does, we do. Essentially the Church is born of the Spirit, as Jesus was. The Church and Jesus share the same Spirit. The Church is filled inwardly with the Spirit for her constitution. As we are so much in Spirit, the Spirit becomes our constitution, and we become a spiritual person. Christ's essence becomes our essence. The Spirit becomes our reality, and this produces life, love, joy, comfort, holiness, reality, power, and the foretaste of eternity. Those who are older somewhat understand what it is to see the future in light of the past. Those who are younger do not yet have much history upon which they might consider the future. We who are older may not be able to jump much anymore, but we do have a taste of eternity. As a servant of the Lord, I still look forward to the future, however. I take care of myself more than when I was young, for I now have a taste of eternity.

All Christians have experienced the Spirit as the Spirit of life, love, joy and comfort. Few, however, can boast in knowing the Spirit as the Spirit of holiness, for whatever is holy is totally separated unto God. Those who have entered into this level of experience can no longer make their own plans for their lives. Instead, their lives become separated unto God. Their declaration is, "My life is for nothing but Christ! I am totally separated unto God. I am one with Him alone." When you are so much in the Spirit essentially and you are sealed by the Spirit, there is a total separation from everything else. To others, you become hopeless, for the Spirit of holiness has gotten through to you.

THE SPIRIT OF HOLINESS SEPARATING US UNTO GOD

Our future is something that now has been handed over to God that He might gain us for Himself. The White House is a goal for many, but the White House is not holy. To be an executive of a large corporation is the goal of many, but that position is not holy. The Lord desires to gain us for Himself. With the Spirit of holiness, you have no other choice but to choose Christ alone. To be holy means to be in, with, and according to Christ. In such a way you have the Spirit of holiness, and your life becomes very real!

ENJOYING THE BEST EXISTENCE

This doesn't mean you don't enjoy life or the things around you. Your stand, however, is Christ. I have seen many my age reconsider and regret the choices they have made for their lives. I never have had this experience. My feeling is always I have experienced the best kind of life a human being could experience. I have no regrets. My life is real. I have lived the best kind of life a man could have! I feel that if I can live one more day, that day will be very real. It will not be wasted. It is not that I am "successful" or appreciated. Regardless how successful or defeated I may feel, the Spirit of holiness is with me, demanding that I be for Him alone, and nothing else! Because of that, I stand for Christ and my life becomes very valuable.

THE SPIRIT TOWARD US IS THE SPIRIT OF POWER

When you have holiness you have reality, and when you have reality you have power. Thus the Spirit to you becomes a Spirit of power. And eventually, you see eternity. For all of this, we must experience the Spirit as love, life, and comfort more and more. Eventually we will be able to declare we are for Christ and Christ alone. The more we are able to make that declaration, the more we will experience the Spirit as the Spirit of reality, of power, and even of eternity.

HAVING THE SPIRIT ESSENTIALLY AND ECONOMICALLY

For its operation, the Church as the treasure in the universe has received the Spirit both essentially and economically. Jesus was born of the Holy Spirit, yet when He was baptized, the Holy Spirit economically came upon Him. The Lord Jesus experienced this, and we experience the same. We are filled inwardly with the Spirit, and outwardly we are filled with the Spirit for operation. Inwardly something is bubbling all the time, and something is upon us as power to do the Lord's work.

EVERYTHING HAS BEEN PROVIDED FOR A MARVELOUS CHURCH LIFE

Sometimes I wonder why people are so foolish as to not love the Lord. Think about God the Father and God the Son, and the sweet church life with the purpose to declare Christ, to enjoy the pleasure of God, to become the channel for God to head up everything, and to become a mutual inheritance with God. Inwardly you have the Spirit for living, and outwardly you have the Spirit as strength for operation.

You begin to do things for Christ, and you begin to help others to receive Christ as well. If many in the church life would have this kind of Spirit, how marvelous the church life would become!

NOURISHED AND FED,
WE NOURISH AND FEED OTHERS AND PROPHECY
FOR THE BUILDING UP OF THE CHURCH

As the Spirit nourishes and feeds you, you nourish and feed others. The Spirit also provides us with wisdom so that we might make the best decisions. Not only does the Spirit cause us to become wise, but also to be one with God. As you take a stand to be one with God, God will show you so many divine things! Eventually the Spirit will produce prophesying among us to build up the Church. (Prophesying can mean to foretell, or to tell forth.) So the Spirit not only leads us and restricts us, but also enables us to prophesy!

ENABLED TO LIVE AND EXPRESS CHRIST

The economic aspect of the Spirit brings us into a function in which we exhibit and experience all the foregoing items in the church life. Eventually you have to learn to be very faithful to the Spirit. As you are faithful to the Spirit, your daily living becomes Christ-like. People see you, and they see someone who is living Christ.

MINISTRIES DEVELOPED TO BLESS THE CHURCH

Eventually, the Spirit produces ministries. Something is put into you so you might become a blessing to the Church for its building up. When we are so much in our spirit, ministries are produced among us in various aspects and degrees.

All of this is for the production of this Pearl, the Church.

- Titus Chu, September 5 2009 at Troy, Michigan

Labor Day 2009

MESSAGE THREE

THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE: PRODUCED THROUGH THE NEW TESTAMENT MINISTRY AS SEEN IN THE FOUR MINISTRIES OF THE APOSTOLIC AGE

Christ and His Body, the Church, make up the unique treasure in the universe. Now we come to how the Church becomes the testimony of the Lord.

THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE PRODUCED THROUGH MINISTRY

We have seen how a people formed with Christ become the Pearl God as the Merchant is seeking in the universe. How is this unique treasure, this Pearl, produced? How is the unique testimony the Lord is after made real and built up? It is built up through ministries.

CONSTITUTED MINISTERS WITH MINISTRIES

Being a minister is not to have a job; being a minister is to be constituted with a ministry. Being a New Testament minister is something higher than any profession on earth. Becoming a minister requires something more than mere training and knowledge. Becoming a minister requires constitution. A minister is a minister because he has a ministry. When someone is constituted with a ministry, he becomes a minister.

If there were no ministers it would be very difficult for the churches to be blessed. The blessedness of the local churches has much to do with the richness of the ministries of the elders and coworkers who serve them. The richer the ministries, the more the churches are blessed.

FOUR KINDS OF MINISTRIES

There are four or five kinds of ministries (Eph 4:11) mentioned which

Christ has given His Church. There are thus four or five kinds of ministers, and with every kind of minister there may be many ministers. What they have been committed with by God is their ministry. Even though there are four or five kinds of ministries (Eph 4:11) there is only one unique ministry, that of Jesus Christ, and the ministry of Jesus Christ is the unique ministry of the New Testament. Therefore Christ is the unique New Testament minister. He ministers to us all the riches in the church life by ministering to us all that God has for us.

ALL LABOR IN THE ONE MINISTRY OF JESUS CHRIST
WHO IS THE "CONSTITUTION" OF THE CHURCH

Some say that there is only one ministry today, and that it is the ministry of Watchman Nee or some other person. While we may say there have been some individuals who have been greatly used by the Lord at different times, we have to recognize that the unique ministry to the churches is the ministry of Jesus Christ. We must be clear about this.

Because men seek after leaders, they are prone to lift some servants up beyond what the Lord has arranged. No one should fear what would happen if a certain brother were to be taken away. John may have lived to be around a hundred, but that is about the extent someone might expect to live. In Christ as the unique Minister there are many ministers. Therefore no one should fear the loss of one minister as though that person were absolutely necessary. There are many ministers with many ministries. These ministries (or ministers) when all put together operate as the ministry of Jesus Christ upon the earth.

In the United States we have seen many presidents come and go, but the Constitution remains. Some have seemingly done better than others, but as long as the Constitution operates, the United States is able to move forward. Many who led the United States have passed on, and others are being raised up who will one day occupy that office. As long as we have our Constitution, however, we can have confidence in the country as it stands framed within it. I am very thankful that in this country there is such a marvelous constitution which actually rules the country. Because of it, even should you have a bad president, the result will not be that serious.

What is the Church's constitution? It is a living constitution, for it is the resurrected, heavenly Christ! There are times we may feel things are very prevailing and there are times we may feel very discouraged by the situation. It doesn't really matter, for Christ remains the Head of the Church. We should rest in the fact that the resurrected Christ Himself is the Church's constitution. Having Him, we cannot be afraid. He will raise up or remove His servants as He pleases, but He Himself remains constant as the Church's heavenly constitution.

What kind of ministers does the Lord give to His Church? First of all, He gives apostles. Please note the noun is plural. There are many apostles. From this we may imply there are apostles of varying capacities. There are learning apostles and mature apostles. There are apostles serving larger and smaller numbers of churches. We need many apostles among us today. Some may be as Timothy, while others may be as Paul. They may not necessarily seem to have a particular ministry. (Timothy never wrote anything we know of, yet he traveled among the churches.) The word simply means "sent out". If you are sent out by the Lord with a commitment, you are an apostle. (It is not merely a matter of following a leading of the Lord; you must be someone sent out with something particular.)

For instance, perhaps thirty or forty young people may go to a small town to preach the gospel there. This could be a way that some may begin to develop their "apostleship". It is by such opportunities that the Lord raises up apostles (who operate in different degrees). We should seek that many apostles be raised up among us. We shouldn't think of an apostle as being so very grand and far beyond what we can do. There are operating apostles, learning apostles, apostles who serve many churches, and those who work on a smaller scale. They all are apostles.

Furthermore there are prophets, evangelists, and shepherds and teachers. While it may not be strictly true, in principle if you never have taught as a shepherd, you would find it difficult to serve as an evangelist; and if you do not preach the gospel, you are not someone who can really speak for the Lord as one of His prophets; and if you cannot speak for the Lord, preach the gospel, and teach as a shepherd, you cannot serve Him as an apostle. Thus, first learn to teach and shepherd one or two and raise them up. Minister to them and work with them that more might be saved. Then work with them so that they might minister in the church meetings. Eventually, the Lord may use you as an apostle to build up the churches.

DEVELOP APOSTLESHIP!

Those who dream of being greatly used by God will be unused, for apostleship results from an accumulation of faithfulness, tears, trials, labor, and many years of continual consecration and responding to the Lord. In such a way a ministry develops, producing a minister called an apostle.

Since the Lord desires to build up the Church, He raises up such ministers as apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers.

THE FOUR MINISTRIES OF THE APOSTOLIC AGE

An apostle has a particular commitment from the Lord, but we also refer to the first one hundred years of the “Christian Era” as the Age of the Apostles. In the Age of Apostles, the last to pass away was the apostle John. With apostles there are four ministries. (This is based upon Watchman Nee’s booklet, “The Four Ministries of James, Peter, Paul and John”.) There is no way any who wish to serve the Lord as one of His ministers can avoid these four ministries. All who serve must advance through what is represented in James’ ministry through what is represented by Peter and Paul’s ministries to what is represented by John’s ministry.

JAMES: MARTYRDOM AS THE FOUNDATION

The nature of James’ ministry serves as the basis for the ministries of Peter, Paul and John. (The James referred to here is James the son of Zebedee and brother of John, not James the brother of the Lord who later became the leader of the church in Jerusalem and wrote the book of James.) Who a person is becomes more important than what he sees or does. Some people claim to see something, but it doesn’t mean much if they have not experienced what is represented by James’ ministry. I personally would rather see a person *not* get what is shared in a meeting and have to struggle in prayer to see it than see someone claim to so easily receive it without paying any price at all! Who you are as a person is more important than how well you can preach. Who you are is more important than what you “see”. James as the initial ministry emphasizes this fact, for James’ ministry is the ministry of martyrdom.

James was the first among the twelve apostles to be martyred (Acts 12:2). As the twelve began to really operate, a brief verse tells us Herod killed James the brother of John with a sword. This simple verse, however, establishes the basis for how every Christian should follow Christ.

Whoever desires to follow Christ must have a spirit of martyrdom. Such a person must be able to say, “I am willing and ready to die. I am afraid of nothing. I care for nothing. My life is for Christ. I live unto Christ and I am also ready to be martyred for the sake of Christ.” This becomes the ground for all the ministries that develop. Unless you take such a stand, you can never develop. As you follow the Lord, so many things will arise. Your parents will raise issues about your future. You must honor and appreciate your parents, but you must also be clear that your service is now to the Lord as He directs. A life that can be used by the Lord is a life that proclaims, “I am ready to follow the Lord all the way, even unto death. With me, there is no compromise.”

Those who have such a spirit are often capable persons. They have the ability to make their lives easier, but they refuse to do so. For Jesus' sake, they stand firm. This does not typically mean physical martyrdom. (Who today is killing Christians anyway?) The spirit of James, however, must be with you. In every stage of your following of the Lord, you cannot allow any compromise to creep in. You must stand absolutely firm for the sake of Christ. With such a stand, you can begin to have the reality of the ministry of Peter.

PETER: BRINGING OTHERS
THE BASIC REVELATION OF CHRIST AND THE CHURCH

Peter's ministry was simply a matter of God showing him Christ, and Christ showing him the Church. On the day of Pentecost, he preached, opening the door of the gospel. That is what is significant about Peter's ministry. Everyone who loves the Lord and desires to follow the Lord can and must receive such a vision of Christ and the Church as Peter received. We all should be able to say we live our lives for nothing but Christ and the Church.

PAUL: FURNISHING THE CHURCH WITH CHRIST'S RICHES

Peter's ministry opened the way for Paul's ministry, which issued in the reality of the fullness of the testimony of Christ. Paul's ministry is the ministry of building up. After the "house" is begun, it needs a lot of furnishing. Paul was the apostle who ministered so many riches for the Church's continued furnishing.

Through Peter, the door was opened. Through Paul, the riches came in. Through Peter, the Jews and Gentiles were saved into one Church, becoming one Body. A house was produced. Then Paul came in to furnish all the unsearchable riches of Christ as one who deeply grasped the mystery of God (Christ) and the mystery of Christ (the Church). In the church life there are so many riches for us to enjoy and apply.

JOHN: EMPHASIZING THE DIVINE LIFE

What does John represent? After Peter produced the house, and Paul furnished it, what was still missing? The children! A lot of young life should be inhabiting the house that has been produced and furnished. Once everything is established and prepared, a lot of life should be flowing! Even in a locality where many come together, if there are no new ones, there is no happiness. When there are new ones and life is circulating within the household, there is blessing. Such a church life is very healthy.

FOUR MINISTRIES TO RAISE UP ONE HOUSE

These are the significances of the ministries of James, Peter, Paul, and John. Using the analogy of marriage, we can see the progression. It begins at the wedding, when both parties declare they are ready to die for each other and the children to come. That is the ministry of James. Eventually, there is life in the household they establish. This emphasis on life is represented by John's ministry, which concludes the so-called Apostolic Age.

THE EMPHASIS OF JOHN'S MINISTRY

John's ministry is very life-giving. Out of twenty-seven books of the New Testament, fourteen were written by Paul and five were written by John. Their writings are, however, totally different. In the apostle Paul's teaching we are able to appreciate Christ's riches. In the apostle John's writings, it is as though he has come to the realization that teachings, no matter how good they are, aren't enough. Therefore he helps us to dwell in the divine life, to take Christ as our person, to fellowship with the saints, to take the Church as the testimony, and to live in the church life by means of the divine life as the content.

ABIDE IN THE DIVINE LIFE AND IN FELLOWSHIP WITH THE SON AND THE FATHER

First, we dwell in the Triune God as life. As we dwell in the divine life, we take Christ as our person. Paul's statement would be "for me to live is Christ" (Gal. 2:20). In John's view, fellowship is very important (1 John 1:3). Whenever fellowship is blocked it indicates something is unhealthy. As long as we experience being in Christ, however, we find that we are able to have fellowship with one another. This, in turn, insures that we are able to take the Church as the testimony and to live the church life by means of the divine life.

John was someone who had seen and could testify of the divine life (1 John 1:2). The life which was from the beginning had become his abode. Paul could state very strongly that he had seen Christ and that we all need to see Christ, but John's word was simpler. He merely said, "I have heard Him, I have seen Him, I have looked upon Him and I have handled Him" (1:1). From these four types of interactions with Christ, John gained a full realization of Christ as the Word of life.

HEAR HIM, SEE HIM, LOOK UPON HIM, HANDLE HIM

How does John's experience relate to ours? We also heard that Christ is the Savior. One day we actually opened our heart to Him, and we saw Him! Afterwards we spent hours looking upon Him by means of prayer and Bible reading, touching His presence. As we look upon Him in such a way, eventually we can say we "handle" Him. This is a great thing, because it implies we begin to really know what it is He desires. We begin to understand His operation and move, and how to stand one with Him for what He is after. We can say, "I am one with You in Your economy for Your operation."

Paul could say he wasn't disobedient to the heavenly vision (Acts 26:19). He sounded as though he had accomplished something. John, however, does not come across in such a heroic way. In 1 John 1 he simply tells us how he heard Christ, saw Christ, and so on. Eventually he could say he handled Him and thus knew Him as the Word of life with a living economy. This is really something marvelous. John desired to bring all of us into this fellowship he was experiencing.

FELLOWSHIPING IN CHRIST

This fellowship John speaks of has nothing to do with a shared topic. Our interests may be very different, but in this fellowship we are able to declare to one another the Christ that we know. This declaration establishes a very sweet fellowship "one with another".

JOHN'S PARTICULAR DEVELOPMENT

The Lord's servants as the faithful messengers convey to the churches the vision they have received of the Lord. John's portion in this matter is very rich, for he alone of all the apostles could say he had known Jesus from the day he was born. He was probably at least ten years younger than Jesus, who was his cousin. (It is hard to imagine anyone older could have rested against Jesus as seen in John 13:23.) John's entire life was related to Jesus in some way.

KNOWING JESUS FROM INFANCY

Jesus no doubt knew John as they were growing up. As the older cousin, Jesus probably had to watch over John in some way from time to time. I look forward to the opportunity in the coming age to ask John about his experiences with Jesus growing up. Nazareth wasn't that close to where

John dwelt on the Sea of Galilee. The distance was about 20 miles, which would have been quite a walk. Even so, I believe John and Jesus were quite close.

FOLLOWING CHRIST FROM THE BEGINNING OF HIS EARTHLY MINISTRY

Then, around 30 AD, Jesus was declared the redeeming Lamb of God by John the Baptist (another cousin). For some reason, John was a follower of John the Baptist at the time and therefore he witnessed this (John 1:35-39). I somewhat believe he had become a follower of John the Baptist at Jesus' direction, so that John might become enlarged. Because John was involved in John the Baptist's ministry, he probably became quite fiery himself. John may have even dressed like John the Baptist and eaten like he did. But I believe John would have sensed that the Baptist's ministry was not yet the real thing.

Then Jesus appeared, walking near to where John the Baptist and his followers were. Suddenly, John the Baptist declared something that John himself was probably hoping to hear. John must have sensed his cousin Jesus possessed much more usefulness to God than being a carpenter would allow for. Therefore he, along with Andrew, left John the Baptist's disciples and became those who first followed Jesus.

When Andrew and John approached Jesus, they asked Him where he lived (John 1:38-39). That was very wise. They didn't ask Him what mission He had for them. If so, perhaps they would have just left Him to do it. Instead, their question implied they wanted to reside with Him. Their thought was, "If we can follow You to where You abide, we can LIVE with You. If we can LIVE with You, we can fully gain You and You can fully gain US." The Bible tells us that from that day on, they lived with Jesus. To live with Jesus is much better than just receiving some assignment from Him!

Eventually the Lord may have told them to go back to say goodbye to their parents. This would agree with what we know about Jesus' high humanity. John's and James' father apparently was successfully running a business, for he had people working for him (Mark 1:19-20). We also know John's mother helped care for Jesus financially. Therefore John and James ended up getting involved in their father's business, fixing the nets. That is why Jesus came by and told them, "Follow Me" (Matt. 4:21)

Why did Jesus call them again? Perhaps they were kept by their father for the sake of the business. They may have felt they should help their father for a year, and then return to following Jesus. (Isn't it true that many consider that they should first get some money together before they begin to follow the Lord full-time? Some even say they will follow when they enter retirement, but shall only retirees follow the Lord? To follow the Lord

in retirement is better than not to follow Him, but how important it is that many young people choose to follow Him! John's feeling may have been to help his family make money to support the Lord's work but let others make money to support the Lord's work! Young people should give themselves to follow the Lord!

John was the youngest among the Lord's disciples and he was among the first. He was an ardent champion of the Lord and was therefore called a "son of thunder" by Jesus (Mark 3:17). Along with Peter and his brother James, he was among the inner circle of Jesus' followers. The fact that he alone leaned on the Lord as they reclined at table indicates he had a very close relationship with the Lord, almost as a son with a father. Therefore he alone could innocently ask, "Who is it, Lord?" when the Lord informed everyone that someone among them would betray Him. (All the others asked, "Is it ME?") He was also the only disciple who followed the Lord all the way to the cross that night and actually witnessed Jesus' death (John 19:25-27). Peter and the others had fled, but John followed the Lord even to Golgotha, standing by with a small group of women that included the Lord's mother. Perhaps because his family was wealthy, John may have known someone of rank who granted him this (see John 18:15). Or, it may simply be he somehow was able to remain unnoticed through all the events that took place without drawing attention to the fact he was one of the Lord's disciples. Regardless, it surely demonstrated his love and attachment to the Lord.

COMMITTED WITH THE CARE OF MARY THE LORD'S MOTHER

An event took place at the cross that became a great factor in all that was to follow with regards to John's life and ministry. As John stood near the cross, Jesus, even as He was dying, took care to charge John with the care of His mother (John 19:25-27). This commitment may not appear to be so great a matter, but it was of great consequence.

The God of all wisdom and prudence knows how to work with His servants. Mary had four sons besides Jesus and an unknown number of daughters (Matt. 13:55-56). It would seem that out of her six other children (which included James and Jude, who each wrote books of the Bible) there should have been one suitable enough to take care of her! My own mother said of me and my brothers, "Out of eight peppers, at least one should be hot [successful] and able to care for me when I am old." Jesus could say of His brothers, "No. Not one is 'hot'."

(It is interesting that when Jesus was carrying out His ministry, James was not there following Him. Furthermore, when Jesus was dying on the cross, James was not present. When Jesus resurrected, it was John and Peter who

ran to the grave. When James came to the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, however, he was apparently received by them. He must have been allowed to speak, and when he spoke, he may have reminded other people of his brother Jesus. He must have done a good job, because eventually he turned the whole church from Christ to the Law. He certainly could argue that Jesus had kept the feasts and all the regulations of the Law. Peter seems to have given in to James and eventually Peter left Jerusalem.)

After the Lord committed them to each other's care from the cross, John and Mary both must have realized this new relationship meant something profound. It did not go along with human concept. Mary's son James was a very capable person. He was able to start from "scratch" in the church life in Jerusalem and advance until he became the sole leader. Mary, however, became very clear from this time onward she was to live with John, and John became very clear that from that moment he was to care for her. Because of this one command, John was preserved and protected until God needed his portion to be manifested. When would that be? Thirty-some years later, after Paul and Peter were martyred (around 67 AD). Due to the Lord's prudence, the ministry of John was kept in reserve for that time when the ministries of Peter and Paul would be terminated.

LABORING WITH THE TWELVE IN JERUSALEM IN THE NEWLY FORMED CHURCH LIFE

God had prepared John for his role. John was with the Lord in his youth and became one of the Lord's closest disciples after the Lord began His earthly ministry (Matt. 17:1-9; Mark 5:37-42; 14:32-36). He was the only disciple who witnessed the Lord's death on the cross, where the Lord appointed him to take care of His mother! Afterwards, he still continued to operate, but always in the second row. He stood up with Peter in Jerusalem as Peter preached on Pentecost and opened the door of the gospel for the church life's beginning (Acts 2:14). He was active there with the other twelve, and a firm support to the apostle Peter (Acts 3:1-6). He was happy to "amen" Peter and to be number two. (All the servants of the Lord need such a willingness, for it is this kind of arrangement from the Lord that protects you.) His direct commitment from the Lord, however, was not to lead the church, but to care for Mary. And Mary, perhaps, was not that easy to care for, for she was the "holy mother".

LEAVING JERUSALEM WITH MARY

Around 58 AD, Paul went to Jerusalem to confer with the leading brothers concerning the requirements placed upon the Gentiles (Acts 15). Peter was

present, but John is nowhere to be seen in this account. Scholars believe that by that time John and Mary had either returned to Galilee or moved to some town in Judea where John may have served some churches. My guess is that it was Mary herself who desired to leave Jerusalem. Perhaps she disagreed with James' insistence upon the Law. She may have also felt slighted due to her sons' preoccupation with their importance in the church there. She was probably also very troubled with the degradation that had taken place through James' influence. She knew Jesus was the Son of God from His conception, and she knew what His burden was. Therefore she may have told John, "Let's get out of this place. I can no longer tolerate it." Whether this was the case or not, it appears John and Mary left Jerusalem at some point before Acts 15.

WITNESSING DEGRADATION IN JERUSALEM AND ITS DESTRUCTION

As one of the apostles, John was no doubt treated with respect in Jerusalem, but he did not appear to have much influence on the direction the church there was taking. Since this was the case, it would not have been difficult for Mary and John to slip away to the country. Later, in AD 67, Paul and Peter were martyred. Then, Jerusalem fell to the Roman general Titus in AD 70. James, the leader of the church there (Gal. 2:12; Acts 21:18), was martyred sometime during the siege. Within a brief span of time the churches lost all these primary leaders, and were in need of feeding and shepherding. Also around this time, it seems Jesus' mother Mary died, releasing John to serve the Lord full-time. He likely had been serving among the churches near where they had been living.

LABORING IN EPHESUS WHERE PAUL HAD LABORED

John must have considered what it was he was to do after he was released from his commitment to care for Mary. He realized all the churches had a great need. He may have considered whether he should go to Babylon to continue Peter's work (1 Pet. 5:13), or to Ephesus or Corinth, where Paul had labored. (Many wonder whether Antioch would have been a place John would have considered, but Antioch was not that healthy. There is, for instance, no record that Antioch ever cared for Paul financially. Furthermore, when Paul returned the second time, there is no indication that anyone cared about him as they did the first time.) Paul's final years of labor took place around Ephesus and Corinth. Corinth, however, was a "money-making" church, being in a financially-prominent city. I believe that eventually through prayer and fellowship, John was led to Ephesus.

I also believe that John was aware that there remained one servant associated with Paul who was laboring in Ephesus. That was Timothy (1 Tim.1:3). After Mary passed away, Timothy may have invited John to Ephesus, or else in fellowship they may have mutually realized that it was something of the Lord. By this time John was quite old, being around 70. No doubt the churches honored him. All the other eleven apostles had passed away by this time; John was the last. With regards to experience and maturity, no one could rival him. He had been through so much. He had known Jesus from infancy. He had followed Jesus from the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, even having been a disciple of John the Baptist beforehand. He was there at the beginning with Peter at Pentecost. He had been through everything. And now he was the last of the apostles. His ministry must have been very rich and life-giving. He was well-received and honored wherever he went.

THREATENED WITH DEATH AND SENT INTO EXILE

Then, one day a knock came at his door. The Roman government under Domitian had identified him as the pre-eminent Christian leader of his day and John was arrested. By this time, quite possibly all of the other eleven apostles had been martyred, as well as Paul and James the Lord's brother. According to tradition, John was ordered by Domitian himself to repudiate his faith in Jesus. Otherwise, he was to be boiled in a pot of oil. John was very firm and refused, of course. According to tradition, he endured the boiling oil without difficulty, but I believe Domitian simply realized he would be better served sending John into exile rather than killing such an aged man held in honor by so many. Perhaps Domitian was moved by John's steadfastness and thus decided to send him into exile instead of killing him. John remained in exile for a number of years, undoubtedly until the end of Domitian's reign.

John's story is a remarkable one. While all the other apostles were doing their great work, John lived a quiet life, caring for Mary. All the other servants of the Lord must have seemed so useful in comparison to John! John might have sometimes felt frustrated as he cared for Mary's needs. On the surface, it did not make sense. As he heard news of how one apostle was laboring in Europe or another in India, he had to inquire as to what a senior citizen wanted to do for the day. How long was John committed with the care of Mary, the Lord's mother? Most likely for at least 30 years! Yet it was by this that John was preserved for that time when the Lord would need him. Thus, the Lord kept him hidden and preserved until that time.

If you don't know how to be quiet for Christ and be set aside by Christ, you can never be used by Christ. John learned this. Finally, he discovered why the Lord set him aside and he became active among the churches. Then, however, he was arrested, threatened with death. Thus, after finally enjoying preeminence and recognition among the churches, he was seemingly put aside again! For years he remained on that island, and I believe it was there that he came to realize that he was just a brother (Rev. 1:9). He may have felt like he was really somebody as the last apostle standing, but by the time he left that island he had become just a brother among the saints to serve them (Rev. 1:1). No matter how mature you are or no matter how much the Lord has used you, you will always be no more or no less than a brother. It was to such a brother that the Lord revealed His final revelation.

RECEIVING THE REVELATION ON THE ISLE OF PATMOS

By that time, John was merely a brother. How sweet this is! He received the book of Revelation, and then he returned to Ephesus. He may have been treated with even more honor than before, but he had changed. He had become someone who could say he was just a brother among them. It may have been then that he read the other gospel accounts that were circulating, and decided it was time to write down his. He realized the other accounts, while wonderful, missed the inward essence of the Lord's ministry; they only addressed what the Lord had done and did not reveal who the Lord really was. That is why he wrote his gospel, which is very different from the other three. Besides this, he also wrote his three epistles.

RETURNING TO EPHESUS AND WRITING HIS GOSPEL AND EPISTLES

When I consider John's life, I often have tears. The Lord put John away thirty-some years. If John had rebelled, he would have been finished. Instead, he was faithful, and he did become useful in the Lord's hand. Then, finally when he became useful and began to enjoy his usefulness, the Lord put him away again for another period of time. He never knew how many days he would be on that island. All the good days in Ephesus became a distant memory. When he finally heard he was released, he must have found it just about unbelievable. The John who returned to Ephesus was undoubtedly a different John. The John who returned from that island was someone who could write the gospel of John and the three epistles of John, for he by that time had become a man of life. The New Testament reality is totally a matter of life, a circulating life, and a life that bears the Lord's testimony. John's writings on life form the conclusion to the New Testament.

- Titus Chu, September 6 2009, Troy, Michigan

Labor Day 2009

MESSAGE FOUR

JESUS' FINAL SPEAKING TO THE CHURCHES REQUIRING THE MINISTRY OF JOHN THE APOSTLE

REVIEW

We have seen how Jesus, while He was being crucified, charged John to take care of His mother. We can be sure that John carried out that commitment faithfully. He certainly would have done his best to care for Mary, which meant he would have been occupied with that responsibility while other apostles were busy carrying out their more visible commitments. How long did this go on? I believe this situation continued on for about thirty years! Eventually and at around the same period of time, James, Peter and Paul died, leaving a great vacancy in the work. Somewhere within this time frame Mary died as well, releasing John to serve the churches.

We have to see how the Lord took care to raise up John. I believe Jesus watched over John as a child, and recommended that he go to John the Baptist so that he might be enlarged. Then, even as He hung upon the cross, He committed Mary's care to John. For years and years John fulfilled that responsibility, and was thus kept away from the "front lines" where so much (both good and bad) was taking place. Thus, for the sake of the Lord's work, John was preserved to serve the churches after the other apostles fought their fight and passed on. We know Paul charged his co-workers to care for the churches, but it seemed that some of his co-workers, such as Demas, used the churches as a means to support themselves (2 Tim. 4:10). Paul, Timothy and others probably tried to work with others such as Apollos and Barnabas (if they were still alive). Eventually, however, none were left. Therefore, John went out to Ephesus. I believe this was a matter of fellowship with Timothy and the Lord's leading. I believe John enjoyed laboring for a period of time among the churches there. I like this because I believe it indicates John and Paul were in fellowship before Paul's death. James was focused in Jerusalem, and Peter's work was focused in Babylon (today's Bagdad). Paul's work was focused around Ephesus.

I feel it is significant that John ended up in Ephesus, the place raised up through Paul's ministry. (Of course, Jerusalem was under siege by the Romans and the city eventually sacked and the temple destroyed.) Since John had a strong association with Peter, it seems it would have been easier to go to Babylon where he would have been more easily received. The fact that John went to Ephesus, however, indicates there was a relationship in life between his ministry and Paul's. I believe there was a good fellowship between Timothy and John, and between the brothers with Timothy and the brothers with John. This all indicates that John and Paul were in fellowship. They weren't cut off from one another by "region". (Region should never become a reason for lack of fellowship. Just as no local church can say, "You shouldn't touch us," neither should laboring in any region or area be a reason for denying fellowship with those from other places. Are we not brothers? Whenever anyone says, "This is my church or region; don't touch it!"...that is a shame to Christ. Each church is for all, and all the churches are for everyone.) Paul and Peter had a very good relationship, as revealed by the fact Mark was referred to as a son by Peter and a fellow-worker by Paul (1 Pet. 5:13; Philm 1:24). This kind of fellowship extended to John. This led to the possibility of John's going to Ephesus. Such a fact indicated that both Paul and John were for Christ and the local churches.

In Ephesus, John became a supplier of life with many years' accumulation of riches. (We may notice that when older, more mature brothers minister, they are often rich and anointed. They do not need to make an effort to bring something forth when they share; it is just there due to their maturity in life and accumulation of riches.) No one had the amount of experience John had by the time he reached Ephesus. He may have been about sixty to seventy years old when he went. He would have been treated as a venerable apostle, and the last still living. If any church needed help, he should have been the brother the elders sought out. He would have been accepted by both the co-workers of Peter as well as the co-workers of Paul. He would have been rich in the heavenly things and honored on earth everywhere. No life could have been better! I believe this was the Lord's reward to him for caring for His mother Mary.

Then Titus' brother Domitian came to power and his intention was to stamp out the competition. Therefore he had John arrested, for John was the last among the twelve apostles and clearly a leader among those who would have refused to worship him. He threatened John with being boiled in oil if he refused to repudiate Christ, but we may be sure John would do no such thing. Instead of killing him, however, Domitian sent John away into exile on a small island. There he received the vision and messages that he wrote down in the book of Revelation. We don't know how long he was on that island, but he eventually returned to Ephesus a more mature brother able to write his gospel of life and his three epistles.

We can see that John passed through many stages before he arrived at his mature usefulness. We all are in such a process. In the beginning, some stage may only last for a few months before you totally become different. Then you grow well and for some reason you become "stuck" for what seems like a longer period of time. This is the time when the Lord expects you to digest what you have received in the previous stages. We don't grow up in meteoric fashion. We seem to be making good progress and then we hit a certain stage which takes longer to digest. As you grow older, each stage requires a longer time to grow out of. In fact, as you mature, the changes become less noticeable from one stage to the next. Eventually, you don't even see the growth, but the person knows the growth. He realizes his Christ, Bible, spiritual understanding, and view have become different, and his commitment has increased. He is able to say, "I now see something higher than before," but the time between stages grows longer.

THE STAGE OF TESTIMONY

No matter how mature you are, however, the matter of testimony will always challenge you. Many of the churches have reached a certain place and must decide: "Are we for Christ, or are we for congregations? Are we for the Lord, or are we for accommodating something else?" Eventually, we must be able to say, "Lord, we are for You." The word testimony has to do with test. No testing, no riches! When we say, "We are for Christ's testimony," Christ has to test us first to see if we are real. John was tested by a pot of boiling oil and he passed that test. Domitian then sent him instead to the island of Patmos where he no doubt faced another test.

THE STAGE OF MATURITY

When John returned from the island of Patmos, he was truly mature. He had become someone incorporated with Christ, someone who flowed out life rather than giving out doctrine. Giving out doctrine is a theologian's job; flowing out life is a minister's job. A brother with a rich ministry should flow out life, not doctrine! Everything you see concerning John at this point is a matter of life, not doctrine. He realized that no spiritual matter could be handled separately from the heavenly Christ; without Christ, all the spiritual things are void. If you are going to talk about spiritual things, you must be in this heavenly Person! Apart from Him, there are no real spiritual things. John spoke of the Word of God being this Person (John 1:1, 14; 1 John 1:1). He spoke of God Himself being love (1 John 4:8), light (1 John 1:5), and Spirit (John 4:24). Paul dared not refer to God in this way, but

John was able to. (Paul could write that God dwelt in unapproachable light (1 Tim. 6:16), but John could write that the message was that God is light. John could write in such a simple way because he had arrived at such a stage of maturity in God.)

JOHN'S VIEW OF THE CHURCH LIFE

According to riches, Paul had much more than John because of his education and background. He grew up under the teaching of Gamaliel, the top teacher of his day (Acts 22:3). He was able to apply all his Old Testament knowledge by the New Testament light. And yet when John wrote of the church life, he was much more simple. Unlike Paul, who wrote we all are sitting in the heavenlies (Eph. 2:6), John wrote, "The church is simply a bunch of little children who are growing. Thus in the church life there are fathers, young men, and young children or babies. All of them, however, are little children" (see 1 John 2:13-14). When so many local churches were kidnapped by institution, it was the fathers' fault, for in those cases the fathers refused to stand firmly for the One who was from the beginning. The Lord desires that in the church life there would be fathers for God's economy who stand for Christ alone. As long as such brothers are operating in the church life, nothing should be able to steal the saints away. For their part, the young men are strong because they do not love the world and the Word of God abides in them. What about the babies? They know the Father. When they mess up, they know they should run to the Father for His comfort and encouragement. When speaking of the church life, that was all John had to say! In his view, as long as you have a few in the church life who know Him who was from the beginning, and some young men who are strong and a number of babies who are always messing up but know how to keep coming to the Father, then you have a marvelous church life. How simple! Yet remember, Paul's ministry comes before John's. Without Paul there could be no John in this progression. You still have to enjoy the riches of Paul, yet you also must appreciate the ministry of life that John dispenses.

THE TESTIMONY OF THE TREASURE IN THE UNIVERSE: THE LOCAL CHURCHES

THE FINAL WORD OF JESUS TO THE CHURCHES

God has spoken all the way from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22. I would say, however, that you should not be too bothered if you cannot understand Revelation chapters 4 through 19, because if you do

or you do not, it won't make too much difference. Some have a particular gift of interpretation and can gain from these chapters perhaps what is contained there. For most readers, however, whether or not they understand what is there is not crucial. Revelation 1-3 is the conclusion of Jesus' clear speaking to the churches. A person's last words should be very important. The first three chapters of Revelation are therefore very crucial.

THREE STRESSES:
HIMSELF, THE CHURCHES AND THOSE THAT SERVE HIM FOR THEM

In the first three chapters of Revelation the Lord stresses His servants, Himself, and the local churches. Based on this being the Lord's final speaking to the churches in the Bible, I would say that the most important things in the universe for us today are the Lord's servants, the Lord Himself, and the local churches! We pay attention to so many other things, but God only seems to pay attention to three. He must gain His servant; He must let people know who He is, and His servants must introduce who He is to the local churches. Eventually, what is most crucial? The local churches are the product, the substance is Christ, and the means are His servants. If He cannot gain His servants, He cannot gain the local churches. If the Lord cannot reach the local churches, the earth is void of the Lord's presence and expression. No matter how marvelous the Lord is, without the local churches the people on the earth see very little of Him. The Lord's reality thus must be with the local churches; the local churches must possess Christ. Who can carry this out? The servants of the Lord, those who possess ministry. In other words, the apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers.

This is why I am so happy when I see someone gained by the Lord who begins to care for someone else, because that will require that person to learn how to teach and shepherd. As that person labors, he may find he is shepherding and teaching a few more as he preaches the gospel, and then he will have to learn to prophesy among those he has raised up as they meet together. Eventually such a person will be able to go to other places to evangelize and raise up other churches by means of what he has learned from the first place he labored. This is more difficult in the United States due to the fact so many here are over trained. In other places such as China, people receive everything you share as "juice". Eventually, as they take what they have appreciated to others, and as they begin to care for a few, their numbers grow, and they are able to go to other places with what they have gained.

BEGIN SERVING ONE OR TWO

In my experience my serving began with helping one person to clearly be saved and to love the Lord fifty years ago. I shepherded one person to be my companion. Eventually I was committed with a congregation of twenty-five and learned to minister and preach the gospel. That became a ground-work in me. We begin by shepherding and teaching one. Gradually we preach the gospel to a few more, and in this way the shepherds, teachers, evangelists, prophets and apostles become manifested.

Raise up brothers you can preach to if you want to preach. Should you expect others to raise up people for you to preach to?

Defining the truth is a matter for the apostles. They labor to determine what is truth. They don't merely read the Bible to work out theories. They are with people, and therefore they are able to discern the real thing.

HIS SERVANTS BEING HIS ORACLE

The book of Revelation tells us that God had something that He gave to Jesus, and Jesus gave it to John through the hand of His angel (Rev. 1:1). John thus became an oracle. Whatever God has must come through Jesus, and whatever Jesus has must come through His servants.

JESUS: ALPHA AND OMEGA, BEGINNING AND END

Jesus Himself appears as the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end (1:8). He is everything! He is every letter in God's alphabet. He is the One who was, who is, and who is coming. Your past is in Him, He is your Lord today, and your future is in Him. Why should we worry? Whatever we need is made up of letters which He is. He also handles all our care. The more you love the Lord, the more you realize this is the reality.

JESUS: CLOTHED WITH A PRIESTLY GARMENT

The Lord is also clothed with the high priestly garments and walks among the seven golden lampstands (1:13). He bears our sins and weaknesses. If we are short He meets all our needs. He operates as our High Priest. He knows we are limited and in weakness. He is our High Priest, but we must come to Him so that His priestly exercise might become real to us.

Where else in the Bible do we have such a description of Christ? In this brief description we see how Christ bears us so that we might fulfill His economy.

The seven golden lampstands are seven churches (1:20). Besides Himself and His servants, there is the need of the churches to realize what is in the heart of the Lord. He speaks not even to “the church in” Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia or Laodicea; but merely “to Ephesus,” “to Smyrna,” “to Pergamos,” “to Thyatira,” “to Sardis,” “to Philadelphia,” and “to Laodicea” (1:11).

We have been trained to look down at Laodicea, but when the Lord sees Laodicea, He still only sees one church in Laodicea! We may think “This is to the Baptist, to the Pentecostal, to the local church, and to the free group...” But the Lord says, “No church has any name but that of the locality. When I say ‘to Cleveland,’ that means the church in Cleveland. Cleveland IS the church in Cleveland; one city, one church and one church, one city. One city bears one testimony, and that testimony is that local church.” He doesn’t say “You can also call yourself this or that.” No matter what others call you or what you even call yourself, you have to know who you really are! I had a lot of nicknames growing up, but I was not confused about who I was. People can even call you Satan, yet you still have to know who you are! We shouldn’t be confused as to who we are. We are the church in that city. Don’t argue with the Lord by insisting on another name. Nothing can be more simple than referring to ourselves as our location. If we are in a certain city, we are simply the church in that city. We should not make ourselves more complicated than the Lord in this matter.

When I first moved to Cleveland, a brother convinced me we couldn’t simply call ourselves the church in Cleveland. He said we should call ourselves the Christian Fellowship Center in Cleveland. This was T. Austin-Sparks’ practice. I later regretted taking his fellowship. We are just the church where we are! If someone says, “I am a Baptist. What about me?” My answer is simply, “The church I am in includes you, but the “church” you are in doesn’t include me!” The church in a city includes all the Christians in that city. The local church is a marvelous matter!

The Lord’s revelation to John includes these three marvelous things. First, it includes the Lord’s workers, His servants. Number two, it includes this marvelous Christ of two aspects: His sufficiency and His care for us. As such a Person, He meets all the needs of those in the churches. Finally, we see the local churches as the seven golden lampstands. The number seven indicates something complete in this age. It refers to all the local churches, complete. In this age it is three plus four (God plus man); in eternity it is three times four. This is why we see the number twelve applied to the various aspects of the New Jerusalem. We must praise the Lord for Himself and for the churches, and thank Him for His servants.

- Titus Chu, September 6 2009, Troy Michigan

Labor Day 2009

MESSAGE FIVE

JESUS' FINAL WORD TO THE CHURCHES IN REVELATION BEING HIS WORD TO US ALL

I am very encouraged and hopeful for I see so many who still love the Lord and the churches, and who are still giving themselves to what the Lord desires. This is not a small thing! We have been through some difficult times. We paid a price and suffered a little, but at the same time the Lord has manifested much among us.

In chapters 1 through 3 of Revelation the Lord stresses three things which we must also stress. The writer is the servant of the Lord, so he is introduced first, but he is last in the actual order of significance. The first matter is the Lord Himself as the source and Originator. The second matter is the recipients, the churches. The third is the means the Lord uses, His servants. Throughout our lives as Christians we have to remember that without Christ or the churches, we are in trouble, and without the word of the servants of the Lord, we will be short. Christ and the Church are enough, but Christ advances and the Church grows. The servants of the Lord are the means for this.

THE LORD WORKS THROUGH MANY SERVANTS

John may have seemed as though he were the unique servant of the Lord, yet he refused to say this. If we read the first verse in Revelation, we see that John refers not to himself alone, but to others as well to whom the Lord would reveal Himself. In God's economy, God does not allow any individual to be overly exalted. Whatever God gives to one, He gives to many.

Among the local churches, there are many servants who serve as a team together. They labor together that the saints may grow and the churches may be raised up. What the Lord has spoken to one servant or one team of servants should go to many who are struggling with the same goal in view.

REVELATION INCLUDES MANY SIGNS

God gave this revelation to Christ to show to His servants by way of signs. Revelation is a book full of signs. I must confess that the majority of Revelation is not something I understand as well as other portions of the Bible. I do know that whatever will be, will be! We must be very practical with the first and last few chapters of Revelation, and we must appreciate the 144,000 in chapter 14 and the woman with the man-child in chapter 12, but besides these things there isn't much that we need to concern ourselves with. I could give a series of messages on all the other things in Revelation, but afterwards we all will still have to admit, "Whatever will be, will be." Anyway, if someone cannot understand the clear speaking of the Lord in Revelation, how can they expect to understand the signs and prophecies?

SENT BY THE HAND OF HIS ANGEL

In the first verse of this book we are told tht the Lord sent all this to John by means of His angel. I believe that this angel is also just Christ Himself. God gave this revelation to Christ to give to John, for if God Himself appeared to John, that would have been too overpowering. This is why John saw Him by way of signs in the midst of the seven golden lampstands through the hand of an angel. This angel, I believe, is just Christ Himself. Whether this is so or not, it all is the Lord's speaking, regardless.

JOHN, THE LORD'S SERVANT AND OUR BROTHER

Notice that John, the servant of the Lord, refers to himself simply as "your brother" (1:9). That is not a small thing. Many honor the servants and the servants enjoy that honor. They consider that they have the Word from God and that is why they serve the churches and why the churches receive the help. Yet there is more to it. The servants must serve as brothers among the others in the churches. If any servant of the Lord wishes to be considered as a pastor or minister or servant of the Lord, there is something wrong. The highest status we have been granted by the Lord is that of

brother.

The Lord is wise. He will allow a brother to labor, but that brother may never see the result of his labor. That is a servant. Brother Nee's last letter indicated he kept the joy in his heart. I believe this indicated he saw something about how his labor would result in fruit all across China. And today there are millions upon millions of Christians who can say their salvation and experience of Christ has so much to do with his labor. Even so, he never allowed himself to be called anything other than a brother.

A servant of the Lord leads a very romantic life. You never know what is coming next. You never know how the Lord will lead. But one thing you do know, and that is you are able to hear the Lord's word, and you can be a blessing to the Church.

JESUS TO THE CHURCHES BEING THE ALPHA AND OMEGA, BEGINNING AND END

Then John spoke of Christ. We must realize that Christ is everything to us. He is the Alpha, the Omega, the beginning and the end. Furthermore, as a priest He bears all our problems as the One walking in the midst of the golden lampstands, which were the local churches. This was the third thing John addressed.

THE CHURCHES BEING ACCORDING TO THEIR CITIES

The voice that spoke with John told him to write what he saw in a book and to send it to seven churches. Then, the person speaking simply said, "to Ephesus, to Smyrna..." and so on, revealing that when the Lord sees the city, He only sees one church. The church is fully identified with the city. Regardless how Christians like to divide themselves, the Lord still desires that many would see such a vision and testify, "We stand firm with the Lord in our locality as the local church bearing the Lords' testimony. We partake in no division. We are only here for Jesus Christ our Lord as His testimony."

For our entire lives we can never be away from Christ, the local churches or the servants of the Lord. We all need the help of the servants of the Lord, and we are in the midst of the local churches as we enjoy Christ.

Now we come to the seven churches.

SEVEN CHURCHES THAT REVEAL ALL THE CHURCHES

Brother Nee has a book called *Orthodoxy of the Church*. It portrays

Revelation chapters 2 and 3 as prophesying the history of the church through the past two thousand years. No doubt this is so, and no doubt the Lord is desperate to have His overcomers in this age. On the other hand, these seven churches existed on the earth and their situation was real as addressed by the Lord. When asked about which church they would prefer, most would reply, "Philadelphia!" No one should think of themselves in a sectarian spirit, however. It is not, "WE are Philadelphia and YOU are not." All Christians are one in God's eyes, even though many may think of themselves as being Baptists or Catholics and so on. If you really see the Body, you would realize there is nothing called exclusion. Whether you are a "good" brother or a brother who is caught up with some problem, you are a brother.

THE FIRST TWO CHURCHES: EPHESUS (DESIRABLE) AND SMYRNA (SUFFERING)

If you were to ask me, I would say Ephesus is the church I appreciate the most. Ephesus means "desirable". Ephesus is the church from which all the others must learn. The other church I appreciate is Smyrna, which means "myrrh," which refers to suffering.

All Americans have the comfortable disease. They may claim they are in a financial crisis, but they still use money like they want to, and the government still finds ways to make them comfortable. Therefore myrrh is something beyond Americans. They may feel they are ready to suffer for Christ, but to them it may mean they will not be able to get any ice for their soft drink. A real local church bears the character of suffering. Not only should a church be desirable for many people, it should also have some experience of suffering. Others should realize that when they see us that somehow we are qualified to go through something others simply cannot go through. What are these sufferings? They are the sufferings of Christ for the building up of the Church (Col. 1:24)! Any local church that tries to bypass suffering will lose their character. Many localities have lost their character because they decided to accommodate something instead of paying the price and suffering.

PERGAMOS: MARRIED TO THE WORLD

Furthermore, many times churches get involved in politics. For the sake of preaching the gospel we need to pursue peace with all men and we need to keep as many doors open as possible. We must be careful not to compromise, however, nor to become entangled. We must be very clear not to become married to politics nor to do things for the sake of pleasing the wealthy. Due to the fact that we want things to go easier for us, we uncon-

sciously may show deference for those of wealth or worldly position. If a senator or your mayor were to come into the church life, I am afraid the church life would quickly become degraded. You may find yourself doing something to accommodate their need. If we are not careful, we will find ourselves in corruption.

THYATIRA: UNCEASING SACRIFICE OR INCENSE

Then, there is the church in Thyatira, which refers to the offering of incense. Historically we say this refers to the Roman Catholic Church, but I would say this also applies to many local churches today. They are extremely godly and faithful. They have many white-haired brothers. They have unceasing sacrifice: they pray, read the Bible, and lead a godly life. I have seen a number of churches where the number meeting is small and the saints are very faithful. There is “unceasing sacrifice of incense,” yet the Lord is not happy about it. Thus the church can be desirable (Ephesus), and it must go through sufferings as myrrh (Smyrna), and if we are not careful, the church can become involved with politics (Pergamos). Furthermore, the church can become so religious that Christ disappears (Thyatira).

By “religion” we mean having the things of Christ and yet not having Christ Himself. If we are not careful, we can end up holding the Bible a certain way, bowing our head to pray a certain way, talking about the Bible in a certain way, and yet God is not with us. You can have a Christian life and even a church life without Christ as the reality. That is another condition of the church.

SARDIS: HAVING SOME LITTLE BIT OF STRENGTH

The church in Sardis means “let’s try”. We are very much like Sardis today. We have a little strength and we try and try, and yet nothing we do is satisfying to God. I would like to move like a young man, but since I am old, I am now fragile and not so flexible. When a church comes to a certain age, it is possible for it to become old. When you sense such a thing, you may be desperate to recover your vitality. The way, however, is not by effort, but by repentance. Repentance will grant you renewed strength.

PHILADELPHIA: BROTHERLY LOVE

The church in Philadelphia (“brotherly love”) is the church we would like to boast that we are. But after all the things that have currently taken place (such as quarantines, etc.) it seems no one loves anybody! Many seem to love what they can gain or possess in the work our brother has

raised up. Yet if someone points their finger at someone else and says, "We reject you for your quarantining," aren't they likewise quarantining those who first quarantined? How much we need the Lord's mercy! Brotherly love is a high thing. It marks the character of the church life. What is our mark in the church life? It is that we love one another.

What marks brotherly love? Sacrifice. Because parents love their children, they sacrifice themselves on behalf of their children. When they cry at night, you get up for them and do whatever is needed. That is love. When we say we love another brother, however, have we really paid a price for him? If you really love the other saints, you won't come to the meetings late, because you would consider the welfare of the others. Brotherly love is the mark of a local church. We sacrifice our time for each other and for new ones so that they might grow in Christ.

LAODICEA: LAYMAN'S RULE

Laodicea reveals that the situation in a church can reach the point where whatever the people want, the church does. In Laodicea the judgment of the congregation leads. The church should be led by the Spirit, yet if we become so greedy after number, or if the condition of the church degrades to the point that we feel we must do something to save ourselves from extinction, we may find ourselves doing whatever we think others want so that we might gain them. We might say, "If you want this kind of music, we will play this kind of music. If you want a certain kind of entertainment, we will give you that kind of entertainment. If you like this kind of hall, we will build it." You no longer are building up the Church according to Christ's leading and truth. Then, even if you gain your success, that will be Laodicea.

In Ephesus they conquered the Nicolaitans. But here eventually at the end we see another local church that is dominated by the opinion of the laymen. Why is it that I do not like to see so much modern technology used in the meetings? My primary concern is that it has to do with the popularity of it rather than Christ's leading. In most cases I doubt that it was that the elders prayed and the Lord led them to install it. Instead, it was that someone saw it somewhere else and convinced everyone else to get it.

The Lord Jesus portrays here the seven possible aspects of the local churches. First, Ephesus is so desirable. Secondly, Smyrna suffered. These first two serve as the most important models for us. Besides these, be careful. Do not get tangled with the worldly politics or become involved with those who are wealthy, as depicted in Pergamos. Trust in the Lord to take care of you! Then, don't live a religious church life, simply going to the meetings year after year without change. We shouldn't have a godly living

without God! God Himself must be our substance. Then, if you wish to have recovery and to be restored as seen in Sardis, realize that the way is through corporate repentance. Then you have a church called Brotherly Love, which indicates sacrifice and paying a price for the sake of the other saints. Then, eventually you have the church in Laodicea. This is the one that I fear might be most applicable to many of the churches today. Instead of seeking the Lord, the consideration is what will “work” with people according to what they like. Where is Christ? He is no longer the chief concern. But brothers, Christ must have the preeminence, the first place.

FURTHER POINTS ABOUT THE CHURCH LIFE

In Ephesus the Lord appears to them holding seven stars, the leading ones, as He walks among the churches. This indicates that everything Ephesus has is for all the churches. How the Lord speaks to Ephesus and walks with Ephesus should be the model for all the churches. The Lord praised them for their works, labor, and perseverance. Labor indicates suffering and perseverance indicates toleration. These two words are marks of the church life. Wherever we are, we are pretty naughty. In the process of growth, much endurance and perseverance is needed.

The second good thing about Ephesus is that they did not tolerate the false apostles and hated the works of the Nicolaitans. Those who have money will try to influence the church, and those who claim to know the truth will also try to get the churches to follow them. There are many out there who would like to conquer a congregation. The Ephesians wouldn't allow anyone to take over and conquer them. Christians are looking for leaders, and you may not realize how much someone with wealth or position or ability seems able to provide a boost for a congregation such as yours. Yet Ephesus hated such a thing, and insisted that all the members had to be allowed to function properly.

LEAVING OUR FIRST LOVE BY SERVING

Ephesus had a problem, however. They didn't love the Lord that much anymore!

I have to say that I have yet to see a brother who, after beginning to serve the Lord, still loved the Lord as he had before. Everyone begins serving the Lord because they love Him, but once they begin serving Him, it seems they no longer love Him! As those who serve Him, do we still love Him? This results in a peculiar situation. Those who love Him are those who do not seem so practical, while those who practically begin to serve Him no longer seem able to love Him as before! It would seem serving the Lord

opens the door to a very serious situation. Because we love Him we serve Him, and yet whenever we are caught with work and service, it seems the first love we had for Him disappears. Whenever we are caught with work, it seems the love element disappears. Therefore, how much we need the Lord's mercy! The Lord rebukes Ephesus and tells them they must repent and do the first works (2:5). What does this mean? It means they must love the Lord and then serve Him. We must put Him in the first place. He must be more important to us than the seeming need of all the saints. When that is our realization, we may serve the saints.

If there were only a Mary and no Martha, the Lord would have had nothing to eat! And yet if Martha had only served without loving the Lord, that food would not have satisfied the Lord. We can labor even with endurance and perseverance and yet lose our first love. That was Ephesus' situation. They were preoccupied with how to gain more fruit and how to make things bigger rather than the Lord Himself. It is more crucial that we enjoy the Lord than all else we can do.

NO SUFFERING IS IN VAIN

With regard to the suffering associated with Smyrna, just remember that there is no suffering that is in vain. Suffer for Christ and pay the price. The reward will be far beyond what you can anticipate. I have suffered a lot by the Lord's mercy. Now as I look back, I realize how precious all my sufferings have been.

DON'T BECOME A JEZEBEL

Don't become married to politics. Don't become married to wealth. Don't marry whatever is popular in Christianity. Do not become religious. The Lord's eyes search as a flame of fire, and His feet shine as He walks among us as burning brass. To Thyatira Jesus could say, "I know your works, love [unlike Ephesus], service, faith, and your patience; and as for your works, the last are more than the first.

Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel..." (2:19-20). The Lord could praise Thyatira that all the positive things, including love, had increased. That was marvelous! Yet the Lord had one thing against them, and that was that "you tolerate the woman Jezebel...to teach and seduce My servants".

There are some in the church life who have the ability to subvert or get rid of those who follow the Lord in the church life. Such persons are able to rise up in the church life and kill whatever the Lord is doing.

We who are elders have to be aware of becoming such Jezebels in the

church life. Too often when a young brother becomes alive with something, the elders get concerned that he might “stir the water” in the church life. Things are much more peaceful when things are dead and religious! If the Spirit raises up someone in the church life who really loves the Lord, Jezebel feels threatened. The leadership feels threatened. That is when man’s control replaces the Spirit’s leading and the church becomes a religious church. In the church life, all the saints must have the freedom to follow the Spirit.

PAY A PRICE!

The only thing I would like to say further about these seven churches has to do with Laodicea. What kind of church is Laodicea? It is the church where the elders no longer look after Christ; but instead after what man wants. Laodicea listens to the voice that says, “If you do this, you will get a good result.” In Laodicea, the congregation rules the church. If the church grows because of Christ’s leading, praise the Lord! But if the number increases just because of an improved social life, etc., then the church has become more focused upon the matter of congregation than Christ. The Lord’s desire for Laodicea is that they would BUY gold refined by fire to be rich, white garments to hide any nakedness, and eyesalve so that any loss of vision might be recovered. Some may protest, saying, “We are not Laodicea!” Even so, buy for yourselves the gold, the white garments and the eyesalve.

To buy means to pay a price. Pay a price for the church. Pay a price for the church life. Pay a price to gain Christ. Pay a price to be enriched. Pay a price to grow. Pay a price to bear the testimony of the Lord. The Lord’s last word to the churches is: Pay a price.

This is the challenge for Americans, for they do not understand that talent alone is not sufficient. You must pay a price. Every believer is talented with Christ. However, so few have the thought of buying. We as Americans feel as though going to the meeting or reading a few chapters in the Bible or preaching the gospel once in a while is good enough. No! The Lord desires that many among us would rise up to pay the price to gain the riches. The divine things can only be received by those who pay the price for God.

This is the final word. May we all take a renewed stand to treasure Christ and the local churches we are in, and appreciate the Lord’s servants, His ministers, and what they have ministered to us. Then may we pay a price to gain all the riches until they become our constitution.

- Titus Chu, September 7 2009, Troy, Michigan