

TO SERVE IN HUMANITY WITH DIVINITY

By Titus Chu

MESSAGE FIVE: THE APOSTLE PAUL'S UPLIFTED HUMANITY WITH DIVINITY IN FIRST CORINTHIANS (2)

AN UPLIFTED HUMANITY NECESSARY TO SERVE THE SAINTS LIVING IN THEIR SELF-LIFE, WHICH IS MOST MANIFEST IN THE MATTER OF DIVISIONS

What was the first sign that the church in Corinth was a degraded church? It was the matter of divisions. The source of the divisions, and the source of all the problems in Corinth, was the self-life. The self-life is also the source of all our problems. When we were first saved, most of us were saved selfishly. We believed in the Lord Jesus out of our own self-interest. How many of us were saved because we cared so much about the Lord Himself? But by the Lord's mercy, He still saved us. He didn't get angry because our believing was so impure. Instead, He willingly came into us. But now that we are saved the Lord desires us to come out of our self-life. The problem is that we began our Christian life selfishly, and we continue our Christian life selfishly. Even when we love the Lord, we love Him selfishly. When we serve the Lord, we serve the Lord selfishly. The self-life becomes the biggest frustration to the church life. What bothers us the most in the local churches is the self-life of so many dear saints. A brother may love the Lord and love the church, yet his self-life can still operate very strongly. His self-life will eventually become a problem to the church.

The first sign of self-life is division. We can also say that when a church is divided, that very division is a sign of their first problem, the self-life. Every “self” is in competition. For example, when several brothers minister in a meeting together, some will feel they did well, and some will be discouraged. They will compare themselves with one another. This is the self-life. Every “self” desires to be identified with a party, to belong to the right group, and to be secure in a particular circle. When we are living by the self-life, we desire to be with the right person. We like to say, “I am with so-and-so.” At the time Paul wrote to the Corinthians, if you were with James, the leading elder in Jerusalem, that was glorious. If you were with Apollos, it may not have been so glorious. Every “self” wants to belong to the right group. Furthermore, every “self” desires to be secure in a particular circle. When we are with certain brothers we feel very secure, because we know how to be with them. If we can fellowship with a certain circle, then we feel we are in a better position. Self-life is a source of having things apart from Christ. When we are in our self-life, it is easy to do spiritual things, yet do them apart from Christ.

Self-life is more fearful than improper living; while the latter drives a person to Christ, the former seeks after self-exaltation with no improper feeling. The self-life is “sugar-coated,” so we don’t realize how bad it really is. An improper living easily makes us feel exposed and drives us to Christ. For example, have we ever been mad with an older brother, even to the point of yelling at him? When this happens, how do we react? We know that it is wrong. We pray, “Lord, have mercy. Cleanse me with Your blood. This is something so ugly.” An improper living always drives us to Christ. But our self-life seeks after self-exaltation with no improper feeling. When we live improperly we know there is nothing to be proud of. We would never testify, “Praise the Lord! I lost my temper!” Instead we would repent and ask for the Lord’s forgiveness. But when we receive a complement, whether it is true or not, then we abide in our self. We consider our local church so lucky to have us. This is not a small thing. The self-life is always waiting to appear.

Division comes from the self-life. We shouldn't be so quick to point at Corinth and judge them for being divided. Division is in us. No one in their self-life can avoid looking for a group or a party in which they can feel secure. To be divided is even somewhat normal. This is why Paul said, "For there must even be parties among you, that those who are approved may become manifest among you" (1 Cor. 11:19). When we say, "The church in Corinth was so divided!" we must remember that division is in us also.

Anyone who serves the saints must first learn how to take care of those who are so desirous, yet live in themselves. When we take care of the church, we shouldn't say, "Oh, this brother did something improper!" Yes, there are problems in the church, but we must first learn to help the saints come out of their self-life. We must help the saints learn to live according to Christ.

To understand the self we need to see a picture of who we are. We are just a big "I." This "I" is also the old man. The old man is the degraded, fallen man. Our life is the soul-life. We often live a life in our soul, which is why the Lord says that we must forsake our soul-life. This whole picture is called "the flesh." We are just flesh. We should not consider the flesh only as something very bad. The flesh can actually be lived out in three ways. The first way is the self. The second way is the natural man. The third way is corruption. All of these three items come out from the same flesh. Sometimes in the morning we are praying so much in our spirit, then all of a sudden our self comes out. This means that our opinion, our view, or our struggling for something comes out. These are examples of the self. Or our natural man comes out, which is our ability. And sometimes even the corruption comes out, which is the sin that abides in the flesh. This is who we are. We are a big "I." We are also the old man, which has been crucified. Our life is the soul-life, which needs to be forsaken. When we put all of these thing together we get the flesh.

We are just flesh. When the flesh operates with ideas and opinions, it is our self. When the flesh operates with capability and talent, that is our natural man. When the flesh operates in corruption, it is the sin which abides in the flesh being manifested. So when we talk about the self, we are also dealing with the “I,” the old man, and the soul-life in the flesh. The self is not a simple thing.

The first trap to the church in Corinth was the dear one’s self-life in their flesh, which brought them to the point that they boasted in men, the spiritual men, the great servants of God. Why did they boast in men? Because their self was seeking something honorable. They wanted to feel elevated. In the church life it is very normal for brothers to boast that they just had good fellowship with a certain elder. It makes them feel glorious. They like to be identified with certain brothers. Again, we shouldn’t just point the finger at Corinth. This is also within us. It is too easy for us to boast in spiritual men. The Corinthians were distracted by the glowing, glamorous operations of these great servants. Such operations were intended to lead them to Christ, yet the saints in Corinth were void of Christ, improperly appreciating those great spiritual men. Alas, what a tragedy! To say “I am of so-and-so” is a very serious thing. The existence of those great servants of the Lord was to bring the believers to Christ. It is the same today with those who serve the Lord - their purpose is to bring us to Christ. The problem is it is easy for us to bypass Christ and attach ourselves to spiritual man.

The same story has been repeated again and again throughout church history. While the great servants of the Lord have struggled to present the believers full-grown in Christ to God, the saints have tended to refuse the growth, ignore Christ, bypass God and His precious will, and turn to be followers of those great spiritual men. It is easy for us to desire to say, “I have a ‘hot-line’ to a leading brother. He’s the one who told me to do this.” Then the other saints would feel intimidated. That is terrible.

If there are leading brothers or spiritual men, what are they here for? They are here to bring us to Christ. We should not bypass Christ. We should not become followers of men and at the same time be void of Christ. Listen, how dreadful is this: “I am of Paul and I of Apollos, and I of Cephas” or “I am of John Nelson Darby” or “I am of T. Austin-Sparks.” While the ministries of these servants are for the saints to grow with the growth of God, the saints declare that they are of that ministry. For example, if we meet some saints from a different locality and they ask us where we are from, it may be normal for them to identify us with a certain leading one. They may say, “Oh, brother so-and-so serves you.” How would we answer them? We should say, “I am very thankful for that brother, but actually it is the Lord who serves us.”

It is even more tragic when some, realizing that being “unto,” “of,” or “for” a particular ministry is wrong, declare, “We are of Christ.” Why would we declare such a thing? What a self-life this is! The declaration “I am of Christ” is wrong, just as the declaration “I am of Paul” is wrong. The Body of Christ expressed in localities and composed of every genuine believer despises these declarations. We should consider this in a practical way. How many saints are in the church in Cleveland? It is actually composed of a great number. We don’t know for sure, but perhaps it is 100,000 saints. Some of them may say “I am of the Baptists.” This is almost the same as saying “I am of Paul,” except it is more serious to say “I am of the Baptists” because it is even more exclusive. Other saints may say, “I am of the Methodists,” or “I am of the Presbyterians,” or “I am of the Pentecostals.” Eventually the whole city has all kinds of divisions. Then do some saints in Cleveland have the right to say, “You are of all those groups, but we are of Christ”? That is how “The Church of Christ” came into existence. We have no right to declare, “We are of Christ!” because by declaring it we divide ourselves from these other saints.

Suppose we meet a dear brother who is with the Baptists. There is no problem between us. If he says, "I am of the Baptists," it becomes a problem. But if we say, "You are of the Baptists, but I am of Christ!" then we ourselves become divisive.

Many times we create the problem. Suppose we meet a believer on an airplane. We find out he is a Christian, and then we ask, "What denomination do you go to?" Do we realize that this is a sinful question? We should not ask this. If he is a Christian we have to say, "I'm a Christian too! Praise the Lord!" That is the base of our fellowship. Our fellowship is not, "You are of your denomination, but I am of Christ." No, we all are of Christ! We have no right to ask people what denomination they go to. When we ask that question we make ourselves divided. Of course, it is normal as we fellowship to find out where he meets. Even if we don't ask, he may say to us, "I am a Baptist." But when we find that out, do we treat him as a "Baptist" brother, or simply as a brother in Christ? If we say, "Oh, now you have told me you are a Baptist - you are in division," then we are in division too.

In the sight of God there are no Baptists, there are only Christians. In the sight of God, the 100,000 Christians in Cleveland are one Body as the church in Cleveland. If someone asks us, "How many saints are in the church in Cleveland?" our answer should be, "I don't know. My guess is about 100,000." If they say, "You have so many?" we should reply, "Well, only several hundred come together." "Then where are the rest?" "They all go to where they like. What can we do? But we are very open to every one of them." If we don't have this spirit then we are in our religious self, just like the saints in Corinth. We shouldn't say to someone, "You are a Baptist? You are wrong! Only we are right, because we are of Christ!" Aren't they also of Christ? Even though they say they are Baptist, they are still of Christ.

From the very beginning the apostle Paul handled this in a much broader way than we have realized. Some Corinthians said, "I am of Paul," "I am of Apollos," and "I am of Cephas." But others among them said, "You are of men, but I am of Christ!" Paul would still say to the last group, "Has Christ been divided? Who gave you the right to say that only you are of Christ?" To declare "I am of Christ" is wrong, just as to declare "I am of Paul" is wrong. Both declarations are from the self-life. Every Christian is of Christ, but the self-life always rejects this realization. Even when we say, "I meet with the local churches," we can be in division. This is not an easy matter. Many times when we declare "the Body of Christ," if we are not careful we are promoting an institution. When we declare "the local churches," if we are not careful we may be promoting a denomination. We must remember that every dear believer in Cleveland is part of the church in Cleveland. Every Christian we meet is part of the Body of Christ.

If we learn to deny our self-life we will have no divisive feeling when we meet other Christians. Of course, we know from experience that usually our fellowship with Christians in denominations will become frustrated sooner or later. But we should not be those who bring in frustration. We should not say to a brother, "Since you are a Baptist I know that our fellowship will be hindered, so we may as well stop now." We should still fellowship with him as the Lord so leads. We still have to be very open to him. We still have to share the Christ we have with him, and let him minister the Christ he has to us. Hopefully in our fellowship there would be nothing brought in which would cause divisiveness. When someone in Corinth said "I am of Paul," in the sight of God was he of Paul? He was still a child of God. When a brother today says he is a Baptist, in the sight of God is he a Baptist? He is still a child of God. Every genuine believer in Cleveland is in the church in Cleveland.

Any declaration that excludes any member of the Body is improper. We cannot have any declarations. To say “we are of Christ” is wrong. At the same time it is proper for us to say that we are the church in Cleveland. We know that to consider the church in Cleveland as just the physical meeting hall is terrible. But if we consider the church in Cleveland to be a few hundred people, that is also terrible. The church in Cleveland is the testimony of the Lord in Cleveland, composed of perhaps 100,000 saints. How many come together? A few hundred. Is there anything wrong with this? There is nothing wrong. We shouldn’t treat other believers differently because they don’t meet with us. Neither should we exclude them. However, we should still realize, “We need to meet together on the proper ground.” There are many thousands of believers in this city, and a few are meeting as the church here. But we never exclude anyone. We never cut anyone off. We receive every believer. Again, to say that we are of Christ is to become divisive. It is from the self-life. Any stand that becomes specific is improper. How good is the apostle Paul’s answer, “Is Christ divided?” Cleveland may have so many divisions among the Christians, but Paul would ask, “Is Christ divided?” The answer is no. Many Christians divide themselves. We are not responsible, and we cannot help this. But Christ is not divided. For sure Christ is both theirs and ours, for which we are thankful. It doesn’t matter what we declare, we are all of Christ.

Since it is a fact that we are all of Christ, why declare something else? Why not only take the fact? This is our self-life. But we still like to do it. We like to belong, to associate, to have something materialistic that we can boast in. In turn there are strifes and divisions.

PAUL'S APPRECIATION AND EXPECTATION TOWARD THE SAINTS IN CORINTH

How did Paul respond to this manifestation of the self-life in Corinth? Paul deeply appreciated the saints in Corinth according to Christ. Their condition was terrible, yet Paul appreciated them. He was thankful to God always concerning them, not based on their situation but based on the grace of God. This was Paul's own statement. Even though they were abusive in their utterance and knowledge, Paul was appreciative of their being enriched in Christ. The Corinthians had utterance and knowledge, but they became abusive with it. They boasted in these things, even though so much of what they knew was just doctrinal and without life. But Paul was still thankful that they were being enriched in Christ. Many believers speak very spiritual things, but what they speak is doctrinal. Doctrine kills. To speak something without the Spirit doesn't give life. If we meet a brother who has memorized so many doctrinal points, but doesn't give life, how would we react? We might think, "He can only speak slogans. He doesn't even have to use his mind." But another way of looking at it is to say, "Isn't it marvelous that he knows all of these things? He is enriched in Christ." Although the Corinthians were so doctrinal, Paul was thankful that they were being enriched in Christ. We should be as big, and as broad, as Paul was.

Even though inwardly they were a mess, Paul was thankful that the testimony of Christ was confirmed in them. Even though they were indulgent in their gift, Paul saw that the initial gift in life eventually would lead to the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ - His second coming. The Corinthians were abusing the gift of tongue-speaking, even to the point that Paul had to tell them to do things in order. Yet while they were so messy, Paul would say that this initial give would eventually lead to the second coming of Christ.

Paul was assured that the faithful God would eventually lead these saints into the full participation of the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ. What a high spiritual understanding! What a high realization! What an outstanding exercise. Many times we are almost possessed by negative things. We look at the saints and think, “Why aren’t they zealous?” Some saints have been in the church life many years. They used to be quick, but now they are slow. They used to be so burning, but now they are somewhat lukewarm. But there are different ways to think about this. One way is, “They are all inoperative. They are all dead. It is a hopeless situation.” But another way to look at it is to say, “Isn’t that marvelous? After so many years, these saints are still faithful in the Lord’s recovery. They are still faithful in the church life. Praise the Lord for this!” If we do not know how to appreciate the saints, eventually not even one brother will make us happy. Everyone has their limitations. But we also need to learn that all the brothers have their loveliness.

This article is available online at
MinistryMessages.org.

© 2001 Titus Chu

The date and location of this
message is not known.