The Conclusion OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

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The Church

Witness Lee

THE CONCLUSION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

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MESSAGE ONE HUNDRED EIGHTY-NINE

THE CHURCH—THE HIDDEN MYSTERY IN GOD'S ETERNAL ECONOMY (1)

Thus far in these messages on the conclusion of the New Testament we have covered four persons: God, Christ, the Spirit, and the believers. In the remaining messages we shall cover three corporate persons: the church, the kingdom, and the New Jerusalem. The church is a corporate person. The kingdom also is a corporate person. According to chapter two of Daniel, Christ, the heavenly stone, will eventually become a great mountain filling the entire earth. This is the kingdom as the increase of Christ. The New Jerusalem in the new heaven and new earth will also be a corporate person. First we shall consider the church and then the kingdom and the New Jerusalem.

I. THE HIDDEN MYSTERY IN GOD'S ETERNAL ECONOMY

The first matter we shall consider concerning the church is the hidden mystery in God's eternal economy. In this universe there is a hidden mystery, a mystery hidden in God. This hidden mystery is in God's eternal economy. Here we have two crucial words—mystery and economy—modified respectively by the adjectives "hidden" and "eternal." Hence, in the New Testament we have the hidden mystery and the eternal economy.

In revealing the divine things, Paul, under the inspiration of the Spirit, uses the word "economy" in his writings. The English word economy is an anglicized form of the Greek word oikonomia. Some dictionaries define oikonomia as a dispensation, a special arrangement, a plan with a purpose. These definitions are correct. However, if we know only this much concerning oikonomia, we shall not know the deep and complete significance of this Greek word.

If we would understand the meaning of oikonomia, we need to realize that this Greek word is composed of two words—oikos, meaning house or household, and nomos, meaning law. Economy, therefore, is a "house law," a household administration. God's household is His house, His dwelling place. This means that God's dwelling place is His family, His household. This

household has an economy, a household law. Here "law" means regulations, and these regulations refer to a household administration. In order to have a household administration, an administration in your house or family, there surely is the need for a particular arrangement. Such an arrangement is a house law.

In using the word oikonomia, a word that denotes a household administration, Paul was implying that God, who made this oikonomia, has the intention to have a house, a household, a family. In eternity past God was alone. He was triune—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—yet He, the one God, was alone. However, God's oikonomia, His household arrangement, implies that in eternity past He intended to have a household, for without a household, He cannot have an administration. Furthermore, without a household God would not be able to carry out a plan. In order for God to carry out His plan in His household administration, He needs a household, a family. This is the reason Ephesians 1:5 reveals that, before the foundation of the world. God the Father predestinated us unto sonship. This predestination was with the intention of having sons. Therefore, God's original intention was to have sons. The book of Romans tells us that, in Christ's redemption, God has made many sinners into sons of God. These sons are the many brothers of Christ, God's unique, only-begotten Son. From this we can see that God intends to have many sons to form His household through which He can carry out His eternal oikonomia.

In this oikonomia, which is eternal and of God, a mystery was hidden. What is a mystery? We may say that a mystery is a mysterious story. A mystery, a mysterious story, was hidden in the eternal God and in His eternal oikonomia. As we shall see, this mystery, this mysterious story, is the church.

Today the word "church" is very common. But when Paul comes to the revelation of the church, he uses certain mysterious expressions. He calls the church a mystery, even a hidden mystery. This mystery is hidden in God's household arrangement. In eternity past, God the Father had a household arrangement, and in that arrangement a mystery was hidden.

A. God's Eternal Economy

(Eternal Plan, the Purpose of the Ages)

Now we need to look into the details concerning God's eternal economy. This economy is an eternal plan; it is also a purpose. In Ephesians the word

“purpose” is used three times, twice as a noun (1:11; 3:11) and once as a verb (1:9). God is purposeful, and He has a purpose. But what does the word “purpose” mean? I believe that the best definition is that a purpose is a determined intent. A purpose is a strong intent to do something or to gain something. The eternal economy of God is of God’s determined intent, of God’s purpose. In eternity past God had such an intent to gain something, to have something. God is determined to have the church. With a definite and strong determination, God intends to have the church. According to Ephesians 3:11, God’s eternal purpose is “the purpose of the ages.” The purpose of the ages is the purpose of eternity, the eternal purpose, the eternal plan of God made in eternity past. Hence, the expression “the purpose of the ages,” a literal translation of the Greek, simply means the eternal purpose.

1. Of God's Will

Besides the terms economy, mystery, and purpose, a number of other important terms are used by Paul in Ephesians. The next term we shall consider is “will.” Three times in Ephesians 1 Paul speaks of God’s will: the good pleasure of His will (v. 5), the mystery of His will (v. 9), and the counsel of His will (v. 11). God has an economy because in eternity God had a will. Because this will was hidden in Him, it was a mystery. But in His wisdom and prudence God has made this hidden mystery known to us through His revelation in Christ, that is, through Christ’s incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension.

God’s eternal, determined intent is to have something. This intent, this purpose, plan, and arrangement, household administration, is of God’s will. We need to be impressed with the fact that God’s purpose, His determined intent, is of God’s will. God’s will is the source, and the purpose is the outcome. God’s eternal purpose is of His will.

At this point we need to ask what God’s will is. What is the will which is the source of God’s purpose, the source of God’s determined intent? The simplest answer is that God’s will is what God wants. Anything or anyone that is living wants something. This means that every living person has a will. As soon as a child is born, he wants something, and what the child wants is his will. In speaking of God’s will, therefore, we may say that God’s will is what He wants.

What does God want? God wants the church. God wants us for the church. The church is something of God’s will, for the church is what God wants.

In eternity past, God wanted to have the church. His wanting to have the church is His will. Of this will God determined an intent, and this intent is His purpose. Furthermore, this purpose is a plan, an arrangement, that is to be carried out in God's family, in His household.

We need to see that four crucial words—economy, mystery, purpose, and will—are all related to the church. The church is something God wants, the church is the goal of God's determined intent, and the church is the mystery in God's economy, the mysterious story in God's household administration. This is revealed in Paul's writing in chapters 1 and 3 of Ephesians.

2. According to God's Good Pleasure (God's Heart Pleasure) Which God Purposed in Himself

God's eternal purpose is of His will. Now we need to see that God's will is according to God's good pleasure (Eph. 1:9). God's good pleasure is His heart pleasure, which we may call the desire of His heart. Our God is living, loving, and purposeful. The living, loving, and purposeful God surely has a desire. Every living thing and especially every living person has a desire, a good pleasure. If we desire pleasure, then certainly God does also. Only something dead or nonliving has no such need. The more living we are, the more pleasure we need. The degree of our livingness determines how much pleasure we need. Because God is certainly the most living One, He surely needs the most pleasure. If we, as fallen sinners, require pleasure, then how much more does God, the living One, have a deep need for it. The book of Ephesians reveals that God needs pleasure; it reveals the desire of God's heart. The biblical term for "the desire of God's heart" is "the good pleasure of His will." The good pleasure of God's will is the desire of God's heart.

Our God is living and loving. John 3:16 says, "God so loved the world." Why did God love the world? He loved the world because out of the world He will have His good pleasure, His heart's desire.

The eternal purpose of God is of God's will according to God's good pleasure, which He purposed in Himself. God's purpose, God's will, and God's good pleasure are interrelated. The living, loving, purposeful God has a desire, which is His good pleasure. God had this desire, this good pleasure, in eternity past. Then within Himself He determined to accomplish something in order to have the fulfillment of His desire. This means that God's desire

became His determined intent to have what He wants. Therefore, the source of God's eternal economy is actually God's good pleasure. First, God had a pleasure, a desire. Then He determined to carry out this desire, and this became God's will, what God wants. Hence, God's good pleasure, His desire, comes first. Within Himself God purposed to carry out this desire, to get what He wants, and that became His will. What God wants is the church. From this we can see that the church is God's good pleasure, God's will, God's purpose, and God's oikonomia. Furthermore, all this is a mystery, a hidden, mysterious story. This indicates that the church is a great matter, for the church is God's desire, God's good pleasure. God's will is to have the church, and He has purposed to carry out the desire to have the church which He wants. Therefore based upon His desire, will, and purpose, God made a plan, an oikonomia, a household arrangement, a household administration. Therefore, God's economy is His planned administration to carry out His eternal purpose to have the church.

God had a desire, a good pleasure, according to which He has a will. Based upon His will, God made a purpose, a determined intent. He then made a plan to administrate His purpose, and this plan is to dispense Himself as life, life supply, and everything into His chosen people. This is the economy of God.

3. Made in Christ

Ephesians 3:11 speaks of the purpose of the ages which God "made in Christ Jesus our Lord." This purpose is the plan, the plan is the arrangement, and the arrangement is the household administration, which is the oikonomia. This oikonomia was made in Christ.

Ephesians 1:9 says that God's good pleasure was purposed in Himself. Now we see that in 3:11 God's purpose was made in Christ. First, God's purpose was formed in Himself. Then in order to make this purpose a household administration, it was made in Christ.

The phrase "in Christ" in 3:11 implies three crucial significances. First, it implies, or indicates, that in eternity past Christ existed simultaneously with God. Certain verses in Ephesians speak of God's thought, will, determination, purpose, and plan in eternity past. The fact that this purpose, this plan, was made in Christ implies Christ's eternal, divine existence. It also indicates

Christ's deity. Christ, who had no beginning, exists eternally and simultaneously with God.

Second, the title Christ in Ephesians 3:11 implies, or indicates, that Christ is the embodiment of God. The book of Colossians reveals that Christ is the embodiment of the Triune God. "In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2:9). The entire Triune God is embodied in Christ, for all the fullness of the Godhead, that is, of the Triune God, dwells in Christ bodily. Hence, the title Christ in Ephesians 3:11 indicates that this One is God's embodiment.

Because the Triune God has embodied Himself in Christ, Christ is the mystery of God, the mysterious story of God. Outside of Christ there is no God, and outside of Christ we cannot find God or contact God, because the Triune God is altogether embodied in Christ.

Third, the title Christ in 3:11 implies a commission. In the New Testament the Lord Jesus is called both the Christ and the Son of God. In Matthew 16:16 Peter said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." John 20:31 says, "These have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." What is the difference between the Christ and the Son of God? The Son of God denotes the Lord's person, and the Christ denotes His commission. Christ is the embodiment of the Triune God, and the Son of God is the expression of God the Father. As such a one, the Son of God, the expression of God, was anointed to be God's Christ, and He was commissioned to bring forth many sons of God so that God may have a household.

As God's anointed and commissioned One, Christ has brought forth many sons for God's household through seven steps: creation, redemption, regeneration, sanctification, transformation, conformation, and glorification. First, all things, including mankind made in God's image, were created through Christ. After man fell, Christ came to accomplish redemption, to bring back fallen man. Next, Christ regenerated God's chosen people. Regeneration is followed by sanctification, transformation, and conformation to Christ's own image. Ultimately, the many sons of God will be brought into the glory of God. All this is for the purpose of bringing forth many sons of God, who are the many brothers of Christ. This is clearly revealed in Romans 8:29, which speaks of the many brothers of God's firstborn Son. Now God has many

sons to form into a family, a household, which He can administrate for the carrying out of His eternal plan to have the church.

In the morning of His resurrection, the Lord Jesus referred to His disciples as His brothers. He said to Mary, "Go to My brothers and say to them, I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God" (John 20:17). Furthermore, Hebrews 2 reveals that, in His resurrection, the Lord declared His Father's name to His brothers and that His brothers have become the church (vv. 11-12). The church, therefore, is a composition of all the sons of God, who are the many brothers of Christ.

God made His eternal economy in Christ. The Christ revealed in the New Testament is the embodiment of the Triune God and all the processes through which He has passed, including creation, incarnation, human living, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. In such a Christ God made His eternal economy. Therefore, Christ is the element, sphere, means, goal, and aim of God's eternal economy. Christ is everything in God's economy. In fact, all the contents of the eternal economy of God are simply Christ. Christ is the center of God's eternal plan. Christ is the element and the sphere in which, with which, and through which God carries out His household administration to have the church as the household of God and the Body of Christ.

MESSAGE ONE HUNDRED NINETY

THE CHURCH—THE HIDDEN MYSTERY IN GOD'S ETERNAL ECONOMY (2)

The church is the hidden mystery in God's eternal economy. In the previous message we considered God's eternal economy. In this message we come to the mystery of Christ.

B. The Mystery of Christ

The mystery of the universe is God. The mystery of God, the New Testament reveals, is Christ (Col. 2:2). The mystery of Christ is the church (Eph. 3:4). Actually these are simply three stages of one mystery. God is to be found in Christ, and Christ is to be found in the church. The church, then, is the mystery of Christ, who in turn is the mystery of God, who Himself is the mystery of the universe.

In Ephesians 3:4 Paul speaks of the mystery of Christ. The mystery of God in Colossians 2:2 is Christ, whereas the mystery of Christ in Ephesians 3:4 is the church. God is a mystery, and Christ, as the embodiment of God to express Him, is the mystery of God. Christ is also a mystery, and the church, as the Body of Christ to express Him, is the mystery of Christ.

According to Ephesians 3:4, the church has a particular title—the mystery of Christ. When we consider Ephesians 3:4 in context, we see that the mystery of Christ is the church. Thus, Christ is the mystery of God, and the church is the mystery of Christ. God is a mystery, Christ is the mystery of God, and the church is the mystery of Christ. Hence, the church is actually a mystery within a mystery, for the church is a mystery in the third stage. The first stage is God Himself as the mystery of the universe; the second stage is Christ as the mystery of God; and the third stage is the church as the mystery of Christ.

In God's economy revealed in the New Testament there are mainly two mysteries. The first mystery, revealed in the book of Colossians, is Christ as the mystery of God. In Colossians 2:2 Paul speaks of the "full knowledge of the mystery of God, Christ." Christ is God's mystery. In Himself God is a mystery. He is real, living, and almighty; however, He is invisible. Because no one has ever seen God, He is a mystery. This mysterious God is embodied in

Christ. Hence, Christ is the mystery of God. Christ is not only God, but He is God embodied, God defined, God explained, and God expressed. Therefore, Christ is God made visible. The Lord Jesus said, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). The first mystery in God's economy is Christ, God expressed, as the mystery of God.

The second mystery, revealed in the book of Ephesians and explained in it, especially in chapter three, is the mystery of Christ. Christ also is a mystery. In Ephesians 3:4 Paul uses the expression "the mystery of Christ." Furthermore, Colossians 1:27 says, "To whom God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the nations, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." As believers, we have Christ dwelling in us. But this Christ whom we have is a mystery. Although Christ lives in us, worldly people do not realize that He is in us. To them, this is a mystery. But although Christ is mysterious, the church is the manifestation of Christ. As the Body of Christ, the church is the expression of Christ. When we see the church, we see Christ. When we come into the church, we come into Christ. When we contact the church, we contact Christ. The church is truly the mystery of Christ.

As a mystery, the church is in the Triune God, in the Father, in the Son, and in the Spirit. With the believers there is an amount of mystery, but not as much as with the church. The divine mystery is much more with the church corporately than with the believers individually. The church is a corporate unit produced out of Christ, who is the mystery of God. This all-inclusive Christ is the mystery of the mysterious God, and such a Christ as the mystery of God produces a unit which is the church. By this we can realize that the church is the continuation of the mystery which is Christ. Mystery surely produces mystery. Christ, who is the mystery of God, brings forth the church, the mystery of Christ.

1. From the Ages Hidden in God Who Created All Things

In Ephesians 3:9 Paul speaks of "the dispensation of the mystery, which from the ages has been hidden in God, who created all things." God's mystery is His hidden purpose. His purpose is to dispense Himself into His chosen people. Hence, there is the dispensation of the mystery of God. This mystery was hidden in God from the ages (that is, from eternity) and through all past ages, but now it has been brought to light to the New Testament believers.

If we consider 3:9 in context, we shall see that there is a relationship between creation and the church. God created all things for the church. God created the heavens, the earth, and billions of items in order to have the church.

God's intention in His creation of all things, including man, was that man would be mingled with God to produce the church. Zechariah 12:1 says that the Lord stretched forth the heavens, laid the foundation of the earth, and formed the spirit of man within him. This indicates that the heavens are for the earth, that the earth is for man, and that man with the human spirit is for God. God's marvelous creation, focused on man, is for the purpose of producing the church. Therefore, Ephesians 3:9 speaks of the mystery hidden in God, who created all things.

According to Ephesians 1:5 and 9, the motive of God's creating of all things was His desire and pleasure. God carried out the work of creation in order to fulfill His desire and to satisfy His good pleasure. God's creation fulfills His desire and accomplishes His purpose; it also reveals His desire in the universe and manifests His purpose in eternity.

The basis of God's work in creation was God's will and plan (Eph. 1:10-11). Revelation 4:11 says that all things were created according to God's will. God is a God of purpose, having a will of His own pleasure. He created all things for His will that He might accomplish and fulfill His purpose. God has a will, and according to that will He conceived His plan. Then according to that will and plan, He created all things so that He may have the church.

2. Not Made Known to Men in Other Generations

The mystery of Christ "in other generations was not made known to the sons of men" (Eph. 3:5a). This mystery was hidden in other generations, but it has been revealed in the New Testament age.

The mystery of Christ, the church, which is His Body, was hidden in the Old Testament ages. None of the Old Testament saints knew anything regarding this mystery. Adam, Abel, Enosh, and Enoch did not know it. Noah knew how to build the ark, but he did not know how to build the church. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph likewise did not know the mystery of Christ. Moses knew how to build the tabernacle, but, not knowing the mystery of Christ, he did not know how to build the church. This mystery was also hidden from Samuel,

David, and Solomon, who knew how to build the temple but not how to build up the Body of Christ. None of the prophets in the Old Testament knew this mystery.

One day John the Baptist came forth and told people three things concerning Christ. First, John said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). Second, John told people that Christ was the One who would baptize them in the Spirit so that they might be regenerated. John declared, "I indeed baptize you in water unto repentance; but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to bear; He shall baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matt. 3:11). Third, John said to his disciples that Christ is the One who will have the bride. "He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices with joy because of the bridegroom's voice" (John 3:29). This indicates that John the Baptist knew more than all the preceding prophets. However, not even John had a clear vision concerning the mystery of Christ.

3. Revealed to the Apostles and Prophets in Their Spirit by Revelation in the New Testament Age

The mystery of Christ, which from the ages was hidden in God, who created all things, and which was not made known to men in other generations, has been revealed to the apostles and prophets in their spirit by revelation in the New Testament age. The church, something particular hidden in God as a mystery, has been revealed to the apostles and prophets. As we shall see in a following message, this revelation was first by Christ in the Gospels and then by the Holy Spirit in the Epistles.

In Ephesians 3:3 Paul says, "By revelation the mystery was made known to me." God's hidden purpose is the mystery, and the unveiling of this mystery is revelation. To carry out this revelation is the apostle's ministry for the producing of the church.

In Ephesians 3:5b Paul says that this mystery "has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in spirit." The mystery that was hidden from the Old Testament saints has been revealed in the New Testament to all believers through the apostles and prophets. Ephesians 3:5b tells us that this revelation is "in spirit." The word "spirit" here refers to the human spirit of

the apostles and prophets, a spirit regenerated and indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God. It may be considered the mingled spirit, the human spirit mingled with God's Spirit. Such a mingled spirit is the means by which the New Testament revelation concerning Christ and the church is unveiled to the apostles and prophets. We need the same spirit to see such a revelation.

When our spirit is mingled with the divine Spirit, our spirit becomes the organ in which the mystery of Christ is revealed.

The revelation received by the apostles and prophets in spirit is not a revelation mainly of secondary matters in the Bible. It is the revelation concerning Christ and the church.

To see and to understand such a mystery our human mentality is altogether inadequate. This is why the Apostle Paul prayed that God would give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation (Eph. 1:17) that we may understand the church, which is the mystery of Christ.

In Romans 16:25 and 26 Paul speaks of "the revelation of the mystery, which has been kept in silence in times eternal, but now has been manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the command of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations unto obedience of faith." This mystery, which has been kept in silence in the times of the ages but has been revealed in the New Testament age, is mainly of two aspects. The one is the mystery of God, which is Christ, who is in the believers as their life and their everything that they may become the members of His Body; the other is the mystery of Christ, which is the church as His Body to express His fullness (Eph. 1:22-23). Therefore, Christ and the church are the great mystery (Eph. 5:32). The book of Romans first tells us how the believers have been baptized into Christ (6:3), how Christ has been wrought into the believers (8:10), and how the believers have put on Christ (13:14). Then Romans reveals how the believers are built together in one Body (12:4-5) to express Christ in local churches that have come into existence in many cities in a practical way, with all the saints loving one another and fellowshipping with one another among all the churches to express the Body of Christ for the fulfillment of God's mystery. The eternal God, through the apostles and prophets, has made known this mystery to all the nations unto obedience of faith.

4. To Make the Multifarious Wisdom of God Known to the Rulers and the Authorities

in the Heavenlies

The mystery of Christ is to make the multifarious wisdom of God known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenlies (Eph. 3:10). There is a difference between wisdom and knowledge. Wisdom is both higher and deeper than knowledge. Wisdom is seen in the initiation of something, for example, in the formulation of a new invention, and knowledge is seen in the practical application. God is the unique initiator. He has initiated many things, not by His knowledge but by His wisdom. When He comes in to apply what He has initiated, He displays His knowledge.

Ephesians 3:10 speaks of God's multifarious wisdom. The Greek word translated "multifarious" indicates that God's wisdom has many sides, aspects, and directions. God's wisdom is manifold, and it has many significances.

The multifarious wisdom of God is to be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenlies. These rulers and authorities are the angelic rulers and authorities, both good and evil. Ephesians 3:10 especially refers to the evil ones—Satan and his angels. According to the New Testament, Satan has his kingdom, his angels, and his sphere of rule. Satan's sphere of rule is in the air and on the earth. The book of Daniel indicates that all nations on earth are under the rule of Satan in the air. God desires to demonstrate to the powers of Satan how wise He is. Therefore, through the church God makes His wisdom known not mainly to human beings but to those rebellious angels who are the followers of God's enemy.

Even the rebellion of Satan is within the realm of God's wisdom. If it were not for Satan's rebellion, God's wisdom could not be made known in a full way. Satan has created many opportunities for God's wisdom to be manifested in a multifarious way, that is, in various ways and aspects and from many angles.

God's wisdom is manifested in creation. God created all things with man as the center to express God and represent Him. As we consider creation we realize how much of God's wisdom is exhibited in it. "O Lord, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all" (Psa. 104:24). How great was God's wisdom in designing the galaxies, the planets, the earth, the flowers, the birds, the animals, and man!

God's wisdom is also exhibited in His redemption of fallen man. God foreknew that His enemy would rebel against Him, and God was prepared to face that situation. God also foreknew that the man created in His image for

His purpose would be induced by Satan to sin, and He was also prepared to face that situation. Seemingly, the fall of man presented a great problem to God. However, this simply afforded Him an opportunity to express His wisdom in His redemption.

Because man was poisoned by Satan and corrupted by sin, God not only redeemed him but also regenerated him with His life. God redeemed man so that He could regenerate him with the divine life. Now God is working continually to sanctify His regenerated people with His holy nature and to transform them with His element. The divine life is for regeneration, the holy nature is for sanctification, and the divine element is for transformation. Furthermore, God will conform His regenerated, sanctified, and transformed people to the image of His Son. Eventually, He will glorify them with Himself. Therefore, the divine life, the divine nature, the divine element, the divine being, and the divine glory will all be used to form fallen and corrupted man into a Body to express Christ, the embodiment of the Triune God. How much wisdom is required for this!

No human word can tell the greatness of God's wisdom in redemption, regeneration, sanctification, transformation, conformation, and glorification. Nevertheless, by His mercy and grace, in our spirit we can apprehend with all the saints such a marvelous wisdom. In our spirit we can realize that God uses all He is and has to produce His family so that He may have a Body prepared and formed for His Son to express the Son as the embodiment of the Triune God. Such a Body is prepared and formed through regeneration by the divine life, sanctification by the divine nature, transformation by the divine element, conformation by the divine being, and glorification by the divine glory.

According to 1 Corinthians 1:30, Christ is our wisdom with respect to righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. As our righteousness, Christ has dealt with our past, which was altogether unrighteous. For our present situation, Christ is our sanctification, and for our future, He is our redemption. For Christ to be our righteousness, sanctification, and redemption requires much wisdom on God's part.

In order to understand this adequately, we need to see the full scope of God's economy. After the creation and fall of man, God became flesh through incarnation. Then the Lord Jesus went to the cross and there crucified the flesh. After passing through death and resurrection, He ascended into the heavens, then descended and entered into us as the life-giving Spirit in order

to enliven our deadened spirit and to regenerate us. Having regenerated us, He now dwells in our spirit as life. In this life, the divine life, we have the law of life, the sense of life, and the fellowship of life. The Lord is also the anointing within us, and daily He is sealing us, saturating us, anointing us, and permeating us. As this takes place, we spontaneously live Him, and He becomes our righteousness. This is God's wisdom.

Because of His wisdom God can boast to Satan of what He has done with corrupted and ruined man. Therefore, what we are as believers today is of God's wisdom. Only God has the wisdom to initiate such a wonderful thing, to make sinful and corrupted people the members of Christ.

Through the work of the Spirit of life, a change is taking place in our very nature. It is a metabolic change, a change that sanctifies and transforms us. Thus, Christ is not only our righteousness but also our sanctification. Furthermore, we are daily being redeemed, and eventually we shall be glorified. From this we see that Christ is our righteousness, sanctification, and redemption, not only in an objective way but in a very subjective way, in the way of mingling Himself with us and changing us metabolically. All this is a testimony to God's multifarious wisdom. Many aspects of God's wisdom are manifested in His making Christ our righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. Our experience of Christ in these matters is according to God's manifold wisdom.

Eventually, Satan, God's enemy, will be subdued and will come to know God's multifarious wisdom. God is not sorry that there is such an evil one as Satan because without such a one God's manifold wisdom could not be manifested in full. It is through the troubles originating from Satan that God has an opportunity to exhibit His wisdom. The whole universe has been damaged by Satan, but God needs such a one in order that His wisdom may be shown. When all the believers are in the New Jerusalem and Satan is in the lake of fire, he will realize that everything he did actually helped God. In His wisdom God even uses Satan's evil doings in order to gain the New Jerusalem.

5. Through the Church

It is through the church as the mystery of Christ that God's multifarious wisdom will be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenlies. Ephesians 3:10 says, "In order that now to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenlies might be made known through the church the multifarious

wisdom of God." The church is produced from the unsearchable riches of Christ, as revealed in 3:8. When God's chosen people partake of and enjoy the riches of Christ, these riches constitute them the church, through which God's multifarious wisdom is made known to the angelic rulers and authorities in the heavenlies. Hence, the church is God's wise exhibition of all that Christ is.

The church is the Body of Christ, the joint heirs, and the joint partakers (Eph. 3:6). The church is composed of those who were once ruined, corrupted, and damaged. Before we were saved, we were dead in trespasses and sins, and we were scattered and divided, utterly unable to be one. We all were in a hopeless situation. Nevertheless, in His wisdom God is able to make us the church. Now we are not only redeemed, saved, cleansed, freed, liberated, and regenerated—we are one with God and with one another. Therefore, we are the church through which God's multifarious wisdom is made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenlies.

The church through which God's wisdom is so marvelously displayed is God's masterpiece (Eph. 2:10). In the eyes of God the most wonderful thing in the universe is the church, for through the church God's multifarious wisdom is made known to Satan and his angels. The day is coming when, through the church, Satan and his angels will be put to shame. They will realize that everything they have done has given God the opportunity to manifest His wisdom.

MESSAGE ONE HUNDRED NINETY-ONE

THE CHURCH—THE REVELATION OF THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST (1)

II. THE REVELATION OF THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST (THE CHURCH)

We have seen that the church is the hidden mystery in God's eternal economy. Now in this message we shall begin to consider the revelation of the mystery of Christ (the church).

A. By Christ

The revelation of the church as the mystery of Christ is completed in two steps that involve the Triune God. In the Godhead the Father is the source, the Son is the expression, and the Spirit is the reaching of the divine Trinity to us. As the source, the Father has all the revelation, but He Himself does not give this revelation directly. Rather, the divine revelation is first given through the Son and then through the Spirit. Therefore, the first step in giving the revelation of the church, which is the mystery of Christ, is by Christ.

1. In the Gospels

The revelation of the church is given by Christ in the Gospels. However, many readers of the New Testament have not seen in the Gospels the revelation of Christ as the embodiment of God. Neither have they seen the revelation of the church.

2. To the First Group of the Apostles

The revelation of the church by Christ in the Gospels was given to the first group of the apostles.

3. The First Time in Matthew 16:15-20

The first time the church was revealed by Christ was in Matthew 16:15-20. As we shall see the second time was in Matthew 18:15-20.

a. Concerning the Universal Church

In Matthew 16:18 the Lord Jesus says, "I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church." Here in the Lord's first mentioning of the church, what is revealed is the universal church for the unique testimony of the Lord in the universe. In the universal aspect the church is uniquely one. The end of Ephesians 1 speaks of the church as the Body of Christ. Christ has only one Body, which is unique in the universe. Ephesians 2:15 says that Christ created the Jewish believers and the Gentile believers in Himself into one new man, which is the church. Hence, the church as the new man is universal and one.

The words "My church" in Matthew 16:18 indicate that the church is of the Lord, not of any person or thing. The church is not like the denominations, which are denominated after some person's name or according to some thing. The church Christ is building is the universal church, not the church in a nation or the church in a city. The church in Matthew 16:18 is the universal church, the one church in the entire universe.

b. Based upon the Revelation of Christ, the Son of the Living God

The revelation of the church as the mystery of Christ is based upon the revelation of Christ, the Son of the living God. One day the Lord Jesus asked His disciples a question: "Who do men say that the Son of Man is?" (Matt. 16:13). They said, "Some, John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets" (v. 14). This indicates that, at most, people can only realize that Christ is the greatest among the prophets. Without heavenly revelation, no one can know that He is the Christ and the Son of the living God (v. 16).

After the Lord asked His disciples to say who they thought He was (v. 15), Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (v. 16). The Christ, as the anointed One of God, refers to the Lord's commission, whereas the Son of the living God, as the second of the Triune God, refers to His person. His commission is to accomplish God's eternal purpose through His crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and second advent, whereas His person embodies the Father and issues in the Spirit for a full expression of the Triune God.

Receiving the divine revelation, Peter declared that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. The definite article before the word Christ is very important. Christ is the anglicized form of the Greek word Christos, which is equivalent to the Hebrew word Messiah. Both Messiah in Hebrew and Christos in Greek mean the anointed One. The term Messiah, the anointed One, is used in Daniel 9:26. "After threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself." This refers to Jesus Christ, who is the anointed One.

According to the Old Testament principle, anyone used by God to carry out His administration had to be anointed. For this reason, the kings, the priests, and the prophets were all anointed when they came into function. This indicates that the anointing is for the carrying out of God's administration. Whatever God wants us to do or accomplish is related to His anointing.

Christ is the anointed One, the One upon whom God has poured Himself out as the ointment to accomplish His administration. Therefore, in Matthew 16 we have Christ with God poured upon Him as the ointment. On the day Christ was baptized, the Spirit of God descended upon Him (Matt. 3:16), anointing Him for the accomplishment of God's eternal purpose.

We need to be impressed with the fact that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. He is the particular One, the unique One, who carries out God's commission. He has been commissioned by God with a great purpose to produce many sons of God. In order to accomplish this purpose, He must be both the Christ and the Son of the living God, for this purpose requires both His commission and His being, His person. In His being, in His person, the Lord Jesus is the Son of the living God.

Christ has not been commissioned by God merely to redeem fallen sinners. Redemption is simply the initial aspect of God's commission. The ultimate issue is to produce, to bring forth, the many sons of God. Christ's bringing forth the believers as the many sons of God involves the imparting of His being, of His element and essence, into us. God commissioned Christ not only to redeem us as fallen sinners but also to produce, to bring forth, the believers as sons of God.

This great commission needs Christ's person, His being, as the Son of the living God. Who can bring forth the many sons of God? Only the Son of the living God can produce the many sons of God. Jesus is the Christ for God's commission. The carrying out of this commission needs His being, with His

essence, element, life, and nature. If the Lord were only the Christ and not the Son of the living God, He would have God's commission, but He would not have the ability to produce the many sons to fulfill God's commission. Therefore, for God's commission He needs to be both the Christ and the Son of the living God. Therefore, the Lord has both the commission and the ability to bring forth the many sons of God. His ability is of His essence, element, life, and nature. He is altogether sufficient to bring forth many sons of God.

After Peter declared that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, the Lord said to Him, "You are blessed, Simon Bar-jona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in the heavens" (Matt. 16:17). "Flesh and blood" here refer to man, who is composed of flesh and blood. Only the Father knows the Son (Matt. 11:27); hence, only He can reveal the Son to us. The source of the revelation of Christ, which is the basis upon which the revelation of the church as the mystery of Christ is given, is the Father.

c. Built upon the Revelation of Christ as the Rock

Matthew 16:18a says, "I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church." The Father's revelation concerning Christ is just the first half of the great mystery, which is Christ and the church (Eph. 5:32). Hence, the Lord needed "also" to reveal to Peter the second half, which is concerning the church.

In 16:18a the Lord says that He will build His church on "this rock." The words "this rock" refer not only to Christ but also to the revelation of Christ, which Peter received from the Father. The church is built on this revelation concerning Christ. First, the rock refers to the wonderful person of Christ, the Son of the living God. Second, it refers to the revelation of this person as seen by Peter. When we see this revelation, the revelation becomes the rock. Thus, the church is built not only on the person of Christ but also on the revelation of His person.

Roman Catholicism claims that the rock in verse 18 refers to Peter, whereas most fundamental Christians say that it refers to Christ. Although it is correct to say that the rock denotes Christ, not even this understanding is adequate. The rock here refers not only to Christ but even the more to the revelation

concerning Christ. In this chapter the Father reveals something from the heavens to Peter. This heavenly revelation from the Father is the rock.

It is not an insignificant matter that the church is built both upon Christ and upon the revelation concerning Christ. The denominations are not built upon this rock. For example, the Southern Baptist denomination is built upon the revelation of baptism by immersion, not upon the revelation of Christ. In the same principle, the Presbyterian denomination is built upon the doctrine of presbytery. Likewise, the charismatic churches or groups are not built upon this revelation concerning Christ; they are built upon their knowledge of the charismatic things and on their experience of them.

The church that is built upon the revelation concerning Christ is the genuine church, and it is not sectarian. The problem today is that Christians like to form groups or so-called churches according to their concept and viewpoint. But their concept is not the revelation concerning Christ. The church must be built upon "this rock," that is, upon the revelation of Christ. If we see this, we shall be saved from division. Only one thing is built upon the revelation of Christ, and that is the church. Any group that is built upon doctrines, views, practices, or concepts is not the church built upon the revelation concerning Christ. The revelation concerning Christ is the rock upon which the Lord Jesus is building His church.

In order to have a complete view of God's way to bring forth the church and to build up the church, we need to realize that the rock in Matthew 16:18 is not merely Christ but also the revelation concerning the Christ, the Son of the living God. The church is built upon the revelation of Christ. This is the reason the apostles and prophets who have received this revelation and who have passed it on in their teaching to the believers have become the foundation of the building of the church (Eph. 2:20). This means that the church is built upon the teaching of the apostles and this teaching is the revelation concerning the Lord Jesus as the Christ and as the Son of the living God.

If we see that the revelation of Christ is the rock upon which the church is built, we shall understand why Paul told Timothy to "charge certain ones not to teach differently" (1 Tim. 1:3). We should teach only what the apostles taught, because the apostles' teaching was the revelation of Christ and the Son of the living God, the revelation which became the unique rock upon which the church is built. Today we should not minister anything other than the

revelation of the Lord Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. Teachings that are different from this revelation eventually become the "rocks" upon which the various denominations and independent groups are built. Whatever a person teaches becomes a "rock" upon which a so-called church may be built. The situation is different with the teaching of the apostles. The apostles taught the revelation concerning the Christ and the Son of the living God, and this revelation is the unique rock upon which we should build the church.

d. Not Prevailed Against by the Gates of Hades (Satan's Power of Darkness)

In Matthew 16:18 the Lord Jesus also says that the gates of Hades will not prevail against His church. The gates of Hades refer to Satan's authority or power of darkness (Col. 1:13; Acts 26:18). The authority of darkness denotes the authority of Satan. God is light, and Satan is darkness. Satan's authority of darkness is the authority of evil in the heavenlies, in the air (Eph. 6:12). This evil refers to something that is in rebellion against God. The authority of evil, of rebellion, in the heavenlies is the kingdom of Satan (Matt. 12:26), the authority of darkness. The authority of Satan is Satan's kingdom, which belongs to darkness. Satan is the ruler of this world (John 12:31) and the ruler of the power of the air (Eph. 2:2). He has his authority and his angels (Matt. 25:41), who are his subordinates as principalities, powers, and rulers of the darkness of this world (Eph. 6:12). Hence, Satan has his kingdom, the authority of darkness, the gates of Hades. However, the gates of Hades cannot prevail against the genuine church built by Christ upon the revelation concerning Him as the rock, with stones such as Peter and all the believers as transformed human beings.

The Lord's word in Matthew 16:18 indicates that Satan's power of darkness will attack the church. For this reason, there is spiritual warfare between Satan's power, which is his kingdom, and the church, which is God's kingdom.

e. With the Kingdom of the Heavens as Its Reality

The church has the kingdom of the heavens as its reality. This is indicated by the Lord's word in Matthew 16:19. "I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of the heavens, and whatever you bind on the earth shall be what

has been bound in the heavens, and whatever you loose on the earth shall be what has been loosed in the heavens." The words "the kingdom of the heavens" here are interchangeably used for the word "church" in the previous verse. This is a strong proof that the genuine church is the kingdom of the heavens in this age. This is confirmed by Romans 14:17, which refers to the proper church life.

(1) The Keys of the Kingdom to Be Given to the Apostles

The keys of the kingdom are given to the apostles. This is indicated by the Lord's word to Peter in 16:19 concerning giving him the keys of the kingdom of the heavens for binding and loosing. The Gospel of Matthew is concerned with the kingdom of the heavens, which is a matter of authority. The church revealed in this book represents the kingdom to reign. Hence, the authority to bind and to loose is given not only to Peter, the apostle for the church here, but also to the church itself (Matt. 18:17-18).

(2) To Bind and Loose What Has Been Bound and Loosed in the Heavens

The keys of the kingdom have been given to the apostles to bind on earth what has been bound in the heavens and to loose on earth what has been loosed in the heavens. Whatever the church people bind or loose on earth should be what has been bound or loosed in the heavens already. We can only bind or loose what has already been bound or loosed in the heavens.

MESSAGE ONE HUNDRED NINETY-TWO

THE CHURCH—THE REVELATION OF THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST (2)

In this message we shall continue to see the revelation of the mystery of Christ, the church, given by Christ in the Gospels.

4. The Second Time in Matthew 18:15-20

The church was revealed by Christ the first time in Matthew 16:15-20. The second time the church is revealed by the Lord is in Matthew 18:15-20.

a. Concerning the Local Church

In Matthew 18:15-20 we have a revelation of the local church. Verse 17 says, "But if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church." The church revealed in Matthew 16:18 is the universal church, which is the unique Body of Christ, whereas the church revealed here is the local church, the expression of the unique Body of Christ in a certain locality. Chapter sixteen relates to the universal building of the church, whereas chapter eighteen relates to the local practice of the church. Both indicate that the church represents the kingdom of the heavens, having authority to bind and to loose.

In Matthew 16:18 the Lord Jesus says, "On this rock I will build My church." This is the universal church. But in 18:17 we have the local church, for this verse speaks of a church to which we can go when we have a problem. Matthew 18:17 says that if we have a problem to be solved by the church, we must go to the church. If this church is not the local church but the universal church, we would not be able to "tell it to the church." In fact, Matthew 16:18 is included in 18:17. We cannot have 16:18 without 18:17. However, if we have 18:17, we have 16:18.

According to the context of 18:17, in the local church we have both the reality and the practicality of the kingdom of the heavens. This means that if we would be in the kingdom of the heavens in a practical way, we need to be in a local church. In a chapter dealing with relationships in the kingdom, the Lord Jesus eventually speaks concerning the church. This proves that the

practicality of the kingdom today is in the local church. Without the local church, it is impossible to have the practicality and reality of the kingdom life. Many Christians talk about the kingdom life, but without the practical local church life, this talk is in vain.

In chapter sixteen the Lord Jesus revealed the universal church. But the universal church requires the practicality of the local church. Without the local church, the universal church cannot be practiced; rather, it will be something suspended in the air. The local church is the reality both of the kingdom and of the universal church.

b. For the Administration of the Church in Its Locality

The revelation of the church in Matthew 18 is, in particular, for the administration of the church in its locality. In 18:15-20 we have the administration, or the government, of the church. In the church there is the need of administration, of government. If we have a problem with a brother which we cannot solve with two or three, we should bring it to the church. The church has government.

The administration or government of the church is in the local churches. If we do not have the local churches, we do not have this government. In the local church there is the government which is a real restriction and test to the flesh and the self. If we know how independent our natural self is, we shall be willing to submit to the government, the administration, in the church. We all need to learn submission because of our independent self. This is why we need the government and restriction of the local church.

(1) Illustrated by the Dealing with Its Members

The administration of the church in its locality is illustrated by the dealing with its members. Matthew 18:15 says, “Now if your brother sins, go, reprove him between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.” Here we see how to deal with an offending brother. If a brother sins or offends us, we must first go to him in love and point out his offense.

In verse 16 the Lord continues, “But if he does not hear you, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.” If the brother will not listen to you, you should not give up. Rather, you should go to him with one or two witnesses, hoping that the

brother will listen to you and be rescued. However, "if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church" (v. 17). If a brother sins, we first need to deal with him by ourself in love (v. 15), then with two or three witnesses (v. 16), and finally through the church with authority (v. 17).

The last part of verse 17 says, "And if he refuses to hear the church also, let him be to you as the Gentile and the tax collector." If any believer refuses to hear the church, he will lose the fellowship of the church like the Gentile, the heathen, and the tax collector, the sinners who are outside the fellowship of the church. A Gentile or a tax collector is someone who does not have fellowship in the kingdom life or in the church life. To consider someone a Gentile or a tax collector does not mean to excommunicate him; it means that he is considered as one cut off from the fellowship of the church. Excommunication is mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5. Whereas the church must excommunicate fornicators and idolaters, the offending brother who will not listen to two or three or to the church may not necessarily require excommunication. Although the situation with him is unpleasant, it is not in the same category as fornication or idolatry. He is cut off from the fellowship of the church in order that this loss of fellowship may encourage him to repent and to recover his fellowship with the church.

(2) With the Authority Given to the Church to Bind and Loose What Has Been Bound and Loosed in the Heavens

The church may deal with an offending brother with the authority given to the church to bind and loose what has been bound and loosed in the heavens. In verse 18 the Lord Jesus says, "Truly I say to you, Whatever you bind on the earth shall be what has been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on the earth shall be what has been loosed in heaven." Here to bind means to condemn, and to loose means to forgive. As in 16:19, what we bind or loose on earth should be what has been bound or loosed already in heaven.

In order to deal with an offending brother, we must exercise the kingdom authority. Because the church today is weak, it does not realize its need to exercise this authority. The brother mentioned in 18:15-17 is first offending and then rebellious. First he offends someone. Then because he will not listen to the one he has offended, to two or three witnesses, or even to the church, he becomes rebellious. Because he rebels against the church, the church must

exercise its authority to bind and loose. It binds when such a brother is rebellious and looses when he repents. Because such a rebellious brother will not listen to the church, the church must exercise the kingdom authority to bind him until he repents. But when he repents, the church must exercise the kingdom authority to forgive him and restore him to the fellowship of the church.

c. Carried Out by Prayer in One Accord

The dealing with the offending brother must be carried out by prayer in one accord. Verse 19 says, "Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything, whatever they may ask, it shall come to them from My Father who is in the heavens." Strictly speaking, in verse 19 "ask" refers to prayer which deals with the brother who refuses to hear the church. If we pray according to the Lord's promise, our prayer will be answered, and the offending brother may be recovered.

We should not think that because, as members of the church, we have the authority of the kingdom of the heavens to bind and loose, we can go ahead on our own to deal with the sinful brother. On the contrary, the dealing with such a brother must be with much prayer. The authority to bind and loose is carried out by prayer in one accord.

The situation among the believers today is abnormal. For this reason, one Christian may sin against another and the situation is not dealt with. There is no one accord, and there is not much prayer concerning such a dealing. As a result, the believers lose the ground, the position, and the authority to deal with a sinful brother. If we are in an abnormal situation and condition, we shall not be able to exercise the authority of the kingdom of the heavens to bind and loose. However, if we are in a normal condition and we pray together with one accord, we shall have the position to exercise the authority of the kingdom of the heavens given to the church to deal with a sinful brother.

d. In the Gatherings of Two or Three with the Lord's Presence

The prayer in one accord to exercise the authority given to the church to bind and loose what has been bound and loosed in the heavens should be in the gatherings of two or three with the Lord's presence. There is no need to

have a big meeting but simply a meeting of two or three gathered into the name of the Lord. When we are gathered into the Lord's name, we are gathered into His person. Then surely we have Him with us. We have His presence, and His presence is the authority of the kingdom of the heavens for us to deal with a sinning brother. Actually, we do not deal with the brother but with the Devil and with the demons. If we attempt to exercise the kingdom authority without the Lord's presence, it will not work. Exercising the authority of the kingdom of the heavens to bind and loose must be done in the Lord's presence.

The context of Matthew 18 indicates that the reality of the church is the Lord's presence. The church must be certain that it has the presence of the Lord as its reality; otherwise, it has no genuine authority. The real and practical authority of the church is the Lord's presence. If anyone does not listen to the church, he rebels against the Lord's presence. The church has the ground to exercise authority in the presence of the Lord over any case of rebellion.

We need to consider 18:20 in some detail. In this verse the Lord says, "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst." These two or three meeting in the Lord's name are not the church but members of the church. However, we may think that as long as two or three meet in the name of the Lord and have His presence, they are the church, and the reality of the church is there. But if we read Matthew 18 carefully, we shall see that the two or three mentioned in verse 20 are not the church. These two or three are the two or three in verse 16. They may gather together in the Lord's name, but they are not the church, for if there is some problem, they need to tell it to the church (v. 17). If those two or three were the church, there would be no need for them to take the problem to the church. The fact that they need to "tell it to the church" proves that they are not the church but rather part of the church. They belong to the church and they are members of the church, but they are not the church.

In Matthew 16 and 18 the universal church and the local church are unveiled not in a doctrinal way but in a very experiential, practical way. In Matthew 16 the Lord unveiled the universal church by saying that He would build His church on the rock of the divine revelation concerning Christ. Then in Matthew 18 the Lord unveiled the local church in an experiential way by telling us how to recover a sinful brother. In His fellowship concerning how to

recover a sinful brother, the Lord opened a window for us to see how the believers in a local church should meet.

First, the Lord's word in 18:20 indicates that the basic way to meet with the saints in the local church is by two or three. Due to tradition and to our environment we may not consider a gathering of two believers a Christian meeting. Nevertheless, the Lord's word indicates that a local church should have meetings by two or three. Basically speaking, we should meet not in large meetings but with a small number. The smallest number for gathering is two. Without two, we cannot have a gathering.

From the Lord's word in 18:20 we can realize that in the Lord's intention He did not want to have big gatherings in the local church for practical help. Big gatherings can only be good for general teaching, but they cannot be good to give some practical help. It is nearly impossible to render any practical help in a big meeting. For this we need a gathering of just two or three believers. We need a small number for our meetings so that we can take care of everyone's need practically.

In 18:20 the Lord did not speak of two or three meeting together but of two or three gathered together. The verb is not in the active voice but in the passive voice. The two or three do not meet together; they are gathered together. By whom are they gathered? They are gathered by the Lord. If we say that the two or three meet together, this meeting is initiated by those who meet. For two or three to be gathered together, however, indicates that someone is doing the gathering. These two or three are gathered by the unseen Lord because they love the Lord and are concerned for His members. The fact that the verb here is in the passive voice indicates that whenever we come together to meet we should not be the ones who take the initiative. Rather, it must be the Lord who takes the initiative. He gathers us. The meeting is initiated not by the meeting ones but by the unseen Lord who gathers them. The Lord initiates the meeting, motivating us and gathering us. This means that every time we meet our meeting should not be from us but from Him. Our meeting, therefore, is not initiated by anyone except the Lord Jesus. Every time we meet it should be He who gathers us together.

The Lord takes the initiative to gather us together into His name. The believers are gathered together not in the name but into the name. The proper translation of 18:20 is not that two or three are gathered together "in My name" but "into My name." The Lord does not mean that we simply gather

together in His name or meet in His name. To meet in His name is much different from being gathered together into His name. Because the name denotes the person, to be gathered together into the Lord's name is to be gathered together into His person. We are gathered by the Lord Jesus into His name, into His person.

In order for someone to come into something he must come out of something. To be gathered into the name of the Lord means to be brought out of anything that is other than the Lord Himself. We need to be rescued by the Lord from so many occupying things and be gathered into His name, that is, into Himself as a living person. Especially we need to get out of the self. If we are to be gathered by the Lord Jesus into His name, we must get out of the self. If we remain in the self, we cannot be gathered into the name of the Lord. It is when we are gathered out of ourselves and out of all things other than the Lord and into Him that He is among us.

The most crucial thing in the believers' meeting is to be gathered into the Lord's name. Because we are the Lord's and have been saved by His name, we should gather only into that name and meet in that name. We must not gather into and meet in any other name. In a locality we should meet by small numbers, and we should meet by being gathered into the Lord's name. We need to be gathered out of so many things into His name, into His person.

Matthew 18:20 also tells us that where two or three are gathered into the Lord's name He is in their midst. Because we have been rescued and brought into the Lord's name, surely He is with us. Now when we are gathered into His name, we enjoy His presence in a special way. His presence brings us enlightenment, grace, supply, and all kinds of blessing.

In Matthew 18:15-20 we have a picture of a local church. A local church is an expression of the Body of Christ in a certain locality composed of saints who mainly meet in small groups. They meet in the way of having been rescued out of all earthly occupations into Christ Himself. Having been gathered into Christ, they meet in Him and have Him with them. Because they meet in Him with His presence, they surely have the authority of the kingdom of the heavens. They may exercise this authority to deal with the Devil and the demons behind, upon, and within a sinful, rebellious brother. This is the practice of the local church life revealed by the Lord Jesus to the first group of apostles.

MESSAGE ONE HUNDRED NINETY-THREE

THE CHURCH—THE REVELATION OF THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST (3)

In this message we shall continue to consider the revelation of the mystery of Christ, which is the church.

B. By the Holy Spirit

In the Gospel of Matthew Christ twice revealed the church to the first group of the apostles, revealing the church in its universal aspect (16:18) and also in its local aspect (18:15-20). However, when the Lord Jesus was on earth, He could not reveal the deeper and more profound aspect of the church to those earliest apostles. In John 16:12 and 13 He said to them, "I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of reality, comes, He will guide you into all the reality; for He will not speak from Himself, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come." This indicates that the Lord had something further in His heart to tell the disciples; however, at that time they were not able to comprehend it. Therefore, He told them that they would have to wait until He sent the Spirit of reality to reveal to them the deeper aspects of the church. From this we see that the revelation of the mystery of Christ is first by Christ and then by the Holy Spirit.

In John 14:26 the Lord Jesus says, "The Comforter, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and remind you of all things which I said to you." Here we see that the Father sends the Spirit in the Son's name. According to John 5:43, the Son came in the Father's name. For the Son to come in the name of the Father means that the Son comes as the Father. The principle is the same with the Father's sending the Spirit in the Son's name. According to 14:26, the Father sends the Spirit, but He sends the Spirit in the name of the Son. Therefore, the Spirit comes in the Son's name because the Spirit and the Son are one (2 Cor. 3:17). Just as the Son does not come in His own name but comes in the name of the Father, so the Spirit does not come in His own name but comes in the name of the Son. This means that although the Spirit is here, He is not here in His own name but in the Son's name. Furthermore, the Son is here in the Father's name, not in His

own name. Therefore, when the Spirit is here, the Son is here, and when the Son is here, the Father is here. This means that when the Spirit comes, all three of the Triune God—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—come with the Spirit. This is the Triune God reaching us as the Spirit to reveal the church as the mystery of Christ.

According to 14:26, the Spirit will teach us all things, and according to 16:13, He will guide us into all the reality. The Spirit of reality guides the believers into all the reality of the Triune God and of all divine matters. The Spirit receives all that is of the Son in order to disclose it to the believers. Regarding this, the Lord Jesus says, "He shall glorify Me, for He shall receive of Mine and shall disclose it to you. All that the Father has is Mine; therefore I said that He receives of Mine and shall disclose it to you" (16:14-15). All that the Father is and has is embodied in the Son (Col. 2:9), and all that the Son is and has is revealed as reality to us through the Spirit. Therefore, the Spirit of reality reveals to the believers all that the Son is. This means that our understanding of the Son is by the Spirit, who has received whatever the Son is and then reveals this to us.

The Father, who is the source, the origin, has many riches. Whatever the Father has is the Son's, and what the Son has is received by the Spirit. Since what the Spirit receives is disclosed or transmitted to us, we become the destination. The Father is embodied in the Son, the Son is transfigured to be the Spirit, and the Spirit is the reaching of the divine Trinity to us. Therefore, we are the destination of the Triune God. All that the Triune God is and has has been disclosed and transmitted to us. Because we are organically united to the Spirit, that is, organically united to the processed Triune God, whatever He is and has now is our portion as our reality. Therefore, as the Spirit receives all that the Son has and unveils it to us, the revelation of the mystery of Christ, the church, is completed.

Referring to the things which God has prepared for those who love Him, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:10, "God has revealed them to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God." The depths of God refer to the deep things of God, which are Christ in many aspects as our eternal portion, foreordained, prepared, and given to us freely by God. These have never arisen in man's heart, but they are revealed to us in our spirit by God's Spirit.

God reveals the deep and hidden things to us through the Spirit, for these things have not been seen by man's eyes, heard by man's ears, nor have they come up in man's heart (1 Cor. 2:9). This means that man has no idea concerning them, no thought of them. They are altogether mysterious, hidden in God, and beyond human understanding. But God has revealed them to us through the Spirit.

To have something revealed to us is different from being taught about that thing. To teach is related to our mind; to reveal, to our spirit. To realize the deep and hidden things God has prepared for us, our spirit is more necessary than our mind.

First Corinthians 2:10 says that the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. The Greek word rendered "searches" includes active research and implies accurate knowledge not in discovering but in exploring. The Spirit of God explores the depths of God concerning Christ and shows them to us in our spirit for our realization and participation. The life-giving Spirit is moving and searching within us to impart the riches of Christ, including the revelation of the church as the mystery of Christ, into our being.

1. In the Epistles

The revelation of the mystery of Christ by the Holy Spirit is found in the Epistles, especially in the Epistles of Paul. In Ephesians 3:3b and 4 he says, "I have written previously in brief, by which, in reading it, you can perceive my understanding in the mystery of Christ."

The expression "the mystery of Christ" is very profound. Paul considered the church the mystery of Christ. The church truly is a mystery. Whereas unbelievers may think of the church as a physical building, the Brethren teachers a century and a half ago pointed out that the church is not a material building but the assembly. The Greek word for church, ekklesia, denotes a called-out assembly. This indicates that the church is a congregation, an assembly of those people who have been called out of the world by God. Hence, the church is a called-out congregation. However, if the church were merely a group of genuine believers called out of the world by God, the church would not be a mystery. We need to understand why Paul regards the church as a mystery.

What is the crucial matter which makes the church a mystery? This crucial matter is Christ. Christ Himself is a mystery. In Colossians 1:25-27 Paul

indicates clearly that Christ is a mystery. “I became a minister according to the stewardship of God, which was given to me for you, to complete the word of God, the mystery which has been hidden from the ages and from the generations, but now has been manifested to His saints; to whom God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the nations, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” Through the divine word and by the Holy Spirit this mysterious Christ, who is the unique mystery, has been imparted into us. The mysterious Christ, who is the mystery of God, has been ministered into our being, and now we have Him within us. This is the reason Paul says, “Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

Christ as the mystery within us makes us all parts of a totality which is the mystery of Christ. This totality, the mystery of Christ, is the church. This is the sense in which the church is a mystery.

Christ as the indwelling mystery is our righteousness, holiness, victory, life, living, and testimony. Anyone who has this mystery within him should be recognized as a brother. This mystery within us responds to the mystery within other believers. Furthermore, this mystery governs us, rules us, controls us, for this mystery is a great Ruler, the King of kings and the Lord of lords. This mystery also causes us to love one another. We love one another not because we have been taught to love but because we have a loving factor—Christ as the mystery—within us. If we do not love one another, we do not have peace and joy. But if we love one another, we are filled with peace and joy.

Christ could not speak to the first group of apostles concerning this aspect of the church because by that time the Spirit of reality had not yet entered into them. But after His resurrection He became the life-giving Spirit, and He breathed Himself as such a Spirit into the apostles (John 20:22). From that time the apostles had within them the Spirit of reality to reveal the deeper and more profound aspects of Christ and the church. In particular, these aspects were revealed to Paul. He could write his Epistles because he had the Spirit of reality within him revealing to him Christ as the mystery of God and the church as the mystery of Christ.

Through resurrection Christ became a wonderful Spirit, and as this Spirit He is now within us. This Spirit is a mystery. As believers, we all have something mysterious within us, and this mystery is Christ. The Christ who is the life-giving Spirit dwelling within us, therefore, is the essence, element,

substance, and factor which make the church mysterious and cause every member of the church to be a mystery. For this reason, in the eyes of our unbelieving relatives and friends we are a mystery, and they cannot understand us. We are the mysterious members of the mysterious Body of Christ, the church.

2. To the Apostles and Prophets

The revelation of the mystery of Christ, the church, was given to the apostles and prophets. In Ephesians 3:3a Paul says, "By revelation the mystery was made known to me," and in verse 5 he says that this mystery "in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets." Among the apostles who received the revelation of the deeper aspect of the church as the mystery of Christ, Paul was the leading one. The deeper and more profound aspect of the church, the church as the mystery of Christ, was fully revealed to Paul. To carry out this revelation was Paul's ministry for the producing of the church.

3. In Their Spirit

In Ephesians 3:5b Paul says that this mystery has been revealed to the apostles and prophets "in spirit." We would emphasize the fact once again that the spirit here refers to the mingled spirit, to the regenerated human spirit of the apostles and prophets indwelt by and mingled with the Holy Spirit of God. Such a mingled spirit is the means by which the Holy Spirit revealed the church as the mystery of Christ to the apostles and prophets. In order to receive this revelation today, we also need such a spirit. The mingled spirit is the organ in which the deep and profound matter of the church as the mystery of Christ is revealed.

In order to see the church as the hidden mystery in God's eternal economy, we should not only exercise our eyes to read the Word and our mind to understand but also our spirit to apprehend. We need to open our being, be poor in spirit, and pray that the Lord would reveal to our spirit what is on His heart concerning the church. Then we shall be enlightened, and we shall see the church as the mystery of Christ.

4. Concerning God's Wisdom in Mystery

The revelation of the mystery of Christ, the church, by the Holy Spirit concerns God's wisdom in mystery. In 1 Corinthians 2:6 and 7 Paul says, "We speak wisdom among those who are full-grown, yet a wisdom not of this age, neither of the rulers of this age, who are being brought to naught; but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the wisdom which has been hidden, which God predestined before the ages for our glory." God's wisdom is Christ (1 Cor. 1:24), who is the hidden mystery predestined, pre-designated, and foreordained before the ages, in eternity, for our glory. According to verse 7, God's wisdom is in a mystery; it is a mysterious wisdom. God's wisdom is the wisdom which has been hidden and which God predestinated before the ages for our glory. God's wisdom is our destiny, and this destiny was determined by God, decided by Him, beforehand. In eternity God determined our destiny. He predestined His wisdom to be for our glory. This means that in eternity He decided that His wisdom would be our destiny and glory.

As God's center and as our portion for our enjoyment, Christ is God's wisdom in a mystery, a wisdom that is deep and profound, beyond human understanding. Within God there is something which Paul describes as wisdom in a mystery. This wisdom has been hidden and predestined before the ages for our glory. As believers we have a destiny, and this destiny is the ultimate and consummate portion of our enjoyment. God's wisdom in a mystery has not only been hidden but also predestined by God to become our destiny for our glory.

5. To Be the Foundation upon Which the Church Is Built

The revelation of the church as the mystery of Christ by the Holy Spirit is the foundation upon which the church is built. Paul refers to this in Ephesians 2:20, where he says that the church is "being built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets." We may have difficulty understanding what the foundation is in this verse. First Corinthians 3:11 says, "Other foundation no one is able to lay besides that which is being laid, which is Jesus Christ." Christ is the only foundation. Nevertheless, Ephesians 2:20 speaks of the foundation of the apostles and prophets. This does not mean, however, that the apostles and prophets themselves are the foundation. Since the mystery of Christ has been revealed to the apostles, the revelation they received is considered the foundation upon which the church is built. This corresponds to the rock in Matthew 16:18, which is not only Christ Himself but also the

revelation concerning Christ upon which Christ will build His church. Therefore, the foundation of the apostles and prophets is the revelation they received regarding Christ and the church for the building of the church. The church is built upon this revelation. This is the meaning of the foundation in Ephesians 2:20.

Upon what are we in the Lord's recovery building the church? To say that we are building upon Christ is too vague and indefinite. We need to build the church upon the revelation received by the apostles and prophets. The so-called churches established according to nationalities, doctrines, and practices are not built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets. In contrast to all these so-called churches, we in the Lord's recovery must be able to affirm strongly that the churches in the recovery are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets. This means that the churches in the Lord's recovery are built according to the revelation received by the apostles and prophets.

MESSAGE ONE HUNDRED NINETY-FOUR

THE CHURCH—THE REVELATION OF THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST (4)

In this message we shall cover two further matters related to the revelation of the mystery of Christ, the church, by the Holy Spirit.

6. Bringing to Light the Hidden Mystery of God's Economy

In Ephesians 3:9 Paul indicates that his teaching brought to light the hidden mystery of God's economy. "To bring to light what is the dispensation of the mystery, which from the ages has been hidden in God, who created all things." God wants to bring to light to all His creation the economy of His mystery which before the creation of the world was known only by Himself. This economy was hidden in God as a mystery. But now God wants to bring to light this economy to the intent that His manifold wisdom might be made known to the principalities and powers through the church (v. 10). This is according to the eternal purpose, the eternal plan, which God purposed and planned in Christ.

God's mystery is His hidden purpose. His purpose is to dispense Himself into His chosen people. Hence, there is the dispensation of the mystery of God. This mystery was hidden in God from the ages (that is, from eternity) and through all past ages, but now it has been brought to light to the New Testament believers.

7. To Be Known (Apprehended) by All the Saints

The revelation of the church as the mystery of Christ by the Holy Spirit is to be known (apprehended) not only by the apostles and prophets but by all the saints. This is indicated by Paul's prayer for the saints concerning revelation in Ephesians 1:17-23.

In this prayer Paul refers to God as "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory." In incarnation the Lord Jesus Christ, God Himself, became a

man. As a man, He is related to God's creation; therefore, God the Creator is His God.

The title "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ" implies that God the Creator has come into man. Whenever we speak of God in this way, we imply that God is no longer merely the Creator outside His creature, man, but that He has been brought into humanity. The incarnation brought God the Creator into man, God's creature.

This title implies creation, incarnation, and redemption. God is the Creator; yet He is the God of Jesus Christ, who is God incarnate. Jesus Christ is not only God in creation but also God in incarnation and redemption. In referring to God as the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are saying that we have been created, that the creating God has come into humanity, and that we have been redeemed.

In 1:17 Paul also uses the term "the Father of glory." Glory is God expressed. Hence, the Father of glory is God expressed through His many sons. The title "Father" implies regeneration, and the word "glory" implies expression. Therefore, the title "Father of glory" implies regeneration and expression. We have been regenerated by God, and we are His expression.

In this one title, "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory," five important things are implied: creation, incarnation, redemption, regeneration, and expression. The regeneration of many sons and the expression of God are for the consummation of the divine economy. Before creation there was nothing in existence except God. God had neither generation nor expression. Then God created the universe and everything in it. By His work of creation He became the Creator. After creation He took the step of incarnation, thereby coming into His creature, man. Furthermore, through crucifixion the Lord Jesus accomplished redemption. As a result, we, the fallen creatures, were redeemed. Then we were regenerated to become sons of God the Father so that we may express Him. On the day we are glorified God will be fully expressed from within us. In this way we shall become His expression. All these important steps—creation, incarnation, redemption, regeneration, and expression—are implied by the title "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory." Paul prayed to such a divine Person.

a. By a Spirit of Wisdom and Revelation

Paul's prayer to the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, was for revelation. The Greek word translated "revelation" in verse 17 means the opening of a veil. Hence, revelation is a lifting of a veil.

In order to have revelation, we need "a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the full knowledge of Him" (v. 17b). Such a spirit is the regenerated human spirit indwelt by the Spirit of God. This spirit has been given to us by God so that we may have wisdom and revelation to know Him and His economy.

In relation to the church, we need a spirit of wisdom and revelation. As far as the church is concerned, a naturally keen mind is of no avail. Rather, the spirit is of primary importance. Just as we must use the proper organs to see, hear, and taste, so we must use the proper organ—the spirit—to see the church as the mystery of Christ.

Furthermore, our spirit must be a spirit of wisdom and revelation. Wisdom is in our spirit so that we may know the mystery of God, whereas revelation is of God's Spirit to show us the vision by opening the veil. First we have the wisdom, the ability to understand, that we may know spiritual things. Then the Spirit of God reveals the spiritual things to our spiritual understanding. Knowing that the spirit is of crucial importance in relation to the church, Paul prayed that the Father of glory would grant us such a spirit of wisdom and revelation. Although the spirit in 1:17 is the mingled spirit, the regenerated human spirit indwelt by the Holy Spirit, the emphasis here is on our regenerated spirit, not on the Holy Spirit.

b. By the Eyes of Their Heart Being Enlightened

In addition to having a spirit of wisdom and revelation, we also need the enlightening of the eyes of our heart. For this reason, in his prayer for revelation Paul continues by saying, "The eyes of your heart having been enlightened" (v. 18a). These are eyes to see spiritual things. We have wisdom, the ability to know, and revelation, the unveiling of spiritual things. However, we still need eyes to see the things. Furthermore, though we have wisdom, revelation, and eyes to see, we still need light to enlighten the things which are open to us that we may have a vision.

Our heart is a combination of the conscience of our spirit with the mind, emotion, and will of our soul. To have the eyes of our heart enlightened requires a thorough dealing with our conscience, mind, emotion, and will.

In order to have eyes to see, we need an open spirit with a purified conscience (Matt. 5:3; Heb. 9:14; 10:22). Do not close your spirit—keep it open. Furthermore, our conscience, which is the main part of our spirit, needs to be purified. If our conscience is opaque, our spirit will not be able to see.

We also need a pure heart. The Lord Jesus says, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8). Many believers cannot see God or receive the revelation of the church as the mystery of Christ because their heart is not pure. If we would have a pure heart, we must deal with our whole heart, that is, with all the parts that compose our heart.

In order to have a pure heart, we need a sober mind (2 Tim. 1:7), that is, a cold mind. Although our mind should be cold, the colder the better, our emotion should be hot. In order to have seeing eyes, we need a loving emotion (John 14:21). Moreover, a pure heart requires a submissive will (John 7:17). If our will is to be submissive, it must be soft.

If we have a pure heart with a sober mind, a loving emotion, a submissive will, and if we have an open spirit with a pure conscience, our eyes will be able to see. Our spirit must be open, and our conscience void of offense. Along with this, our heart must have a cold and sober mind, a hot and loving emotion, and a soft and submissive will. When we have such a spirit and heart, the eyes of our heart will be able to see the church as the mystery of Christ.

c. By Knowing the Surpassing Greatness of God's Power toward Them, Which God Wrought in Christ

In Ephesians 1:19 Paul prays that we would know "what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the operation of the might of His strength." This power is toward us who believe according to the operation of the might of God's strength which He wrought in Christ. This is more than subjective and experiential to us today. God's power toward us is surpassingly great. We need to know it and experience it.

God's surpassingly great power toward the believers may be compared to electrical power that is continually being transmitted from the power plant to our homes for our daily life. In the same principle, the divine power is being transmitted into us continually for the fulfillment of God's eternal purpose.

Verse 19 speaks of the greatness of God's power "according to the operation of the might of His strength." Here Paul speaks of power, operation, might, and strength, using different words to convey something of the vastness of God's power to us.

The surpassingly great power of God toward us is according to the operation of the might of His strength which He wrought in Christ. God's power toward us is the same power that operated in Christ. As the Body we participate in the power that operates in the Head.

(1) In Raising Him from among the Dead

Ephesians 1:20a speaks of God's power which "He wrought in Christ in raising Him from among the dead." The great power that operated in Christ first raised Him from among the dead. This power has overcome death, the grave, and Hades, the place where the dead are held. Because of God's resurrection power, death and Hades could not hold Christ (Acts 2:24).

(2) In Seating Him at His Right Hand in the Heavenlies, Far above All

The surpassing greatness of God's power has also seated Christ at God's "right hand in the heavenlies, far above all rule and authority and power and lordship, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in that which is coming" (vv. 20b-21). God's right hand, where Christ has been seated by the surpassingly great power of God, is the most honorable place, the place with supreme authority. The heavenlies here refer not only to the third heaven, the highest place in the universe, where God dwells, but also to the state and atmosphere of the heavens, in which Christ was seated by God's power.

In verse 21 Paul tells us that Christ has been seated above all rule, authority, power, and lordship and above every name that is named. Rule refers to the highest office; authority, to every kind of official power; power, to the might of authority; and lordship, to the preeminence which power establishes. The authorities here include not only the angelic, heavenly authorities, good or bad, but also the human, earthly ones. The ascended Christ has been seated far above all rule, authority, power, and lordship in the entire universe. Every name that is named refers not only to titles of honor but also to everything

that has a name. Christ has been seated far above everything, both in this age and in the coming age.

(3) In Subjecting All Things under His Feet

Ephesians 1:22a says, "And He subjected all things under His feet." The surpassing greatness of God's power not only raised Christ from among the dead and seated Him at God's right hand in the heavenlies but also subjected all things under the Lord's feet. For Christ to be far above all is one thing; for all things to be subjected under His feet is another. The former is Christ's transcendency; the latter is the subjection of all things to Him. Here in 1:22a we see the subduing power, the power to subdue all things.

(4) In Giving Him to Be Head over All Things to the Church

In 1:22b Paul goes on to say, "And gave Him to be Head over all things to the church." Fourth, God's great power that operated in Christ gave Him to be the Head over all things to the church. The headship of Christ over all things is a gift from God to Him. It was through God's surpassingly great power that Christ received the headship in the universe. As a man, in His humanity with His divinity, Christ was raised up from the dead, was seated in the heavenlies, had all things subjected to Him, and was given to be the Head over all things.

In 1:20-22 we see four aspects of the power that operated in Christ: resurrection power, transcending power, subjecting power, and heading-up power. This fourfold power is to the church. The words "to the church" in verse 22 imply a transmission. Whatever Christ, the Head, has attained and obtained is now being transmitted to the church, His Body. In this transmission the church shares with Christ all His attainments: the resurrection from among the dead, His being transcendent over all, the subjecting of all things under His feet, and the headship over all things.

The church comes out of this power. The little word "to" indicates the source of the church. The power that operated in Christ in raising Him from the dead, in seating Him at the right hand of God in the heavenlies, in subjecting all things under His feet, and in giving Him to be Head over all things operated once for all. Nevertheless, Christ is Head of all things to the church, and the surpassing greatness of the power that operated in Him is toward us who believe (v. 19). This divine power is not transmitted to the

church once for all; on the contrary, it is transmitted continually. This transmission began on the day of Pentecost, and it is still continuing today. Even now this transmission is to the church. All that Christ has accomplished as the Head is continually being transmitted to the church. The divine power will continue to be transmitted to the church for eternity; it will never cease.

(a) The Body of Christ

The last part of verse 22 and the beginning of verse 23 speak of "the church, which is His Body." The Body is not an organization but an organism constituted of all the regenerated believers for the expression and activities of the head.

Whatever Christ, the Head, has attained and obtained is now being transmitted to His Body, the church. By means of this transmission the church shares with Christ all His attainments. The church shares in His resurrection from among the dead, His being seated in His transcendency, the subjection of all things under His feet, and His headship over all things. As the element of Christ is transmitted into the church, all that He has accomplished, attained, and obtained is transmitted into the church as well. Through this marvelous transmission we become the Body of Christ.

The Body is the issue of the incarnated, crucified, resurrected, and ascended Christ who is continually being transmitted into us. According to our natural life, we are not qualified to be part of the Body. On the contrary, we are qualified only to be terminated and buried so that we can be resurrected. By nature, not even our spirit is qualified to be part of the Body. Before Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, the Body of Christ was not in existence. He had a number of followers, but He did not have the Body. The Body of Christ could not come forth from the incarnated Christ until He had been crucified to terminate the flesh, the natural man, and the entire old creation. After terminating all these things through His crucifixion, Christ entered into resurrection to germinate something new. Therefore, it was after His resurrection that the Body of Christ came into being. In our natural life and in the old creation we are not the Body. But we are the Body in the new creation germinated by Christ's resurrection life. On the day of Pentecost, the crucified, resurrected, and ascended Christ, who was given to be Head over all things, began to transmit all that He had accomplished, attained, and obtained to the church. Since that day, this transmission has not ceased. This indicates that this transmission has a beginning but that it has no ending.

After all the wonderful steps taken by the Triune God—creation, incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension—He came into the church with all His accomplishments. Thus, the church, the Body, is an entity altogether in resurrection and ascension with both the natural element and the old creation terminated. The Body, an organism in resurrection and ascension, is wholly in the new creation and has nothing to do with the old creation. Every part of the Body is of the new creation.

We all need to see that the Body has come into existence through the divine transmission from the resurrected and ascended Christ. Having ascended to the right hand of God, Christ continually transmits all that He is and all that He has obtained and attained into the church. It is in this way that the church, the Body, comes into existence. The Body comes from the transmission of the ascended Christ.

When Christ is transmitted into us, the transmission joins us to Christ and makes us one with Him. It is in this transmission that we have the church life and the Body functions. The heavenly transmission is to the church, which is His Body. By means of this transmission the Body is real, genuine, living, and aggressive.

(b) The Fullness of the One Who Fills All in All

In 1:23 Paul tells us that the Body is "the fullness of the One who fills all in all." The Body of Christ is His fullness. The fullness of Christ issues from the enjoyment of the riches of Christ (3:8). Through the enjoyment of Christ's riches, we become His fullness to express Him. This is the fullness of the One who fills all in all.

Christ, who is the infinite God without limitation, is so great that He fills all things in all things. Such a great Christ needs the church to be His fullness for His complete expression.

It is in the transmission that the Body of Christ is the fullness of the One who fills all in all, because the Christ who fills all in all is in the transmission. The transmission connects us to the all-filling Christ. In this way the church becomes the fullness of the all-filling Christ. By means of such a transmission, we are the Body, the fullness of the One who fills all in all.

The Body comes from the transmission of the all-inclusive Christ. To enjoy this transmission we need a sober mind, a fervent emotion, a submissive will,

and a pure conscience. Through the experience of this transmission we become the Body. What we need today is more of this all-inclusive transmission.

Having considered Paul's prayer for revelation in Ephesians 1:17-23, we can see why he considers the church the mystery of Christ. Paul entered into the full and completed revelation of this mystery of Christ, which is His mystical Body, the fullness of the One who fills all in all. May we all be enlightened to see this mysterious aspect of the church.

MESSAGE ONE HUNDRED NINETY-FIVE

THE CHURCH—THE FORMATION OF THE CHURCH (1)

We have seen that the church is a mystery hidden in God's eternal economy. We have also seen that the church as the mystery of Christ has been revealed in two steps: first by Christ and then by the Holy Spirit. In the first step, Christ revealed the church outwardly to His apostles. He showed them the universal and local aspects of the church but not the mysterious aspect. This aspect was not revealed until, after His resurrection, Christ had become the life-giving Spirit and had breathed Himself into His disciples and, on the day of Pentecost, had poured out the consummated Spirit upon them. After all this had taken place, the believers, especially the apostles, were equipped and qualified to realize something deeper and more profound concerning the church. They could see something not just outwardly but inwardly, not something that could simply be realized in the mind and in the heart but something that needed to be understood by the human spirit. Paul in particular received in his spirit the revelation of the church as the mystery of Christ. In his spirit he received the completed revelation concerning Christ as the mystery of God and the church as the mystery of Christ. Therefore, in his Epistles Paul unveils these two mysteries.

The revelation of the church as the mystery of Christ is received not in our mind or in our heart but in our spirit, in the regenerated human spirit indwelt by the Spirit of reality. Because Paul was enlightened in his regenerated spirit, he entered into the vision of the church as the mystery of Christ and spoke concerning this vision in his Epistles, telling us of this mystery.

III. THE FORMATION OF THE CHURCH

Having considered the church as the hidden mystery in God's eternal economy and having seen that the church, the mystery of Christ, has been revealed first by Christ in the Gospels and then by the Holy Spirit in the Epistles, we shall begin in this message to consider the formation of the church. First, we shall see the formation of the church in a general way, and then we shall cover the details.

We need to realize that none of us is qualified to form the church. Only the Lord Jesus is qualified for this. In Matthew 16:18 He says, "I will build My church." He is the unique one who is qualified to form the church.

In order for Christ to form the church it was necessary for Him to pass through death and enter into resurrection. In resurrection He was transfigured from the flesh to the Spirit. First Corinthians 15:45b tells us that in His resurrection and through His resurrection Christ as the last Adam became a life-giving Spirit.

On the day of His resurrection, the Lord Jesus appeared to His disciples in a wonderful way. "When therefore it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst and said to them, Peace be to you" (John 20:19). The disciples were "startled and became frightened and thought they beheld a spirit" (Luke 24:37), that is a phantom, a ghost, a specter. The Lord said to them, "See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you behold Me having" (Luke 24:39). The Lord had a physical body that could be seen and touched. After showing the disciples "both His hands and His side" (John 20:20), the Lord "breathed into them and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit" (v. 22). This is the Spirit expected in John 7:39 and promised in 16:16-17, 26; 15:26; 16:7-8, 13. Hence, the Lord's breathing of the Holy Spirit into the disciples was the fulfillment of His promise of the Holy Spirit as the Comforter. Here the Spirit as the breath was breathed as life into the disciples for their life. By breathing the Spirit into the disciples, the Lord imparted Himself as life and everything into them.

The Lord Jesus came to His disciples on the day of His resurrection as the pneumatic Christ. The Greek word for "Spirit" in John 20:22 is pneuma, a word that also means breath or air. In John 1 Christ is the Lamb, but in John 20, after His death and in His resurrection, He is the pneumatic Christ. To say that Christ is the pneumatic Christ means that He is full of the divine breath. Whereas in John 1 Christ came as the Lamb, in John 20 He came as the pneuma. The fact that He breathed into the disciples and told them to receive the Holy Spirit indicates that He had come to them as the breath, the pneuma. The Lord became the pneumatic Christ through resurrection, and today, in resurrection, He still comes to us as the Spirit, the pneuma.

After the Lord Jesus came in John 20:19, there is no word or hint in John's record indicating that the Lord left the disciples. The reason for this is that He stayed with them, although they were not conscious of His presence. Instead of leaving them, He disappeared, becoming invisible. But to the surprise of the disciples, at various times and in different places He would appear, manifesting Himself to them. Acts 1:3 tells us that to the apostles "He presented Himself alive after His suffering by many convincing proofs, through a period of forty days, appearing to them." His appearing does not mean that He ever left them; it simply means that He made His presence visible to them.

After appearing to His disciples for a period of forty days, the Lord Jesus ascended to the heavens. Ten days later, on the day of Pentecost, He, having again received the consummated Spirit, poured out this Spirit upon all His disciples.

At this point we need to consider the difference between the essential Spirit and the economical Spirit. The essential Spirit is for the believers' spiritual life, living, existence, and being, and the economical Spirit is for God's economy, work, and move. On the day of His resurrection the Lord Jesus breathed the Spirit into the disciples essentially as life for their spiritual existence. Then fifty days later, on the day of Pentecost, Christ, in His ascension, poured out the consummated Spirit upon His disciples economically as power for their work.

In the Lord's resurrection, the Spirit of resurrection life is likened to breath, breathed into the disciples for their spiritual being and living essentially. In the Lord's ascension, the Spirit of ascension power, poured out upon the disciples, is symbolized by wind for the disciples' ministry and move economically (Acts 2:2). The essential Spirit of resurrection life is for the believers to live Christ; the economical Spirit of ascension power is for them to carry out His commission.

We need to see clearly the difference between the breathing in John 20 and the blowing in Acts 2. The breathing in John 20 is for the imparting of the life-giving Spirit into the believers essentially for their spiritual being and for their spiritual living. But the blowing in Acts 2 is for the pouring out of the economical Spirit of power upon the believers, who have already received the essential Spirit into them. The pouring out of the Spirit of power is not for the believers' spiritual being or living; rather, the outpouring of the Spirit of

power is for the believers' ministry and move. Therefore, the essential aspect of the Spirit is for living, and the economical aspect is for ministry.

The Lord Jesus Himself is the pattern for the believers' receiving the Spirit both essentially and economically. First, the Spirit came as the divine essence for the conceiving and birth of the Lord Jesus (Luke 1:35; Matt. 1:18, 20). This was the coming of the Spirit essentially for Christ's existence and being as the God-man.

The Holy Spirit also came to Jesus Christ as the divine power for the anointing of Christ (Matt. 3:16). This was economical and was for Christ's ministry and work, whereas the coming of the Spirit as the divine essence was essential and was for the Lord's being and living. When He came forth at the age of thirty to minister and work for God, He needed the Spirit as His power economically, even though He had already been born of the Spirit and had the Spirit within Him.

The believers also received the Spirit both essentially and economically. On the day of the Lord's resurrection, the essential Spirit for the disciples' spiritual existence and being was breathed into them. This is proved strongly by the record of Acts 1. According to this record, even before the day of Pentecost, Peter was changed. In the four Gospels Peter often behaved in a foolish, nonsensical manner. But in chapter one of Acts Peter is a very different person, able rightly to expound the Psalms.

Another indication that the disciples had received the Spirit essentially before the day of Pentecost was the fact, also recorded in Acts 1, that they were able to pray in one accord for ten days. Before the Lord's crucifixion, the disciples were striving with one another. But in Acts 1 there is praying instead of striving. What made it possible to pray in one accord for ten days? This was made possible by the indwelling Spirit.

Although the disciples had received the Spirit essentially and had this Spirit within them, they still needed the economical Spirit to descend upon them. Concerning this, the Lord Jesus said to them, "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and unto the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Then ten days after His ascension, the Lord Jesus poured out Himself as the consummated Spirit upon His disciples.

Now we can see that the church was formed by two steps. The first step was the Lord's breathing the Spirit into the believers for their spiritual existence and being. The second step was the Lord's pouring out Himself as the consummated Spirit upon the believers, baptizing them into one Body. By these two steps the believers were filled inwardly with the Spirit and were clothed outwardly with the Spirit. Inwardly they had the Spirit of essence, the essential Spirit, and outwardly they had the Spirit of economy, the economical Spirit. As a result, they were altogether wrapped up with the Spirit, and by being wrapped up with the Spirit they were formed into the Body of Christ. This was the formation of the church.

On the day of Pentecost Christ baptized the Jewish believers in the economical Spirit. Not too long afterward, in the house of Cornelius He baptized the Gentile believers in the economical Spirit. On the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, the economical Spirit descended upon the Jewish believers, and in the house of Cornelius in Caesarea, the same economical Spirit descended upon the Gentile believers. By these two instances of the believers being baptized in the economical Spirit, Christ, as the Head in the heavens, baptized His entire Body—both the Jewish side and the Gentile side—in one Spirit into one Body, as fully revealed in 1 Corinthians 12:13. Therefore, the church was formed through Christ's baptizing all the believers, both Jews and Gentiles, in one Spirit into one Body.

A. Being Universal

Through the once-for-all baptism in the all-inclusive Spirit, the church, in the eyes of God, was once for all, universally formed to be the fullness of Christ for His universal expression. It is after this universal formation of the Body of Christ that, through the centuries, all God's chosen people were, are, and will be brought into not only the reality but also the practicality of the Body of Christ until the completion is reached.

B. On the Day of Pentecost and in the House of Cornelius

The formation of the church took place in two steps at two different times: on the day of Pentecost and when Peter was in the house of Cornelius (Acts 2:1; 10:24). What happened on the day of Pentecost with the Jewish believers and in the house of Cornelius with the Gentile believers was for the formation of the church, the Body of Christ.

C. By Christ the Head

The church has been formed directly by Christ the Head (Matt. 16:18). Ephesians 1:22 and 23 tell us that God gave Christ to be Head over all things to the church, which is His Body. The important phrase "to the church" implies that whatever Christ the Head has attained and obtained is transmitted to the church. This transmission from the Head is the source of the Body.

D. Through the Outpouring of the Spirit

The formation of the church by Christ the Head took place through the outpouring of the Spirit (Acts 2:17-18, 33). The outpouring of the Spirit differs from the breathing of the Spirit into the disciples out of the mouth of Christ at His resurrection. The pouring out of God's Spirit was from the heavens at Christ's ascension. The former is the essential aspect of the Spirit breathed into the disciples as life for their living; the latter is the economical aspect of the Spirit poured upon them as power for their work. The same Spirit is both within them essentially and upon them economically.

The pouring out of the Spirit at Christ's ascension was the descension of the resurrected and ascended Christ as the all-inclusive Spirit to carry out His heavenly ministry on earth to build up the church as His Body for God's New Testament economy.

In Acts 2:33 Peter, speaking of the Lord Jesus, says, "Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received the promise of the Holy Spirit from the Father, He poured out this which you both see and hear." This was not the promise given by the Holy Spirit but the promise given by the Father in Joel 2:29, quoted by Peter in Acts 2:17, and referred to by the Lord in Luke 24:49 and Acts 1:4, concerning the Holy Spirit. The exalted Christ's receiving of the promise of the Holy Spirit is actually the receiving of the Holy Spirit Himself. Christ was conceived of the Spirit essentially for His being in humanity (Luke 1:35; Matt. 1:18, 20) and was anointed with the Spirit economically for His ministry among men (Luke 4:18). After His resurrection and ascension, He still needed to receive the Spirit economically again that He might pour Himself out upon His Body to carry out on earth His heavenly ministry for the accomplishment of God's New Testament economy.

1. The Baptism in the Holy Spirit

The outpouring of the Spirit is the baptism in the Holy Spirit. To the Holy Spirit it is an outpouring, but to Christ the Head it is a baptism.

The Lord Jesus referred to the baptism in the Holy Spirit in Acts 1:5. “John indeed baptized in water, but you shall be baptized in the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” This has been accomplished in two sections involving the Jewish believers and the Gentile believers. Therefore, in 1 Corinthians 12:13 Paul says, “In one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks.” Since the Spirit is the sphere and element of our spiritual baptism and in the Spirit we were all baptized into one organic entity, the Body of Christ, so we should all, regardless of our races, nationalities, and social ranks, be this one Body. It is in the one Spirit that we were all baptized into the one living Body to express Christ.

2. On the One Hundred Twenty Believers

First, the outpouring of the Spirit was on the one hundred twenty believers (Acts 1:15; 2:1-4). On the day of Pentecost the Jewish believers, the first part of the Body, were baptized.

3. On the Believers in Cornelius's House

After the Jewish believers had been baptized in the Holy Spirit for the formation of the church, the Gentile believers were baptized in the Spirit in the same way (Acts 10:24, 44-47a). The Holy Spirit fell upon those who heard the word in the house of Cornelius outwardly and economically. In the case of the house of Cornelius, the Holy Spirit’s entering into the believers essentially for life and falling upon them economically for power took place simultaneously when they believed in the Lord. However, only His falling upon them economically is noted in Acts 10:46, because it was outward and could be realized by others by their speaking in tongues and praising God, whereas His entering into them took place silently and invisibly. They received both aspects of the Holy Spirit directly from Christ the Head of the Body, without any mediatorial channel, before they were baptized in water by other members of the Body of Christ. This indicates emphatically that the Head of the Body baptized the Gentile believers into His Body directly. The Gentile believers in the house of Cornelius received the Holy Spirit economically, as the early apostles and the Jewish believers did on the day of Pentecost, directly from the ascended Head.

Peter's word in Acts 11 proves that what happened in the house of Cornelius was the second step in Christ's baptizing His Body in the Holy Spirit once for all. Peter said, "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as also on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, John indeed baptized in water, but you shall be baptized in the Holy Spirit" (vv. 15-16). Therefore, the record in Acts strongly indicates that only two cases—that of the Jewish believers on the day of Pentecost and that of the Gentile believers in the house of Cornelius—are considered the baptism in the Holy Spirit. In these two instances the Head Himself did something directly on His Body for the formation of the church. By these two steps the Head of the Body baptized all His believers once for all, both Jewish and Gentile, into His one Body. Hence, the baptism in the Spirit is an accomplished fact carried out by Christ in His ascension both on the day of Pentecost and in the house of Cornelius for the formation of the universal church, His Body.

MESSAGE ONE HUNDRED NINETY-SIX

THE CHURCH—
THE FORMATION OF THE CHURCH (2)

We have seen that the formation of the universal church took place on the day of Pentecost and in the house of Cornelius and that this formation was accomplished by Christ the Head through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In this message we shall cover some other matters related to the formation of the church.

E. With All the Believers as the Extrinsic Form

The formation of the church was with all the believers as the extrinsic form represented by the one hundred twenty believers at Jerusalem on the Jewish side (Acts 1:15; 2:1-4) and by the believers in Cornelius's house at Caesarea on the Gentile side (Acts 10:24,44-48a). Therefore, 1 Corinthians 12:13 says, "In one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and were all given to drink one Spirit." As the Spirit is the sphere and element of our spiritual baptism and in such a Spirit we were all baptized into one organic entity, the Body of Christ, so we should all, regardless of our races, nationalities, and social ranks, be this one Body. It is in this one Spirit that we were all baptized into this one living Body to express Christ. This is the formation of the church with all the believers as the extrinsic form.

F. With Christ as the Intrinsic Constituent

The church is formed not only with all the believers as the extrinsic form but also with Christ as the intrinsic constituent. This means that the church is formed with two kinds of materials: the believers as the outward material to be the extrinsic form of the Body and Christ Himself as the inward material to be the intrinsic constituent of the Body.

The church is not an organization, and it is not merely a group of believers in Christ who have been forgiven, cleansed, and made righteous and who regularly gather together. The church is the constitution of Christ. It is Christ

constituted into the very fiber of our being. The Christ constituted into us is the church. The church is the constitution of the resurrected Christ, who embodies the reality of the Triune God. Therefore, the church is a living constitution of the Triune God who has been wrought into our humanity. Yes, as believers, we are human beings, but in our humanity we have the constitution of Christ, for He has been wrought, constituted, into us. Hence, we are not merely human beings—we are also the church. We are the church because we have been immersed into the Triune God and have Christ constituted into our being.

Because Christ is the intrinsic constituent of the church, He is every member of the church as the new man. Speaking of the new man, Colossians 3:11 says, "Where there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, freeman, but Christ is all and in all." There is no natural person in the new man. There cannot be Greeks, who are for philosophical wisdom, and Jews, who are for miraculous signs (1 Cor. 1:22). There cannot be circumcision, those who observe Jewish religious rituals, and uncircumcision, those who do not care for Jewish religion. Furthermore, in the new man there cannot be barbarian, Scythian, slave, or freeman. A barbarian is an uncultured person, the Scythians were considered the most barbarous people, the slaves were those sold into slavery, and the freemen were those who had been freed from slavery. In the new man there is room only for Christ, not for any kind of natural person, because Christ replaces with Himself the natural life of every member of the church as the new man.

According to Colossians 3:10 and 11, in the new man Christ is all and in all. He is all the members of the new man, and He is in all the members. He is everything in the new man. He is every part of the new man, and He is in every part. Actually, He is the new man.

The word "all" in verse 11 refers to all the members who make up the new man. Christ is all the members, and He is in all the members. For this reason, in the church there is no room for any nationality. Because Christ is all and in all in the new man and we are parts of the new man, then we are parts of Christ. Each member, each part, of the new man is Christ. No doubt, the new man is the church, Christ's Body. Although many different kinds of people make up the church, all are parts of Christ.

In Colossians 3:11 Paul says not only that Christ is all but also that He is in all. On the one hand, Christ is all the members; on the other hand, He is in all the members. Therefore, we should not think that because Christ is all the members of the new man, we are not needed. Paul does say that in the new man there is no place for the natural person, because Christ is all the members. Nevertheless, Paul says that Christ is in the members. The fact that Christ is in the members of the new man indicates that the members still exist. When we take Christ as our life and live together with Him, we are one with Him and He is us. Simultaneously, Christ is in us. Hence, it is true to say that Christ is both in us and that He is us. We are parts of the new man with Christ in us. We continue to exist, but we do not exist without Christ; rather, we are indwelt by Christ. For this reason, in the new man Christ is both all the members and is in all the members.

Another verse which indicates that Christ is the intrinsic constituent of the church is 1 Corinthians 12:12. "For even as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of the body being many are one body, so also is Christ." In Greek Christ here is "the Christ," referring to the corporate Christ, composed of Christ Himself as the Head and the church as His Body with all the believers as its members. All the believers of Christ are organically united with Him and constituted of His life and element to become His Body, an organism, to express Him. Hence, He is not only the Head but also the Body. As our physical body has many members yet is one, so is this Christ.

The corporate Christ, the Body-Christ, includes not only Christ Himself but also all the believers, who are the members of Christ's Body, the members of Christ, parts of Christ. According to our natural constitution, we cannot be members of Christ's Body. Christ Himself is the constituent that makes us parts of Him. Therefore, in order to be parts of Christ as members of His Body, we must have Christ wrought into our being.

Intrinsically speaking, the church is altogether Christ Himself, for He is the constituent, the very being, of the church, whereas we are simply the extrinsic form of the church. As the intrinsic constituent of the church, Christ is not only the Head but also the Body and even every member of the Body and in every member.

1. As the Embodiment of the Processed Triune God,

with His Unsearchable Riches

The Christ who is the intrinsic constituent of the Body of Christ is the embodiment of the processed Triune God (Col. 2:9), with His unsearchable riches (Eph. 3:8). Colossians 2:9 says, "In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." According to biblical usage, the significance of the word "fullness" surpasses that of the word "riches." The fullness in 2:9 refers not to the riches of God but to the expression of the riches of God. What dwells in Christ is not only the riches of the Godhead but the expression of the riches of what God is.

"The fullness of the Godhead" refers to the entire Godhead, to the complete God, including the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Because the Godhead comprises the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, the fullness of the Godhead must be the fullness of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. As the embodiment of the fullness of the Godhead, Christ is not only the Son of God but also the entire God. The fact that all the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Christ bodily means that the Triune God is fully embodied in Him. Furthermore, the fact that all the fullness dwells in Christ bodily implies the physical body which Christ put on in His humanity. It indicates that all the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Christ as the One who has a human body. Before His incarnation, the fullness of the Godhead dwelt in Him as the eternal Word, but it did not dwell in Him bodily. After He became incarnate, clothed with a human body, the fullness of the Godhead began to dwell in a bodily way, and in His glorified body (Phil. 3:21) now and forever it dwells.

As the embodiment of the processed Triune God, Christ is the all-inclusive One with the unsearchable riches. In Ephesians 3:8 Paul says, "To me, less than the least of all saints, was this grace given, to preach to the nations the unsearchable riches of Christ as the gospel." Paul preached not the doctrines but the riches of Christ. The riches of Christ are what Christ is to us. As God, He is the Father, the Son, the Spirit, the Lord, the Christ. As man, He is the Apostle, the Shepherd, the Forerunner, the Captain of our salvation. There are countless aspects of the riches of Christ, for He is the reality of every positive thing in the universe. The riches of Christ also include both human virtues and divine attributes. Therefore, Christ is the real love, patience, and forgiveness.

We need to know and experience the unsearchable riches of Christ, which are for the producing of the church as His expression. This takes place

through the dispensing of Christ into the believers. The church is produced not by teaching nor by organizing but by the dispensing of Christ. The more Christ is dispensed into us, the more uplifted the church life becomes. The riches of Christ produce the church through our experience and enjoyment of Christ. On Christ's side it is a matter of dispensing; on our side it is a matter of experience and enjoyment. By absorbing the riches of Christ we become the Body of Christ as His fullness to express Him. Therefore, the Body of Christ is constituted of the riches of Christ that have been enjoyed and assimilated by us. The Body is the result, the issue, of the experience and enjoyment of the riches of Christ.

The unsearchable riches of Christ are actually the fullness of the Godhead. With the Godhead there is the fullness; with Christ the fullness becomes the unsearchable riches. How all-inclusive and extensive these riches are! The fullness of the Godhead has become the unsearchable riches of Christ to be dispensed into us for our experience and enjoyment.

a. To Be the Life of the Church

Christ, the embodiment of the processed Triune God, with His unsearchable riches, is the life of the church. Colossians 3:4 speaks of "Christ our life." Christ is not only our objective Savior; He is also our subjective life. The fact that Christ is our life indicates that we need to experience Christ in our daily living. Christ, not our self, our soul, should be our life.

Christ is God and also life (1 John 5:12). The life which is God, the life that God is, is in Christ (John 1:4). Hence, the Lord Jesus said that He is life (John 14:6; 11:25). Therefore, He who has Christ has life (1 John 5:12).

If Christ is not our life in our practical experience, then all that He is as the embodiment of the processed Triune God with His unsearchable riches will remain objective to us. Paul's use of the expression "our life" indicates that we and Christ have one life. Day by day we need to experience Christ as life, having one life and one living with Him.

For Christ to be our life, the life of the church, means that He is subjective to us to the uttermost. Nothing is more subjective to us than our life. Our life is actually we ourselves. It is impossible to separate a person from the life of that person, for a person's life is the person himself. If we did not have life, we would cease to exist. To say that Christ has become our life means that Christ has become us. Since our life cannot be separated from us and since Christ is

our life, He cannot be separated from us. Because our life is our self and because Christ is our life, we may say that, in this sense, Christ has become us. In a very subjective sense, Christ is the life of the church.

b. To Be the Nature of the Church

As the intrinsic constituent of the church, Christ is not only the life of the church but also the nature of the church. Second Peter 1:4 indicates that the believers, as members of the church, the Body of Christ, have become "partakers of the divine nature." The divine nature refers to the riches of what God is; it denotes the constituents of God's being. Whatever God is, is in His nature. To partake of God's nature is to enjoy it and to participate in it. Therefore, when we partake of the divine nature, we partake of the divine riches.

Because we, the believers in Christ, are children of God born of Him, we possess God's life and also His nature for our enjoyment. Although we definitely can never participate in the Godhead or become an object of worship, in life and in nature we, the children of God, are the same as God. In this sense, as those who have been born of God, we are divine. Having received the divine life at the time of our regeneration, we now must go on to enjoy what God is in His nature, continually partaking of the divine nature, which is the nature of the church.

2. Consummated as the All-inclusive Spirit

The Christ who is the embodiment of the processed Triune God is also the consummated, all-inclusive Spirit (Phil. 1:19). The Spirit of God in Genesis 1 was not yet consummated. Likewise, the Spirit of Jehovah in the Old Testament was not consummated. Not even the Holy Spirit, by whom Jesus was conceived and born, was the consummated Spirit. Concerning the consummated Spirit, John 7:39 says, "The Spirit was not yet, because Jesus was not yet glorified." The Spirit of God was there from the beginning (Gen. 1:1-2), but the Spirit as the Spirit of Jesus Christ was "not yet" in John 7:39 because at that time the Lord Jesus had not yet been glorified. The Lord was glorified when He was resurrected (Luke 24:26). After His resurrection, the Spirit of God became the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the Spirit of the incarnated, crucified, and resurrected Christ. This is the consummated Spirit, the all-inclusive Spirit, including the Lord's divinity, humanity, human living,

all-inclusive death, and resurrection. The Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, is, therefore, the consummated, all-inclusive Spirit.

a. To Be the Church's Bountiful Supply

The consummated, all-inclusive Spirit is the church's bountiful supply. In Philippians 1:19 Paul speaks of "the bountiful supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ." Literally, the Greek word translated "supply" here means the supplying of all the needs of the chorus by someone known as the choragus, the leader or director of the chorus. The Greek word Paul uses thus implies a bountiful supply. The choragus supplied all the needs of everyone in the chorus, the needs for food, clothing, lodging, and musical instruments. The supply of the choragus truly was bountiful, even all-inclusive. In using the expression "the bountiful supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ," Paul likens the supply of the Spirit to that of the choragus. Christ as the intrinsic constituent of the church has been consummated as the all-inclusive Spirit to be the church's bountiful supply.

b. In Life and Power

The all-inclusive Spirit is the church's bountiful supply in life and power. In Romans 8:2 Paul speaks of the Spirit as the Spirit of life. This life, of course, is the divine, eternal, uncreated life of God. The Spirit is the Spirit of such a life. The Spirit and life are one and cannot be separated. He is of life, and life is of Him. Life is His content, and He is the reality of life, even life itself. Life is of the Spirit and issues from the Spirit. The Spirit is the source, whereas life is the flow that comes from the Spirit. Because the Spirit is the Spirit of life, when we contact the Spirit, we contact life.

Acts 1:8a says, "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you." Here we see that the all-inclusive Spirit as the church's bountiful supply is also in power. To receive power is to be baptized in the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5). The Holy Spirit was breathed into the disciples on the day of Christ's resurrection (John 20:22) to be the Spirit of life to them essentially. The same Holy Spirit came upon the disciples on the day of Pentecost to be the Spirit of power to them economically. On the day of Pentecost the ascended Christ poured Himself upon His disciples to empower them. Therefore, on the day of Pentecost the disciples had both the Spirit of life within them and the Spirit of power upon them. Within and without, they were permeated, saturated, and filled with the Spirit.

The formation of the church is actually a mingling of humanity with the consummated Spirit. This is illustrated by the type of the meal offering. The main aspect of the meal offering was an oiled cake, a cake made of wheat flour mingled with oil. Oil was also poured upon the cake. We may say that the oil mingled with the flour was essential oil and that the oil poured upon the cake was economical oil. Eventually, the cake of flour, with oil mingled with it and poured upon it, became a loaf, and that loaf is a type of the church. "We who are many are one bread, one Body; for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor. 10:17). This is the formation of the church through the believers being mingled with the Spirit. Inwardly, we have the essential Spirit intrinsically, and outwardly we have the economical Spirit. In this way we are the church.

We have seen that the church is formed by the mingling of human beings with the consummated, all-inclusive Spirit. As members of the church, the Body, we have the Spirit of life within us as the essence for our spiritual existence, and we have the Spirit of power upon us as power for carrying out God's economy. For our spiritual existence, the Spirit is the essential Spirit; for the carrying out of God's economy. He is the economical Spirit. On the day of His resurrection, the Lord Jesus breathed the essential Spirit into the disciples. This caused them to be qualified to be mingled with the Spirit for the formation of the Body of Christ.

In forming the church, Christ was both the Breather and the Baptizer. After His death and resurrection, He became the Breather. As such, He breathed the essential Spirit into His disciples for their essence, life, being, and existence. After He ascended to the heavens, He became the Baptizer. On the day of Pentecost He, the Baptizer, baptized the disciples in the economical Spirit.

As the Breather, the Lord Himself was the breath breathed into His believers. This means that He was the essential Spirit entering into them to be their essence, life, being, and existence. As the Baptizer, He was also the Spirit in which He baptized His members into the one Body.

The essential Spirit was the base, just as the oil mingled with the fine flour was the base for the meal offering. Then upon this base, the mingled cake, the oil, signifying the economical Spirit, was poured. From this we see that the formation of the church first required the base: the essential Spirit entering into the believers to produce the wonderful mingling of humanity with divinity. Then upon this base Christ poured the economical Spirit typified by

the oil poured upon the cake of the meal offering. The result of the breathing of the essential Spirit into the believers and the pouring out of the economical Spirit upon them was the formation of the universal church as the Body of Christ, the fullness of the One who fills all in all.

We all need to see that the formation of the church as the Body is altogether a matter of the consummated, all-inclusive Spirit mingled with and poured out upon the believers. This is the church, the totality, the aggregate, of the processed Triune God mingled with chosen, redeemed, regenerated, and transformed humanity. Eventually, such a church will consummate in the New Jerusalem.

MESSAGE ONE HUNDRED NINETY-SEVEN

THE CHURCH—THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CHURCHES (1)

In the two foregoing messages we covered the formation of the church. In this message we shall begin to consider the establishment of the churches.

IV. THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CHURCHES

There is an important difference between the formation of the universal church and the establishment of the churches. The universal church is not established; rather, it is formed with two categories of elements: all the believers as the extrinsic element and the all-inclusive Christ, the embodiment of the processed Triune God consummated as the all-inclusive, compound Spirit as the intrinsic element. Instead of being established, the universal church is formed by these two categories of elements.

A. Being Local

The local churches are established, not formed. Establishment is different from formation. We should not say that we are going to a certain place to form a local church there. On the contrary, we go to a certain city not to form a local church but to establish a local church. The church as a whole was altogether formed more than nineteen hundred years ago on the day of Pentecost and in the house of Cornelius. This means that, in the eyes of God, the universal church, the Body of Christ, has been formed. This is an accomplished fact. Now, after the formation of this universal church as a complete entity, there is the need for the spreading of the church. The way to spread the church is to bring it to a certain locality and plant it. This planting is the establishment of a local church.

Just as we can plant a tree but not form a tree, so we can establish a church but not form the church, A carpenter can form a stand, but he cannot form a tree. Not even the best scientist with a doctoral degree in botany can form a tree. Only God can form a tree. In like manner, only Christ could form the church. The Apostle Paul could plant a local church and Apollos could water it,

but it was God alone who formed it and gave it life, and it is God who gives it growth (1 Cor. 3:6-7).

The entire church as the Body of Christ, including all the Jewish and Gentile believers, has been formed once for all universally. This is an accomplished fact. What we are doing today is simply establishing churches in different localities by planting "church trees." This planting of church trees is the establishing of the churches.

No one is able to go to a place to form a local church. Assuming to do such a thing would be abominable in the sight of God, for it is presuming to do something that only God Himself can do. But although we cannot form the church, we have the position, the right, the opportunity, and even the commission to go to the uttermost parts of the earth to establish local churches.

The Lord has formed the church. Our burden is to bring the church as a tree to every city, town, and village and plant a church there. We all need to be faithful to carry out the burden to establish local churches by planting church trees. We should be burdened not just for the saving of sinners but for the establishing of churches. The married couples should be like Prisca and Aquilla who planted a church tree wherever they went. If we all have the desire to establish churches by planting church trees, the establishing of the churches will be very fast and prevailing.

B. Beginning from the Day of Pentecost

In this message and in the message following, we shall give a history of the planting of local churches recorded in the New Testament. According to this record, the planting of the churches began in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost and went as far as Rome. Although Paul wanted to go to Spain, he was not able to do so. Therefore, during New Testament times, the planting of the churches went only as far as Italy.

C. Starting from Jerusalem

The establishment of the churches began from the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1), and it started from the city of Jerusalem (Acts 2:5).

1. The First Local Church—the Church in Jerusalem

The first local church was the church in Jerusalem. The first mention of the church in Acts is in 5:11. “Great fear came upon the whole church.” This was the church in Jerusalem. The Greek word translated “church” here is ekklesia, composed of ek, out, and a derivative of kaleo, called; hence the called out congregation, the assembly. It is the first time that the church is mentioned here in Acts as a local church.

Acts 8:1 clearly speaks of “the church in Jerusalem.” This was the first church established in a locality within the jurisdiction of a city, the city of Jerusalem. It was a local church in its locality, as indicated by the Lord in Matthew 18:17. It was not the universal church, as revealed by the Lord in Matthew 16:18 but only a part of the universal church, which is the Body of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23). The record of the New Testament concerning the matter of the establishment of the church in its locality is consistent throughout (Acts 13:1; 14:23; Rom. 16:1; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 8:1; Gal. 1:2; Rev. 1:4, 11).

Two other verses in Acts that refer to the church in Jerusalem are 11:22 and 15:4. Acts 11:22 says, “The account concerning them was heard in the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem.” It is significant that this verse speaks not of the ears of the believers but of the ears of the church. This indicates that the believers considered that their ears were the ears of the church. They did not care so much for themselves as individual believers but for the church as a corporate body. Whatever they heard they considered that it was for the church, because they looked upon their ears as the ears of the church.

Acts 15:4 tells us that Paul and Barnabas, who had been sent forward by the church in Antioch, were received by the church in Jerusalem. They did not act individualistically apart from the church but corporately in the church and with the church. This was the move of the Body of Christ.

2. Composed of:

a. The Elders

The church in Jerusalem was composed of the elders, the serving ones, and the believers. Acts 11:30 speaks of a gift sent “to the elders through the hand of Barnabas and Saul.” This indicates that in the early days the finances of the church were under the management of the elders.

An elder is an overseer (1 Tim. 3:1). The two titles refer to the same person: elder, denoting a person of maturity; overseer, denoting the function of an elder.

b. The Serving Ones

Acts 6:3-6 speaks of seven serving ones in the church in Jerusalem. Acts 6:3 says, "Now brothers, select seven well-attested men from among you, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we shall appoint over this need." "Full of the Spirit" is one's condition after being filled with the Spirit inwardly and essentially. This refers to life, not to work. The word "wisdom" here also indicates that in this verse to be full of the Spirit is for life.

The word of the apostles in 6:2-4 pleased the multitude and "they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte of Antioch, whom they set before the apostles; and having prayed, they laid their hands on them." Since these seven were chosen to serve tables, they may be considered deacons, just as those whom Paul and his co-workers appointed later in the churches (Rom. 16:1; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8).

It is significant that in the appointment of the seven serving ones no leader was appointed. This indicates that no rank or position was regarded. All the serving ones are the servants to the saints. This is a good pattern for us to learn and follow that we may avoid leadership in rank and position in any form.

c. The Believers

Two verses that speak of the believers who composed the church in Jerusalem are Acts 2:44 and 5:14. Acts 2:44 says, "All those who believed were together and had all things common," and 5:14 says, "Believers were all the more being added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and of women." The designation "believers" denotes those who have believed in Christ as the Son of God according to God's New Testament economy. This designation, of course, indicates the matter of believing. Anyone who does not have faith in Christ, who does not believe in Christ, is certainly not a believer.

The believers are also those who have received Christ as their generating life for them to become the children of God. Believing in Christ equals

receiving Him (John 1:12-13). When we believe in Christ, we receive Him. We receive Him by believing in Him.

Furthermore, the believers are those who have believed into Christ as the Son of God to have an organic union with Him. John 3:36 says, "He who believes in the Son has eternal life." Literally translated, the phrase "believes in" should be "believes into." When we believe in the Lord Jesus as the Son of God, we believe into Him. By believing in Him, we enter into Him to be one with Him organically, to partake of Him, and to participate in all that He has accomplished for us. By believing into Him we are identified with Him in all that He is and in all that He has passed through, accomplished, attained, and obtained. The church is composed of such believers.

D. Spreading to Judea, Samaria, and Galilee

The establishing of the churches spread quickly from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. Acts 9:31 says, "So the church throughout the whole of Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it was multiplied." This verse speaks of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria, all of which were provinces in the Roman Empire. Judea was in the southern part of the Jewish land, Galilee was in the north, and Samaria was between the south and the north. There were churches in all three of these provinces. Since at this time the church had spread only to the provinces of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria, and the word "whole" in 9:31 covers all the places where the church existed, the "church" in singular is used in the universal sense. The church here is spoken of in the universal sense although there must have been a number of churches in the various cities of these three provinces, which may be called churches in the local sense.

According to verse 31, the church throughout the whole of Judea, Samaria, and Galilee had peace. The church had peace inwardly although there was persecution outwardly. Furthermore, having peace in the midst of persecution, the church was being built up. The building up proceeded after the establishment of the church.

We are also told that the church in these provinces was going on in the fear of the Lord. Although there were persecutions, the church was not in the fear of men. Rather, the church went on in the fear of the Lord lest the church

offend the Lord by being subdued by persecution, or lest she offend the Lord in other things.

According to 9:31, the church was going on also in the comfort of the Holy Spirit. This indicates that the church was suffering affliction through the persecutions, in which she feared the Lord and enjoyed the comfort of the Holy Spirit.

The Jews considered Galilee a despised region and Samaria a region full of mixture. Nevertheless, 9:31 speaks of the church throughout the whole of Judea and Galilee and Samaria. This indicates that no matter how much Galilee was despised and Samaria was rejected by the Jews in Jerusalem, the churches raised up in those regions were all considered one church. In the local sense, they were the churches, but in the universal sense, all these churches are the church. Here we have a basic revelation concerning the oneness of the church universally.

E. Reaching Antioch in Syria

Acts 11:19-26 records the spread of the gospel to Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch through the scattered disciples. Verse 26 refers to the church in Antioch. When Barnabas found Saul, "he brought him to Antioch. And it came about that for a whole year they were gathered in the church and taught a considerable number."

1. The Church in Antioch

Acts 13:1 opens with the words, "Now there were in Antioch, in the church that was there." This clearly refers to the local church established in Antioch.

Acts 14:26 and 27 say that Paul and Barnabas "sailed away to Antioch, from which they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had fulfilled. And having arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them." Verse 27 does not say that they gathered the believers but that they gathered the church. This indicates that the church in its essential meaning is a meeting, a congregation or assembly. There was such a church, such a congregation, in Antioch.

2. Including Prophets and Teachers

Acts 13:1 tells us that in the church in Antioch there were "prophets and teachers: Barnabas and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius the

Cyrenian, and Manaen, foster brother of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul." Prophets are those who speak for God and speak forth God by God's revelation. They sometimes speak with inspired prediction (11:27-28). Teachers are those who teach the truths according to the apostles' teaching (2:42) and the prophets' revelation. Both prophets and teachers are universal as well as local (Eph. 4:11).

When the establishment of the local churches started with the one hundred twenty in Jerusalem, only typical Jews were involved. But according to the record in Acts 13:1, the prophets and teachers in the church in Antioch were from a number of different sources. Barnabas was a Levite, a Cyprian by birth (4:36). Niger, whose name means black and should denote a Negro, was probably of African origin. Lucius the Cyrenian was from Cyrene in North Africa. Manaen was the foster brother of Herod and was governmentally related to the Romans. Finally, there was Saul, a Jew born in Tarsus and taught by Gamaliel according to the law of Moses (22:3). The fact that the prophets and teachers here were composed of Jewish and Gentile peoples with different backgrounds, education, and status indicates that the church is composed of all races and classes of people regardless of their background, and that the spiritual gifts and functions given to the members of the Body of Christ are not based upon their natural status.

In 13:1 the Lord set up a pattern for the spreading of the churches. From Antioch the Lord's move turned to reach the Gentile world, and in the Gentile world there were many different kinds of people, people of different cultures, races, and statuses. Therefore, at the very beginning of this turn, the pattern was established to indicate that the churches are composed of all races and classes of people.

F. Spreading in the Provinces of Syria and Cilicia

1. Churches Established

The establishment of the churches spread to the provinces of Syria and Cilicia. In these two provinces of the Roman Empire churches were established. This is recorded in Acts 15:40 and 41. "Paul, having chosen Silas, went out, being commended to the grace of the Lord by the brothers. And he passed through Syria and Cilicia, establishing the churches."

2. Strengthened by the Apostles Paul and Silas

After the churches were established in Syria and Cilicia, Paul and Silas were sent by the apostles from Jerusalem to strengthen them. Such a strengthening implies a confirmation, recognition, by the apostles.

MESSAGE ONE HUNDRED NINETY-EIGHT

THE CHURCH—THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CHURCHES (2)

In this message we shall continue to consider the establishment of the churches.

G. Turning to Asia Minor

1. Churches Established in the Cities of Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch in the Province of Galatia—the Churches in Galatia

Acts 14:21-23 refers to the churches established in the cities of Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch. After Paul and Barnabas brought the good news to the city of Derbe and made a considerable number of disciples (vv. 20-21a), "they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch" (v. 21b). This is not the Antioch from which they were sent out on this journey of ministry (13:1); rather, it is the Antioch in Pisidia, the Antioch in Asia Minor.

The churches in these cities were "the churches of Galatia" (Gal. 1:2), a province of the ancient Roman Empire. Through Paul's preaching ministry churches were established in a number of cities in that province. Hence, "churches," not "church," is used when Paul refers to them.

2. Elders Appointed in Every One of These Churches

Elders were appointed in every one of the churches in Galatia. Acts 14:23 says, "When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fastings, they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed." The Greek words rendered "in every church" contain the preposition kata with the distributive usage—according to church. The phrase "in every church" in 14:23 equals "in each city" in Titus 1:5. The comparison of these phrases indicates not only that the jurisdiction of a local church is that of the city in which it is located, but also that in one city there should be only one church. The eldership of a local church should cover the entire city where

that church is. Such a unique eldership in a city preserves the unique oneness of the Body of Christ from damage. One city should only have one church with one eldership. This practice is illustrated, beyond any question and doubt, by the clear pattern in the New Testament (Acts 8:1; 13:1; Rom. 16:1; 1 Cor. 1:2; Rev. 1:11), and it is an absolute prerequisite for the maintenance of proper order in a local church.

All the churches in which the elders were appointed respectively by the apostles in Acts 14:23 were established within less than one year. Hence, the elders appointed in these churches could not have been well matured. They must have been considered elders because they were comparatively the most matured among the believers. They were not voted in by their congregation; they were appointed by the apostles according to their maturity in Christ. They were charged by the apostles to care for the leadership and shepherding in the churches.

H. Spreading to the Province of Asia in Asia Minor

1. Churches Established in the Cities of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea

Revelation 1:4 speaks of "the seven churches which are in Asia," and verse 11 says, "What you see write in a book and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, and to Smyrna, and to Pergamos, and to Thyatira, and to Sardis, and to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea." Asia was a province of the ancient Roman Empire in which were the seven cities mentioned in verse 11. The seven churches were in those seven cities respectively, not all in one city.

2. Elders as Overseers Appointed in These Churches by the Spirit

Elders as overseers were appointed in these churches by the Spirit (Acts 20:17, 28). To the elders of the church in Ephesus Paul said, "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among whom the Holy Spirit has placed you as overseers" (Acts 20:28a). It was the apostles who appointed the elders in every church. But here Paul, the leading one who did the appointing, says that the Holy Spirit did it. This indicates that the Holy Spirit was one with the

apostles in their appointing the elders and that the apostles had done this according to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

From Paul's word concerning the Holy Spirit placing overseers among the flock we see that the establishing of the churches is altogether due to the Holy Spirit, not due to the apostles. Although the apostles had appointed the elders, here Paul says that this was the work of the Holy Spirit. This reveals that a local church comes into existence only through the work of the Holy Spirit. In other words, the work of the apostles concerning the churches should be absolutely the work of the Holy Spirit. Because the Holy Spirit establishes the elders, it is the Holy Spirit who establishes the churches.

The overseers in Acts 20:28 are the elders in verse 17. This proves that overseers and elders are synonymous terms denoting the same persons. To make an overseer a bishop of a district to rule over the elders of various localities in that district is grossly erroneous. This is what Ignatius taught. His erroneous teaching gave the ground to rank and brought in hierarchy.

The Greek word for "overseer" is episkopos, from epi, meaning over, and skopos, meaning seer; hence, overseer (bishop, from Latin episcopus). An overseer (1 Tim. 3:2) in a local church is an elder. The two titles refer to the same person: elder, denoting a person of maturity; overseer, denoting the function of an elder. It was Ignatius in the second century who taught that an overseer, a bishop, is higher than an elder. From this erroneous teaching came the hierarchy of bishops, archbishops, cardinals, and the pope. This teaching is also the source of the Episcopal system of ecclesiastical government. Both the hierarchy and the system are abominable in the sight of God.

I. Reaching Europe—Churches Raised Up in the Province of Macedonia

The spreading of the churches continued and eventually reached Europe. Churches were raised up in the province of Macedonia, and in 2 Corinthians 8:1 Paul speaks of "the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia." Macedonia is a province of the Roman Empire in southeastern Europe between Thrace and Achaia on the Aegean Sea.

1. The Church in Philippi, Comprising the Saints with the Overseers and Deacons

A church was established in Philippi, comprising the saints with the overseers and deacons. In Philippians 1:1 Paul says, “Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the overseers and deacons.” This verse indicates that the church in Philippi was established in good order. Notice that Paul speaks of the “saints...with the overseers and deacons.” This is the only place in the New Testament where such an expression is found. It is significant that Paul speaks of the saints with the overseers and deacons. In every local church the unique group consists of the saints. The saints are the components of a local church. Among the saints there are leading ones, which the New Testament describes as elders or overseers. Both titles refer to the same people. When an elder is carrying out his responsibility in the church, he is functioning as an overseer.

In 1:1 Paul also mentions the deacons. Deacons are the serving ones in a local church under the direction of the overseers (1 Tim. 3:8). The English word “deacons” is an anglicized form of the Greek word diakonos, which means a serving one.

It is contrary to the Scriptures to have different classes of believers in a locality. The New Testament reveals that in a local church there is a unique group, and this group is composed of all the saints. For this reason, Paul did not say to all the saints “and the overseers and deacons”; he said all the saints “with the overseers and deacons.” The Greek preposition rendered “with” actually means together with. If Paul had used the conjunction “and” instead of the preposition “with,” this would indicate that in a local church there should be three groups of people—the saints, the elders, and the deacons. But his use of “with” here indicates that there are not three such groups in the church. Paul’s use of the preposition instead of the conjunction indicates that in any locality there should be just one church, which must include all the saints in that locality.

2. The Church in Thessalonica

Thessalonica, like Philippi, was a city of the Roman Empire in the province of Macedonia, north of the province of Achaia. After the Macedonian call, which Paul received on his second journey of ministry, he and his co-worker Silvanus visited first Philippi and then Thessalonica (Acts 16:9-12; 17:1-4). The apostle stayed and worked there for only a short time, probably less than one month (Acts 17:2).

First Thessalonians 1:1 says, “Paul and Silvanus and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Both 1 and 2 Thessalonians were addressed to the local church in Thessalonica, composed of all the believers in Christ in that city. Such a local church is of the believers and is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. This indicates that such a local church is born of God the Father with His life and nature and is united with the Lord Jesus Christ organically in all He is and has done. Hence, it is of men (such as the Thessalonians), yet in God and in the Lord organically.

The emphasis on the organic union with Christ is an outstanding feature of Paul’s writings. Although 1:1 is written in a simple way, it nevertheless includes Paul’s characteristic reference to the organic union. In this verse Paul speaks of the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. The preposition “in” here is very important, for it indicates that the church is in the Triune God. The church is composed of human beings, but they, the believers, are in the Triune God. On the one hand, the church in Thessalonica was of the Thessalonians; on the other hand, this church was in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

In 1:1 Paul does not merely say that the church is in God; he says that the church is in God the Father. Unless God is our Father, we cannot be in Him. We were not created in God, but we were regenerated, born again, in Him. This means that in creation we did not have any organic union with God or any life relationship with Him. Instead, there was only the relationship between the creature and the Creator. As God’s creatures, we did not have the life of God. However, when we were born of God, our life relationship with God began. This brought us into the organic union with the Triune God. Now God is not merely our Creator—He is our Father, the One who has begotten us.

Paul says not only that the church is in God the Father but also in the Lord Jesus Christ. “The Lord Jesus Christ” first implies that Jesus Christ is our Lord; second, that He is our Savior; and third, that Christ, God’s anointed One, is bringing us into the riches of God and accomplishing everything with us for God.

When Paul says that the church is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, he indicates that we have been born of God and have been brought into the organic union with Christ. The church, therefore, is a group of human

beings who have been born of God and who have been brought into the organic union with Christ.

J. Spreading to the Province of Achaia, next to Macedonia—Churches Raised Up in:

1. Corinth—the Church in Corinth

The planting of the churches also spread to the province of Achaia. Achaia was south of Macedonia and was a province of the Roman Empire, a great part of today's Greece, in which is the city of Corinth.

In 1 Corinthians 1:2 and 2 Corinthians 1:1 Paul addresses "the church of God which is in Corinth." The expression "the church of God" is marvelous. It indicates that the church in Corinth was not the church of Cephas, of Apollos, of Paul, nor of any practice or doctrine, but of God. The church was constituted of the universal God, but it existed in Corinth, a definite locality on earth. In nature the church is universal in God, but in practice the church is local in a definite place.

2. Cenchrea—the Church in Cenchrea, with a Deaconess

Another church in the province of Achaia was the church in Cenchrea. In Romans 16:1 Paul says, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a deaconess of the church which is at Cenchrea." Phoebe was a deaconess, that is, a serving one. Paul held her in such high esteem that in the following verse he said that "she has been a patroness of many and of myself as well." The word "patroness" in Greek is a word of dignity, denoting one who helps, sustains, and supplies. Phoebe was a sister who served others at any price and at any cost. If we mean business with the Lord in the church life, we also need to serve the church and care for it regardless of the cost. The first requirement for the practice of the church life is that we serve the church.

K. Spreading to Italy

1. The Church Raised Up in Rome—the Church in Rome

Eventually, the establishing of the churches spread to Italy, and a church was raised up in Rome—the church in Rome. The fact that there was a church in Rome is indicated by Paul's words in Romans 1:7: "To all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called saints."

2. Meeting in the House of Prisca and Aquila

The church in Rome met in the house of Prisca and Aquila. In Romans 16:3-5a Paul says, "Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the nations; and greet the church in their house." The church in their house was the church in Rome. There were not two churches in Rome, one called the church in Rome and another which met in the house of Aquila and Prisca. The church in Rome simply met in the house of this couple, so there was a church in their house.

On the one hand, this couple was for all the churches; on the other hand, they were for their local church in particular. When they were living in Ephesus (Acts 18:18-19), the church in Ephesus was in their house (1 Cor. 16:19). When they were in Rome, the church in Rome met in their house. Therefore, the church in Rome could be called the church in their house.

MESSAGE ONE HUNDRED NINETY-NINE

THE CHURCH—THE TWO ASPECTS OF THE CHURCH (1)

This message and the message following may be considered a review and conclusion of the ten previous messages on the church. We have seen that the church is the hidden mystery in God's eternal economy. The church, the mystery of Christ, was first revealed by the Lord Jesus in the Gospels to the first group of the apostles. He did not reveal the church to them in a deeper and more profound way. Rather, He revealed the church to those apostles mainly in an outward way. After His resurrection and ascension, He breathed Himself into His believers as the life-giving Spirit and also baptized them in the economical Spirit. As a result, they were qualified to understand, in their spirit, the things concerning the church in a more intrinsic way. The Apostle Paul, in particular, received the deeper and more profound revelations concerning the church, the Body of Christ. In the foregoing messages we have also covered the formation of the church and the establishment of the churches. In this message we shall begin to see the two aspects of the church.

V. THE TWO ASPECTS OF THE CHURCH

The church has two aspects: the universal aspect and the local aspect.

A. The Universal Aspect

In the universal aspect the church is uniquely one. At the end of Ephesians 1 Paul says that the church is the Body of Christ, the fullness of the One who fills all in all. This is the church in its universal aspect, for Christ has only one Body, which is unique in the universe.

1. The Universal Church

The universal church is the house of the living God, the Body of Christ, the bride that matches Christ as the Bridegroom, and the new man.

2. As Revealed by the Lord in Matthew 16:18

In Matthew 16:18 we have the Lord's first mentioning of the church. In this verse He says, "On this rock I will build My church." What is revealed here is the universal church for the unique testimony of the Lord in the universe.

a. To Be Built by Christ, the Son of the Living God Revealed by the Father

The universal church is to be built by Christ, the Son of the living God revealed by the Father. When Peter declared that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, the Lord said to Him, "You are blessed, Simon Bar-jona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in the heavens" (Matt. 16:17). Only the Father knows the Son (Matt. 11:27) and can reveal the Son to us. The Son revealed by the Father is now building the universal church, not the church in a nation or the church in a city.

In Matthew 16 the Father first revealed Christ to Peter. Then, with this revelation as the basis, the Lord went on to reveal the universal church to Peter and the other apostles. The Lord said clearly that He Himself as the Christ, the Son of the living God, will build the church.

b. On the Rock of the Revelation concerning Christ, the Son of the Living God

In Matthew 16:18 the Lord Jesus said that He will build His church upon "this rock." These words refer not only to Christ Himself but also to the revelation of Christ. The church is built on this revelation concerning Christ.

We all need to see that the building up of the universal church is altogether on the clear revelation concerning Christ, the Son of the living God. This revelation is the crucial factor, the very center, of the building up of the universal church. The universal church is not built up according to any doctrine, creed, or so-called belief. On the contrary, the universal church is built according to the revelation of Christ, the Son of the living God.

Christ is unique; He is wonderful, excellent, and all-surpassing. He is the complete God and also a perfect man. He created the earth yet He lived on earth as a man, living in Nazareth as a carpenter. Eventually, at the age of thirty, He came forth to manifest God by what He was, by what He did, and by what He spoke. This means that His person, His deeds, and His words expressed God to the uttermost.

The Lord Jesus expressed God not in the Godhead but in the fatherhood, for He made the name "Father" known to His disciples. In order for God to fulfill His intention of working Himself into His chosen people, it was necessary for Him to be the begetting Father. By begetting us with Himself He becomes our Father, and we become His children.

The main thing the Lord Jesus did while He was on earth was to express the Father and make the Father's name known to His disciples. Before that time the Israelites knew God as the Father only in a general way as their source. They did not know Him in the sense of His begetting but only in the sense of His being their origin through creation. Adam was not begotten by God but was only created by Him. Therefore, God was his origin, and in this sense God was his Father. Actually, God was not Adam's Father. Today, we who believe in Christ are genuine, begotten sons of God, and God is our genuine, begetting Father. As a result, we know God today in the fatherhood, for we know God in the name of the Father. This was the reason that the Lord, on the morning of His resurrection, told Mary to say to His disciples that He was ascending to His Father and their Father (John 20:17). He also for the first time referred to His disciples as His brothers. Our being children of God and brothers of Christ is altogether due to the Lord's wonderful person and to His expressing God in the name of the Father.

After living a life of expressing God in the name of the Father, the Lord Jesus entered into death, carrying out an all-inclusive death. He was crucified with a sevenfold status: as the Lamb of God to deal with the totality of sin (John 1:29); as a man in the flesh (John 1:14), in the likeness of the flesh of sin (Rom. 8:3); as the last Adam (1 Cor. 15:45b), a man in the old creation; as the brass serpent (John 3:14), having the serpent's form but not the poison; as the Firstborn of all creation (Col. 1:15) to terminate the entire old creation; as the Peacemaker, the One who makes peace (Eph. 2:14-16); and as a grain of wheat, falling into the ground to release the divine life (John 12:24). Because the Lord died in this sevenfold status, He took away all the negative things and released the divine life so that we, His believers, could be regenerated and begotten to become the children of God.

After His resurrection He ascended to the heavens. In one sense, He ascended by Himself. In another sense, He was uplifted to the heavens by the great power of God that was wrought in Him to raise Him from among the dead, to seat Him in the heavens, to subject all things under His feet, and to give Him to be the Head over all things to the church for the producing of the

Body of Christ (Eph. 1:19-23). What a wonderful person Christ is! The church is built upon the revelation of this wonderful person.

The universal church has been formed out of the all-inclusive person of Christ. He is the factor, the element, the constituent, for the formation of the universal church. The church, therefore, was not formed out of nothing but was formed out of something wonderful. This is typified by the formation of Eve out of Adam. Adam was the factor, the element, the constituent, for the bringing forth of Eve. In like manner, in contrast to creation, which was out of nothing, the church has come into existence through the wonderful person of Christ, the embodiment of the processed Triune God and a unique, perfect man. The universal church, the Body of Christ, is built on the rock of the revelation concerning the wonderful, excellent, all-inclusive person of Christ, the Son of the living God.

c. The Gates of Hades (Satan's Power of Darkness) Not Prevailing against It

In Matthew 16:18 the Lord Jesus also says that "the gates of Hades shall not prevail against" His church. The gates of Hades refers to Satan's power of darkness. Satan's power of darkness will attack the church but will not prevail against it. God's enemy is nothing compared to the church built up by Christ.

d. Related to the Kingdom of the Heavens

In Matthew 16:19 the Lord Jesus says, "I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of the heavens, and whatever you bind on the earth shall be what has been bound in the heavens, and whatever you loose on the earth shall be what has been loosed in the heavens." Here "the kingdom of the heavens" is interchangeably used for "church" in the previous verse. This indicates that the universal church is related to the kingdom of the heavens. Where the church is, there is the reality of the kingdom of the heavens. Today, in actuality and in practicality, the kingdom of the heavens is with the church and in the church.

3. As Revealed by the Apostle in the Epistles

The universal church is also revealed by the Apostle Paul in his fourteen Epistles. These Epistles may be divided into two groups of seven. The first

group, including the Epistles from Romans through Colossians, concerns the Body of Christ and our Christian life. The second group, from 1 Thessalonians through Hebrews, may be regarded as a supplement to what is covered in the first group. Four of the Epistles in the first group speak of the Body of Christ: Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, and Colossians. The other three Epistles in this group—2 Corinthians, Galatians, and Philippians—speak only of our experience of Christ in our daily life and thus are concerned with our Christian life. Because Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, and Colossians touch the Body of Christ, these Epistles are deep and profound.

a. The House of the Living God, the Pillar and Base of the Truth, for His Manifestation in the Flesh

The universal church is the house of the living God, the pillar and base of the truth, for His manifestation in the flesh (1 Tim. 3:15-16). First Timothy 3:15 tells us that the church is the house of God. In the Old Testament both the tabernacle and the temple were called the house of God (Judg. 18:31; 1 Kings 6:1), which was a type of the church. The word "house" both in the original language and in English has two meanings. On the one hand, it refers to the household; on the other hand, it refers to the dwelling place. Hence, the church as the house of God indicates that the church, on the one hand, is the household, the family, of God, and, on the other hand, is the dwelling place of God.

The church is the composition of the believers, and the believers are the children of God, who are born of God and have His life and nature. Hence, they become members of the household of God (Eph. 2:19), the family of God. The members of God's family added together become the house of God, which is the dwelling place of God (Eph. 2:22), the place where God can have His rest and put His trust. In this dwelling place God lives and moves to accomplish His will and satisfy His heart's desire.

A house is also the best place for one to express himself. If you look at a person's house, you will be able to tell what kind of person he is because a person's house is his expression. The principle is the same with the church as the house of God. The church as the house of God is the place where God expresses Himself on earth.

The church as God's house is "the pillar and base of the truth." The pillar supports the building, and the base holds the pillar. The church is such a supporting pillar and holding base of the truth. In this verse "truth" refers to the real things which are revealed in the New Testament concerning Christ and the church according to God's New Testament economy.

First Timothy 3:16 shows us that the church as God's house, the pillar and base of the truth, is God's manifestation in the flesh. God not only desires to make home in the church and have a resting place there, but He also wants to express Himself in the church. He wants to practice His New Testament economy, speak forth His desire, and manifest His glory in the church. All that He is, all that He is doing, and all that He wants to obtain are to be manifested in the church as His house.

The church is the house of the living God, the pillar and base of the truth, for His manifestation in the flesh, that is, His manifestation in regenerated, transformed, and built-up humanity.

b. The Body of Christ, the Fullness of the One Who Fills All in All, for His Expression

The universal church is the Body of Christ. Ephesians 1:22 and 23 reveal that the church as the Body is "the fullness of the One who fills all in all." The Body of Christ is His fullness, that is, His full expression. The Body is the fullness of the Head, and the fullness is the expression of the Head. Christ, who is the infinite God without any limitation, is so great that He fills all things in all things. Such a great Christ needs the church to be His fullness for His complete expression.

(1) Constituted of All the Believers Baptized in One Spirit and Given to Drink One Spirit

First Corinthians 12:12 and 13 say, "Even as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of the body being many are one body, so also is Christ; for also in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and were all given to drink one Spirit." These verses reveal that the church as the Body of Christ is constituted of all the believers baptized in one Spirit and given to drink one Spirit. First, Christ breathed the Spirit into the disciples and then baptized them in the Spirit.

Now all the believers, as constituents of the Body, have been given to drink one Spirit.

Christ is the Breather of the Spirit, the Baptizer in the Spirit, and the Giver of the Spirit as our constant drink. According to the biblical principle, our spiritual food is in this drink, in this water. In Revelation 22 we see that the tree of life grows in the river. Therefore, when we drink of the river of water of life we receive not only the water but also the nourishment from the tree of life.

As the Breather, Christ breathed Himself as the essential Spirit into us to be the essence of our spiritual being and existence. Then, with this as the basis, He baptized us all into one Body. Now He continually gives the Spirit. "He gives the Spirit not by measure" (John 3:34).

(2) Constituted with the Unsearchable Riches of Christ

The church as the Body of Christ is constituted with the unsearchable riches of Christ (Eph. 3:8, 10). All the riches of Christ are for the producing of the church. This takes place through the dispensing of these riches into the believers. The experience of the riches of Christ results in the fullness of Christ, the Body, as Christ's expression. Therefore, the Body of Christ is constituted of the riches of Christ. As the riches of Christ are experienced and enjoyed by us, they become the fullness of Christ, the Body, for His expression.

Christ is the fullness of God, and the church is the fullness of Christ. Christ's riches are so extensive that not only is Christ Himself filled with them, but these riches also fill up the members of His Body. As we are filled with Christ's riches, we become His fullness. This is what it means to say that the universal church as the Body of Christ is constituted with the unsearchable riches of Christ.

c. The Wife of Christ

The church is also the wife of Christ, His counterpart (Eph. 5:23-27). The church as the counterpart of Christ implies satisfaction and rest in love. Christ needs such a wife. To be the church is to render to Christ the adequate satisfaction and rest in love.

(1) Coming Out of Christ

As the wife of Christ, the church comes out of Christ (Eph. 5:30). Just as Eve came out of Adam, the church as Christ's counterpart comes out of Christ. Because Eve came out of Adam, she had the same life and nature that Adam had. This signifies that the church has the same life and nature that Christ has. This reveals that the church, the wife of Christ, is a pure product out of Christ. The church, therefore, must be one element—the element of Christ.

(2) To Be One with Christ

The church as the wife of Christ comes out of Christ to be one with Christ (Eph. 5:31). Just as Eve became one flesh with Adam (Gen. 2:24), the church becomes one with Christ. Christ and the church being one spirit (1 Cor. 6:17), as typified by Adam and Eve being one flesh, are the great mystery (Eph. 5:32).

d. The New Man

Finally, the universal church is the new man (Col. 3:10-11). In Ephesians 2:15 we see that Christ created the Jews and the Gentiles in Himself into one new man. This new man is corporate and universal. There are many believers, but there is only one new man. All the believers are components of this corporate and universal new man.

The emphasis on the church being the Body of Christ is on life, whereas the emphasis on the church being the universal new man is on Christ as our person. For the Body we need Christ to be our life, and for the new man we need Christ to be our person.

(1) Not of the Natural Man

The church as the new man is absolutely not of the natural man. After referring to the new man in Colossians 3:10, Paul goes on to say in verse 11, "Where there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, freeman." This indicates that in the new man there is no possibility, no room, for the natural man. In the new man there is room only for Christ, not for any kind of natural person.

(2) With Christ as All the Members and in All the Members

According to Colossians 3:11, in the new man “Christ is all and in all.” He is all the members of the new man, and He is in all the members. The word “all” here refers to all the members who make up the new man. On the one hand, Christ is all the members; on the other hand, He is in all the members. This indicates that Christ is all the members and that there is no room for the natural man. It also indicates that as members of the new man we continue to exist, but we exist with Christ in us. Therefore, Paul says that in the new man Christ is both in us and that He is us. In the new man Christ is everyone, and He is also in everyone. This means that the new man is a constitution of the mingling of divinity with humanity to make one entity. In this entity both the intrinsic and extrinsic elements are mingled into one because Christ is the members of the new man and is also in the members. This is the universal church.

MESSAGE TWO HUNDRED

THE CHURCH—THE TWO ASPECTS OF THE CHURCH (2)

B. The Local Aspect

Every truth in the Bible has two sides. This is also true with respect to the church. The church has two aspects: the universal aspect and the local aspect. Universally, the church is uniquely one. Locally, however, the church is expressed in many localities. Therefore, the one universal church becomes the many local churches. God is expressed in Christ, Christ is expressed in the church, and the church is expressed in the local churches. In the foregoing message we covered the universal aspect of the church. In this message we shall go on to consider the local aspect.

1. The Local Churches

In the local aspect the church is expressed in many localities as many local churches. The one universal church expressed in many places on earth becomes the many local churches. The expression of the church in a locality is the local church in that particular locality.

The universal church as the Body of Christ is expressed through the local churches. The local churches, as the expressions of the one Body of Christ, are locally one. Without the local churches there would be no practicality and actuality of the universal church. The universal church is realized in the local churches. Knowing the church universally must be consummated in knowing the church locally. It is a great advance for us to know and practice the local churches.

Only in the local church can the church be practical. Only in the local church and by the local church can we have the practice of the church. If we do not have the local church, we do not have anything practical as far as the church is concerned. Eventually, the Bible ends with seven local churches (Rev. 1:10-13).

As believers, we are living today in the local churches. Actually, we cannot live directly in the universal church. It is impossible for us to live in the

universal church without living in a local church. The Lord is building up the universal church, and each one of us is living practically in a local church.

The universal church as the Body of Christ needs to have its expression. If we talk about the church without having the expression of the church, our talk is entirely theoretical; it is not practical. For the church to be real and practical, there is the need of the local churches. If you do not have the local churches, you do not have the church. If you do not have the local church, you cannot have the universal church, for the universal church is composed of all the local churches.

2. As Revealed by the Lord in Matthew 18:17

The universal church was revealed by the Lord in Matthew 16:18, but the local church was revealed by Him in Matthew 18:17. The church mentioned in this verse must be a local church because it is a place where we can go. The Lord said that if you have a problem with a brother, you should go to him first. If he listens to you, the problem is solved. But if he does not listen, you should bring one or two with you to witness to him, expecting him to listen to them. If he still does not listen, then you should bring the problem to the church. This, of course, must be the local church. It cannot be the universal church, for we cannot bring a problem to the universal church, only to the local church.

a. For the Church's Administration in Its Locality

What the Lord revealed in His second mentioning in Matthew 18:17 is the local church for the administration of the church in its locality. In a local church there is the need of administration. If we do not have the local churches, we do not have this administration.

b. To Bind and to Loose with the Authority of the Heavens

In Matthew 18:18 the Lord says, “Truly I say to you, Whatever you bind on the earth shall be what has been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on the earth shall be what has been loosed in heaven.” This indicates that the church’s administration is exercised in binding and loosing with the authority

of the heavens. This is not mainly to deal with man but to deal with the authority of darkness.

The church revealed in Matthew 16:18 is the universal church, the unique Body of Christ, whereas the church revealed in Matthew 18:17 is the local church, the expression of the unique Body of Christ in a certain locality. Matthew 16 concerns the universal building of the church, but Matthew 18 concerns the local practice of the church. Both chapters indicate that the church represents the kingdom of the heavens, having the authority to bind and to loose.

3. As Revealed by the Apostles in Acts and the Epistles

The local church is revealed also by the apostles in Acts and the Epistles. In Acts the church was practiced in the way of local churches. The practice of the local churches is also seen in the Epistles. Except for a few Epistles written to individuals, all the Epistles in the New Testament were written to local churches. Not one was written to the universal church.

a. Established Locally in Separate Cities

Whereas the universal church has been formed by Christ once for all, the local churches are established locally in separate cities. Therefore, the believers live in churches that are in their localities respectively. Acts 8:1, for example, speaks of "the church in Jerusalem." This was the first church established in a locality within the jurisdiction of a city, in this case the city of Jerusalem. It was a local church in its locality, as indicated by the Lord in Matthew 18:17. As such a local church, it was part of the universal church, which is the Body of Christ. The record of the New Testament consistently reveals the establishing of local churches in different cities.

The second mention of a particular local church in the New Testament is in Acts 13:1a. This verse says, "Now there were in Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers." In Antioch there was another local church, another expression of the church. Hence, in Acts 8 and 13 we can see one church with two expressions: one at Jerusalem, the other at Antioch. All local churches (Acts 14:21, 23) are the expression of the one universal church.

The first mention of a local church in the Epistles is in Romans 16:1. In this verse Paul says, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a deaconess of the church which is at Cenchrea.”

In 1 Corinthians 1:2 Paul addresses “the church of God which is in Corinth.” This reveals that the church is not the church of any person, practice, or doctrine; rather, the church is of God. The church is the church of God because it is constituted of the universal God. Such a church existed in Corinth, a definite locality. In nature the church is universal in God, but in practice the church is local in a definite place. This means that the church has both the universal aspect and the local aspect. Without the universal aspect, the church has no content; without the local aspect, it is impossible for the church to have any expression and practice. For this reason, the New Testament emphasizes the local aspect of the church.

The description of the church in 1 Corinthians 1:2 is marvelous. The church is of God, for it is constituted of the element of God. But the church which is of God is also local. Hence, in this one verse we see both the universal aspect and the local aspect of the church. The universal aspect refers to the constitution, nature, and content of the church; the local aspect refers to the expression and practicality of the church. If we have only the local aspect but not the aspect of the church being of God, we shall have only an outward formality. We shall be lacking the inward reality. But if we have only the universal aspect but not the local aspect of the church in a particular locality, we shall have the reality but not the practicality. On the one hand, the church is constituted of God; on the other hand, the church is expressed in a particular locality. The universal church is expressed and practiced in particular localities.

The Bible never speaks of the churches in one city but always of the church at a particular place—for example, the church at Jerusalem, the church at Antioch, the church at Cenchrea, and the church at Corinth. Every local church is an expression of the one church. The church is one, but the expressions of the church are many; and these many expressions of the church are the local churches. “The churches of Macedonia” (2 Cor. 8:1), “the churches of Galatia” (Gal. 1:2), “the churches of Judea” (Gal. 1:22; 1 Thes. 2:14), “the churches of the nations” (Rom. 16:4), the churches of Syria and Cilicia (Acts 15:41), “everywhere in every church” (1 Cor. 4:17), “in every church” (Acts 14:23), “the churches of God” (1 Cor. 11:16), “the churches of Christ” (Rom. 16:16), “all the churches of the saints” (1 Cor. 14:33), and “all

the churches" (1 Cor. 7:17) mentioned in the New Testament all refer to the local churches, which were the many local expressions of the one universal church in the first century on earth, both in the Jewish world and in the Gentile world.

Revelation 1:4a says, "John to the seven churches which are in Asia." Asia was a province of the ancient Roman Empire in which were the seven cities mentioned in verse 11. The seven churches were in those seven cities respectively.

b. Taking a City as the Boundary and Ground of Each Local Church

The churches are established in different cities by taking a city as the boundary and ground of each local church. Revelation 1:11 indicates this very clearly. In this verse the voice said to John, "What you see write in a book and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, and to Smyrna, and to Pergamos, and to Thyatira, and to Sardis, and to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea." This verse is composed in a very important way. Here we see that the sending of this book to the seven churches equals the sending of it to the seven cities. This shows clearly that the practice of the church life in the early days was that of one church for one city, one city with one church, with the city as the boundary and ground of each local church. In no city was there more than one church. This is the local church, local with respect to city, not with respect to street or area.

If we read Revelation 1:11 carefully, we shall realize that the church in a place must be equal to the city in which the church is located. When something was written and sent to the church in Ephesus, for example, it was sent to the city of Ephesus, because the church in Ephesus represented that city in the eyes of the Lord.

Revelation 1:11 corresponds to Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5. In these two verses we see that to ordain elders in every church is to ordain elders in every city, and to ordain elders in every city is to ordain elders in every church. This makes it abundantly clear that the sphere and limit of a church must be exactly the same as that of the city in which it is located. In other words, the boundary, the jurisdiction, of the church is identical to that of the city in which it is established. In Revelation 1:11 the Lord Jesus makes it extremely clear that a local church is equal to the city in which it is located.

c. Each Being Not Greater nor Smaller Than Its City

A local church should not be greater nor smaller than its city. This means that the jurisdiction of a local church should cover the whole city in which the church is; it should not be greater or lesser than the boundary of the city. All the believers within that boundary should constitute the one unique local church within that city. Hence, one church equals one city, and one city equals one church. This is what we call the local churches.

In every place there can be only one expression of the church. The expression of the church cannot be greater than a locality, nor can it be smaller than a locality. Furthermore, the churches in a number of places cannot be combined to form an alliance of churches, and the church in one place cannot be divided into a number of churches on certain streets, roads, or lanes, or in certain neighborhoods. There can only be one church in one locality.

d. As Lampstands to Bear the Testimony of Jesus Christ in Separate Cities

Local churches as lampstands bear the testimony of Jesus Christ in separate cities (Rev. 1:20b, 9b). The churches, signified by the golden lampstands, are the testimony of Jesus in the divine nature, shining in the dark night locally yet collectively. Every local church is a golden lampstand, the testimony of Jesus Christ, having the sevenfold intensified Spirit of God as the lamps and shining the testimony of Jesus from its locality. Lampstands are for shining in the night. The present age is a spiritual dark night. The seven lamps of the lampstand are the seven Spirits before the throne (Rev. 4:5); they are for the church to be the lamps of Christ shining out the light in the dark age of today. Furthermore, the lampstands are made of pure gold, which signifies the divine nature. Thus, the golden lampstands indicate that the churches are shining out with God's nature in this dark age.

The golden substance of the lampstand signifies God the Father; the specific shape of the lampstand signifies Christ, since Christ is the embodiment of God; and the seven lamps of the lampstand signify the seven Spirits of God as the expression of God. Hence, the golden lampstands signify the churches as the embodiment and expression of the Triune God shining

forth, with the sevenfold intensified Spirit of God as the lamps, the testimony of Jesus in the dark age of today.

e. All the Local Churches Being the One Unique Body of Christ in the Universe

All the local churches are the one unique Body of Christ in the universe (Eph. 4:4). Every local church is a part of this universal Body, a local expression of this unique Body. This one universal church, the one Body, comprises all the local churches. There may be thousands of local churches, but together they constitute one universal church. The universal church is the unique Body of Christ, and all the local churches are simply the local expressions of this one Body.

We need to be impressed with the fact that the local churches are the local expressions of the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 2:22). There is only one Body, but there are many expressions. Universally, all the churches are one Body, and locally, every local church is a local expression of that universal Body. Therefore, a local church is not the Body but only a part of the Body, an expression of the Body.

In the New Testament we see many local churches, and together these local churches are considered one universal church, for they constitute the one Body of Christ. In Matthew 16:18 the Lord said, “I will build My church.” Here the church is in the singular number, indicating that it must be the universal church. But in Acts and the Epistles there are many references to “the churches”—the churches in Syria, the churches in Asia, the churches in Macedonia, the churches in Galatia. The Bible first refers to one church and then to many churches because the one church, the universal church, is the totality of all the churches, and all the churches are local constituents of the one universal church, the unique Body of Christ.

MESSAGE TWO HUNDRED ONE

THE CHURCH—THE OFFICES IN THE CHURCH

In the New Testament the church is mentioned again and again from the first book, Matthew, to the last book, Revelation. In these messages on the conclusion of the New Testament, we are collecting the various verses regarding the church and arranging them so that we may see a clear picture of the church as a great, corporate person, the new man.

We have seen that the church was a good pleasure in God's heart and that, based upon this good pleasure, God has purposed a will to obtain the church. The church was a mystery hidden in God for centuries. In the four Gospels Christ revealed the church to the first group of His apostles. He revealed the church to them both in the universal sense and the local sense. However, at that time He did not reveal the church mainly in an intrinsic way. Later, in the Epistles the intrinsic constituent of the church was revealed. Paul saw this revelation and wrote about it in his fourteen Epistles. In these Epistles we have a full picture of the intrinsic nature, essence, and element of the church.

We have also seen that Christ, as the resurrected and ascended One, has formed the church with Himself as the embodiment of the processed Triune God becoming the life-giving Spirit breathed into His believers. This is typified in Leviticus 2 by the oil formed with fine flour to make a cake. Furthermore, Christ poured Himself as the consummated, all-inclusive, compound Spirit upon His believers. This is typified by the oil poured upon the cake. In this way the church has been formed once for all. After forming the church, the Lord Jesus sent out His believers to go into every part of the earth to plant the churches, that is, to set up, to establish, the local churches for His expression.

The church has two aspects: the universal aspect and the local aspect. The universal aspect is mainly for the expression of the wonderful, all-inclusive Christ, whereas the local aspect is for administration to carry out this marvelous mystery in the universe. Now in this message we shall go on to see something further concerning the church—the offices in the church.

VI. THE OFFICES IN THE CHURCH

In the church there are both offices and gifts. In this message we shall consider the offices in the church, and in the following message we shall cover the relationship between the four special gifts and the church.

With the offices in the church there is a position. This means that the office has the right to do certain things. We may use the office of President of the United States as an illustration. This office gives the President the position and the right to do certain things to carry out his presidency. According to the New Testament, there are offices in the church. As we shall see, there is one office in the universal church, and there are two offices in the local church.

A. In the Universal Church

1. Only One Office—the Apostleship

In the universal church there is only one office—the apostleship. Paul refers to this office in Romans 1:5, where he says that he had received "grace and apostleship unto obedience of faith among all the nations on behalf of His name."

2. Only the Apostles Having the Position and Right to Appoint Elders in the Local Churches

Only the apostles have the position and right to appoint elders in the local churches. It is important for us to see this so that we may abandon hierarchy and any kind of organization. In the New Testament we see God's way to establish the churches and to carry them on. God's way is that in the universal church there is the one office of apostleship. This apostleship gives the apostles the position and right to appoint the elders for the administration of the local churches.

Acts 14:23 tells us that the apostles "had appointed elders for them in every church." In Titus 1:5 Paul says, "For this cause I left you in Crete, that you might set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in each city, as I charged you." We would emphasize the fact that "in each city" here compared with "in every church" in Acts 14:23 indicates that the jurisdiction of a local church is that of the city in which it is located and also that in one

city there should be only one church. Because a church always covers the city, to appoint elders in every church is equal to appointing elders in every city. Therefore, to establish elders in every city is to establish elders in every church. If we see this, we shall be preserved, protected, restricted, and kept from making mistakes. In particular, we shall be kept from repeating the tragedy of the hierarchy. We must hate hierarchy and avoid it.

B. In the Local Church

In the local church there are two kinds of offices—the elders and the deacons and deaconesses.

1. Elders

In the church certain brothers serve as elders. In the first local church, the church at Jerusalem (Acts 8:1), there were elders taking care of the government of the church (Acts 11:30; 15:2, 4, 6, 22; 16:4; 21:18). Eventually, elders were appointed in every church. Thus, there were elders in the church in Ephesus (Acts 20:17). The New Testament reveals that the elders were not voted in by their congregations, but were appointed by the apostles according to their maturity of life and were charged by the apostles to care for the leadership and the shepherding in the churches.

a. Being Overseers in the Local Church

The elders are overseers in the local church. In Acts 20:28 Paul said to the elders of the church in Ephesus, “Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among whom the Holy Spirit has placed you as overseers.” In Philippians 1:1 Paul addresses “the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the overseers and deacons.” In 1 Timothy 3:1 Paul says, “If anyone aspires to oversight, he desires a good work.” Then in the following verse he begins to describe the qualifications of an overseer. If we compare Acts 20:28 with 20:17, we shall see that the overseers in a local church are the elders. This proves that “overseers” and “elders” are synonymous terms denoting the same persons. The title “elder” denotes a person of maturity, whereas the title “overseer” denotes the function of an elder. To make an overseer a bishop of a district to rule over the elders of various localities in that district is grossly erroneous. This is what Ignatius did. His erroneous teaching gave the ground to rank and brought in the hierarchy. From this erroneous teaching came the hierarchy of bishops, archbishops, cardinals, and the pope.

For the elders to oversee means that they take the oversight, looking diligently to be aware of the situation. This is not a matter of observing who is wrong and who is right, who is doing well and who is doing poorly. Rather, to oversee is mainly a matter of overseeing the need. For example, when a shepherd is overseeing the flock, he is not concerned with who is right and who is wrong. He is concerned with the need of the flock. His oversight is related to protecting the flock, leading the flock, and feeding the flock. The shepherd exercises oversight in order to supply the flock with whatever is needed.

The New Testament uses the word "oversee" regarding the function of the elders, but it does not use the word "rule." To oversee is to observe the situation, condition, and need for the purpose of taking care of the church with all the saints. Elders, therefore, are not appointed to be rulers exercising authority over others. Ruling over others is ugly and base. The elders should never rule anyone. In the Gospel of Matthew the Lord Jesus said that He is the only Lord and Master and we all are brothers (23:8, 10). This means that the elders, the overseers, are also no more than brothers.

To oversee is not to replace or annul the functions of the saints. Rather, through the proper oversight the elders, the overseers, promote all the functions of each member of the Body. Thus, oversight is absolutely different from hierarchy, which annuls and replaces the functions of the members.

First Peter 5:2 says that the elders should oversee not by way of compulsion, but willingly, according to God. The elders should be willing to take care of others, to look after them, to protect them. They should not be compelled to do this.

By the context of 1 Peter 5 we can see that to oversee does not mean to rule; it does not mean to be a king. In the natural life everyone likes to rule over others. There is no need to compel someone, to force him, to be a ruler. The words "not by way of compulsion" indicate that to oversee is to care for the church, not to rule over it.

As Peter says, the elders should oversee "willingly, according to God." To oversee according to God means according to God's nature, desire, way, and glory, not according to man's preference, interest, and purpose. The elders should not oversee according to their opinion, concept, or likes and dislikes. Instead, they should oversee according to God's choice, desire, intention, and preference. The elders must oversee the church altogether according to God's

thought, feeling, will, and choice. They must oversee according to God's likes and dislikes.

b. Taking the Lead in the Local Church

The elders take the lead in the local church. In 1 Timothy 5:17a Paul says, "Let the elders who take the lead well be counted worthy of double honor." All the elders should be able to take the lead in a local church. This means that in everything they should go ahead of the flock to take the lead. To take the lead is not to rule but to set an example in doing things first that others may follow. The elders should always do things as an example. In taking the lead they are not rulers but patterns.

c. Teaching in the Local Church

The elders also teach in the local church. In 1 Timothy 3:2 Paul says that an elder should be "apt to teach." The word "apt" implies being able and accustomed to. To teach here is similar to parents teaching their children. An elder must be apt to render this kind of home teaching to the members of a local church. In order to teach the saints in the local churches the elders need to labor in the Word. They need to get into the depths of the truths in the Bible.

If the elders would be apt to teach, they need to be knowledgeable. For example, an elder should be able to explain what the mystery of Christ is. If a brother is not knowledgeable concerning the truth, he is disqualified from the eldership. An elder should be able to teach the saints like a parent helps a child with his homework. However, this does not mean that every elder should be a teacher. It is not necessary for parents to be teachers in order to help their children with homework. Similarly, not all elders are teachers, but they all should be apt to teach.

In 1 Timothy 5:17 Paul says that the elders who take the lead well should be counted worthy of double honor, "especially those who labor in word and teaching." Whereas all the elders should be apt to teach, not all have a special capacity in teaching. Among the elders in a local church, there may be some who have the burden to teach and to labor in the Word. These teaching ones are especially worthy of double honor because nothing is more exhausting than teaching. In verse 17 "word" denotes the general speaking of doctrines, and "teaching" denotes special instruction concerning particular things.

d. Shepherding the Local Church

The elders also bear the burden of shepherding the local church. The local church is like a flock, and the elders are the shepherds to shepherd this flock, taking care of the situation of the flock and meeting the needs.

In Acts 20:28 Paul charges the elders of the church in Ephesus "to shepherd the church of God." The main responsibility of the elders as overseers is not to rule over but to shepherd, to take all-inclusive tender care of the flock, the church of God.

Another verse that speaks of the elders' shepherding is 1 Peter 5:2. "Shepherd the flock of God among you, overseeing not by way of compulsion, but willingly, according to God; not seeking gain by base means, but eagerly." Literally, the Greek word rendered "flock" is "little flock." This refers to the church of God, which is small in number (Luke 12:32) compared to the world.

According to 1 Peter 5:2, the elders are not rulers but shepherds. Shepherding is a proper care exercised over the flock. The flock needs to be cared for, protected, led in the right direction, and brought to a place where they can eat and drink. This is shepherding.

In 5:2 Peter does not tell the elders to shepherd their own flock; he charges them to shepherd the flock of God. The flock is not the elders' possession but God's possession. Therefore, the elders should not consider the church in which they are taking the lead as belonging to them. In the New Testament we are told that the church is of Christ, of God, and of the saints. The church is called the church of Christ, the church of God, and the church of the saints (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 1:2; 14:33). But the church is not the church of the apostles or the church of the elders. Because the church is composed of the saints, it is the church of the saints. Because the church has been redeemed by Christ, it is the church of Christ. Because the church has been regenerated by God, it is the church of God. However, Peter makes it clear that the elders should not think that, because they are taking the lead in the church, the church is theirs. The elders are to shepherd the flock of God, not their own flock.

e. Not Lording It over the Church but Being Patterns of the Flock

In 1 Peter 5:3 Peter says to the elders, "Nor as lording it over the allotments, but becoming patterns of the flock." To lord it over others is to exercise lordship over those who are ruled (Matt. 20:25). Among the believers, besides Christ there should be no lord. All should be servants, even slaves (Matt. 20:26-27; 23:10-11). The elders in the church can only take the leadership (not the lordship), which all the believers should honor and follow (1 Thes. 5:12-13; Heb. 13:7). Literally, the word "allotments" means lots, portions; hence, allotments, portions entrusted. Here this word refers to the flock. The churches are God's possession, allotted to the elders as their allotments, their portions, entrusted to them by God for their care.

The church is God's flock and His possession. The elders have been appointed by God to be shepherds of the flock. Hence, God has allotted the church in their locality to them for their care. The church in a particular locality is God's possession; it is not the possession of the elders. But God has allotted that church to the elders so that they may care for it and shepherd it. Furthermore, the church is allotted to the elders for their care only temporarily. For eternity the church is God's possession. Even the elders themselves are a part of the church as the possession of God.

Instead of lording it over the allotments, the elders should become patterns of the flock. This means that they take the lead to serve and care for the church so that the believers may follow. We may say that the elders are the head sheep, those sheep that are in the front of the flock taking the lead so that all the sheep may follow. Instead of lording it over the church, the elders, as the leading sheep, should be patterns of the flock.

According to the Lord's word in the Gospels and Peter's word in his Epistle, the elders are not to have any control at all. The elders should not be rulers but slaves who serve and do not control. God is the Owner of the flock and the Master, and the elders are His slaves to serve Him by taking care of the flock, setting themselves up as living examples.

According to the New Testament teaching, there is no rank for the elders. There is also no controlling power for the elders, because they do not have any rank. The elders do not have any right to control. The clear word of the New Testament does not allow any ground for the elders to take rank or controlling power.

f. Taking Care of the Finances

in the Local Church

The elders take care of the finances in a local church. Acts 11:29 and 30 say, "The disciples, according as any one of them was prospered, determined each one of them to send things for dispensing to the brothers dwelling in Judea; which also they did, sending it to the elders through the hand of Barnabas and Saul." This indicates that the finances of a local church are under the management of the elders. For this reason, 1 Timothy 3:3 says that an elder should not be fond of money. Money is a test to all men. An elder must be pure in money matters, especially since the church fund is under the elders' management.

2. Deacons and Deaconesses

The second office in a local church is that of the deacons and deaconesses. In the church some brothers serve as deacons (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8) and some sisters serve as deaconesses (Rom. 16:1). The word "service" in Romans 12:7 denotes the service of the deacons and deaconesses in the local churches.

a. Serving the Local Church

Deacon is an anglicized form of the Greek diakonos, which means a serving one. Deacons and deaconesses, therefore, serve the local church (1 Tim. 3:13), serving under the direction of the overseers, the elders. The overseers take care of the church, and the deacons and deaconesses serve the church by taking care of many practical matters. Those who serve as deacons and deaconesses should have a serving spirit and a serving attitude.

b. Doing the Business Affairs in the Local Church

The deacons and deaconesses do the business affairs in the local church. We have an illustration of this in Acts 6, where seven well-attested men, full of the Spirit and wisdom, were appointed to care for the need of serving tables so that no one would be overlooked in the daily dispensing (vv. 1, 3). Those who were chosen to serve tables may be considered deacons, just as those were whom Paul and his co-workers appointed later in the churches.

Apart from the offices of elder and deacon, there is no other office in the local church.

MESSAGE TWO HUNDRED TWO

THE CHURCH—THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE FOUR SPECIAL GIFTS AND THE CHURCH

In the foregoing message we considered the offices in both the universal church and the local church. In this message we shall cover the relationship between the four special gifts and the church.

VII. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE FOUR SPECIAL GIFTS AND THE CHURCH

An office has a position with the right to do certain things. A gift, however, is not a position, and it does not give one any rights. A gift is an ability. If one has a certain gift, he has a particular ability but not any position. A gift does not bring any position to us; it only gives us the ability to do certain things. According to Ephesians 4, there are four special gifts—the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the shepherd-teachers. Actually, these gifts are not merely abilities but gifted persons. We need to see the relationship between these four special gifts and the church.

In Ephesians 4:11 Paul says that Christ, the Head of the Body, has given four categories of gifts to the Body: apostles, prophets, evangelists, and shepherds and teachers. These gifts are raised up by the Head and given by Him to the Body. They are not produced in a human way by education, selection, or ordination. Rather, among the saints who love the Lord and seek Him, some are gradually manifested to be apostles, evangelists, prophets, or teachers. They are produced by their manifestation in their Christian life and living.

A. The Apostles

The first of the four special gifts is the apostles. On the one hand, the apostleship is an office in the universal church; on the other hand, an apostle is a gift. Actually, the apostleship is more a gift than an office. For example,

Paul had the office of apostleship, but he was also a gift. As an apostle, Paul was a gift more than he was one who had an office. He did not do much according to his office, but he did a great deal as a gift.

1. In Their Ministry to Produce the Churches, the Apostles Are a Gift to the Universal Church—All the Churches

In their ministry to produce the churches, the apostles are a gift to the universal church, that is, a gift to all the churches. A gift is a present freely given to you. An apostle certainly is a gift to all the churches. Throughout the ages, certain ones have been raised up by God to be apostles and have been given to the church as a gift.

In 1 Corinthians 9:1 Paul asks, "Am I not an apostle?" The word "apostle" is an anglicized Greek word which means one who is sent. An apostle of the Lord is a believer who is sent out by Him with His authority to preach the gospel of God, to teach the divine truth, and to establish churches. Peter and John were such apostles among the Jews in the first section of the book of Acts, and Paul and Barnabas were such apostles among the Gentiles in the second section of Acts. Others, such as Silvanus and Timothy, also became apostles (1 Thes. 1:1; 2:6). As long as anyone has the power to preach the gospel, the gift to teach the divine truth, and the ability to establish churches, he is qualified and confirmed to be an apostle sent by the Lord with His commission and authority.

The apostleship is universal. When Paul and Barnabas were in the church at Antioch they were not apostles but prophets and teachers (Acts 13:1). However, when they went out to preach the gospel to establish the churches, they were the sent ones. A sent one is an apostle. They were prophets and teachers in the local church in Antioch, but by being sent out in the ministry they became apostles to establish the churches.

2. In Their Ministry to Appoint the Elders, They Have an Office over All the Local Churches

In their ministry to appoint the elders, the apostles have an office over all the local churches. Acts 14:23, for example, tells us that the apostles

appointed elders in every church. Therefore, in their ministry the apostles are a gift given to the churches, and they also have an office with the position and right to set up the elders in all the local churches.

The apostles appoint the elders in the local churches (Acts 14:23). Because the elders in the churches are established and appointed by the apostles, the apostles are over the elders. The eldership is local, and it is under the apostleship.

First Timothy 5:19-20 indicates that an accusation against an elder should be made to the apostles. This shows that the elders are under the apostles.

The government of the church is very simple. The apostles go out and preach the gospel to establish the churches. Then they select the more mature believers and appoint them to be elders to shepherd, to take care of, a local church. The elders should take care of the churches according to the apostles' teaching. Because all the churches are established by the apostles, and the elders are selected and appointed in different localities by the apostles, in taking care of the churches all the elders should take the word of the apostles.

3. The First Placed by God in the Church

The apostles are the first gift placed by God in the church. "God has placed some in the church: firstly apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers" (1 Cor. 12:28a). The church here refers both to its universal aspect and to its local aspect. The first gifts to be placed in the church are the apostles, those who are called and sent by God to preach the gospel that sinners may be saved to be the materials for the building of the church, to establish the churches, and to teach the divine truth. Their ministry is universal for all the churches.

The greatest apostle in the New Testament was Paul. In his fourteen Epistles he used many marvelous expressions. For instance, in Romans 8 he used the word "law" to refer not to the commandment given by God but to the innate ability of life. Therefore, there is the law of sin and of death and also the law of the Spirit of life. In Ephesians 1 Paul spoke of the surpassing greatness of the power that was wrought in Christ in raising Him from among the dead, seating Him in the heavenlies, subjecting all things under His feet, and giving Him to be Head over all things to the church, the Body, the fullness of the One who fills all in all. The fact that Paul had such a revelation indicates that he was a great apostle. Although we cannot compare with him, we

nevertheless may be little apostles, going to the villages and towns to bring the gospel of the truth to people, helping them to believe in the Lord Jesus, and planting local churches.

B. The Prophets

The prophets are those who speak for God and speak forth God by God's revelation and who sometimes speak with inspired prediction. In order to be a prophet, one must have the word of wisdom and the word of knowledge. This means that a prophet must have the proper knowledge of the Word and also receive much divine revelation. Without this knowledge and this revelation, we cannot speak for God or speak God forth. A prophet must be one who has the light, the revelation, concerning what is written in the Word. The prophets, therefore, must have the spiritual gift to speak the word of wisdom so that God may be spoken forth and by this speaking be dispensed into others. Sometimes the prophets also receive the miraculous ability to foretell, to predict. However, this is not often seen in the New Testament. The emphasis in the New Testament is not on the prophets' foretelling but on their speaking for God and speaking forth God.

1. A Gift Mainly for the Local Church

The prophets are a gift mainly for the local church (Acts 13:1; 1 Cor. 14:23-24). In the churches today there should be prophets receiving the divine revelation and the light, prophets who know the truth, who have the word of wisdom and the word of knowledge, and who speak for God and speak God forth into others. The more such prophets speak for God and even speak God, the more the Triune God is dispensed into others.

2. Also for All the Local Churches

The prophets are not only a gift mainly for the local church but also for all the local churches. If the prophets can speak the word of wisdom and the word of knowledge, dispensing God into others, in a particular locality, they can do the same thing in every locality (Acts 11:27-28; 21:8-11; 15:22, 30, 32).

3. Speaking for God and Speaking Forth God Spiritually and Predicting for God Miraculously

On the one hand, the prophets mainly speak for God and speak forth God spiritually (Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 14:1); on the other hand, occasionally the prophets predict for God miraculously (Acts 11:28; 21:11). In the Bible as a whole and in the New Testament in particular, the word "prophesy" does not mainly mean to predict. In both the Old and New Testaments to prophesy is to tell for, that is, to speak for others; to tell forth, that is, to speak things forth; and to foretell, that is, to predict, to speak things before they happen. Mainly prophesying is a matter of speaking for the Lord and of speaking the Lord forth. Hence, the main idea of prophecy in the New Testament is not prediction but speaking for the Lord and speaking forth the Lord under His direct inspiration, that is, speaking according to the revelation the Lord has imparted.

To prophesy in the sense of telling for and telling forth requires much growth in life. For this, we need to know God and experience Christ. If we do not have the adequate knowledge of God and experience of Christ, we do not have anything to say for Him, and we cannot speak Him forth.

To prophesy in the sense of foretelling, of predicting something before it happens, is miraculous and does not require the growth in life. The Spirit is the means by which the prophets foretell in this way. Acts 11:28 says that a prophet "named Agabus rose up and signified through the Spirit that there was about to be a great famine over the whole inhabited earth, which occurred at the time of Claudius." Another instance of such miraculous foretelling by a prophet is in Acts 21:10 and 11.

Whenever a prophet speaks for God, speaks forth God, or speaks in the way of foretelling, he must speak by the Spirit of God. If we speak for God or try to speak forth God without the Spirit of life, our speaking will be ordinary human speaking, not prophesying. To prophesy, either to predict something for God or to speak for God and to speak forth God, must be a speaking by the Spirit of God.

4. The Second Placed by God in the Church

The prophets are the second of the four special gifts placed by God in the church. In 1 Corinthians 12:28 Paul says that God has placed some in the church "secondly prophets."

C. The Evangelists

The third category of special gifts to the church mentioned in Ephesians 4:11 is the evangelists. The evangelists are experts in preaching the gospel, and all the saints need to learn of them. An outstanding example of an evangelist is Philip in chapter eight of Acts. This Philip was not the Philip among the apostles (Acts 1:13) but the Philip among the seven appointed by the apostles to serve tables (6:5). Through his ministry and preaching the gospel as recorded in Acts 8, he was manifested to be an evangelist. Because he had an outstanding gift of gospel preaching, he was eventually called "Philip the evangelist" (Acts 21:8).

1. For All the Local Churches

The evangelists are for all the local churches. This is indicated by the record concerning Philip's gospel preaching in Acts 8. In verse 40 we are told that "passing through he brought the good news to all the cities."

2. Doing the Particular Work of Preaching the Gospel

An evangelist does the particular work of preaching the gospel. Acts 8:5 says, "Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ." Philip also preached the kingdom of God as the gospel. Acts 8:12 tells us, "When they believed Philip, bringing the good news concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women." He preached the kingdom of God as the gospel just as the Lord did (Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:43). Acts 8:26 and 40 also indicate that, as an evangelist, Philip did the particular work of gospel preaching.

D. The Shepherd-teachers

The fourth category of special gifts in Ephesians 4:11 is the shepherd-teachers. The shepherd-teachers here are not two kinds of persons; rather, they are one kind. This means that if a believer is to shepherd the saints, he must surely teach them. Likewise, if he teaches the saints, he will also shepherd them. Shepherding needs teaching, and teaching needs shepherding. Therefore, the shepherd-teachers are one category of persons.

1. A Gift for the Local Church

The shepherd-teachers are a gift for the local church. This is indicated by Acts 13:1, which tells us that there were teachers in the church in Antioch. In Acts 7 Stephen was manifested as a teacher, and Acts 11 reveals that both Barnabas and Saul were teachers. Acts 11:26 says that Saul and Barnabas "were gathered in the church and taught a considerable number."

2. Teaching in the Local Church Meetings

The shepherd-teachers teach in the local church meetings. This is indicated by "a teaching" in 1 Corinthians 14:26. In the church meetings we need a word of teaching. Such teaching should minister Christ with the church as His Body.

Teaching is different from prophesying. Teaching is the speaking based on prophesying. The teachers take what is given in the prophets' prophesying and teach the saints according to it. This is teaching. The prophets are those who speak for God and speak forth God by God's revelation and who sometimes speak with inspired prediction. Teachers are those who speak the truths according to the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42) and the prophets' revelation.

3. The Third Placed by God in the Church

The shepherd-teachers are placed third by God in the church. For this reason, in 1 Corinthians 12:28 Paul says that God has placed some in the church "thirdly teachers."

E. All the Four Special Gifts Not Building the Body of Christ Directly but Perfecting the Saints That They May Build the Body of Christ Directly

All the four special gifts—the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the shepherd-teachers—do not build the Body of Christ directly. Instead, these special gifts perfect the saints that they may build the Body of Christ directly (Eph. 4:12-16).

In Ephesians 4:12 we see the reason for Christ's giving the four special gifts: "For the perfecting of the saints unto the work of ministry, unto the building up of the Body of Christ." The Greek word rendered "for" in this verse is

weighty and significant. It indicates that Christ gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, and shepherd-teachers for the purpose of perfecting the saints. The saints are perfected "unto the work of ministry, unto the building up of the Body of Christ." The Greek word rendered "unto" here means "resulting in." Therefore, the perfecting of the saints results in the work of ministry, the building up of the Body of Christ.

According to grammar, the phrase "unto the building up of the Body of Christ" is in apposition to the phrase "unto the work of ministry." This indicates that both phrases refer to the same thing. Therefore, the work of ministry is the building up of the Body. In verse 12 the work of ministry refers in particular to the work of the saints in building up the Body of Christ directly.

Ephesians 4:16, referring to the Head, Christ, says, "Out from whom all the Body, fitted and knit together through every joint of the supply, according to the operation in measure of each one part, causes the growth of the Body unto the building up of itself in love," In this verse "every joint of the supply" refers to the four special gifts mentioned in verse 11. The article before the Greek word rendered "supply" is emphatic. It indicates that the supply should be a particular supply, the supply of Christ. The apostles, prophets, evangelists, and shepherd-teachers have the supply, the particular supply. Nevertheless, the Body is built up "according to the operation in measure of each one part." "Each one part" refers to every member of the Body. Every member of the Body of Christ has its own measure, and this measure works for the growth of the Body. The Body causes the growth of itself through the supplying joints and working parts. Both the joints of the supply and every single part with its measure are needed for the church to build itself up. The growth of the Body is the increase of Christ in the church. This results in the Body building itself up.

The saints need to be perfected, equipped, furnished, unto the work of ministry. This work of ministry is the building up of the Body of Christ. Because so many saints are not yet doing the work of ministry, they need the special gifts to perfect them, to equip them, that they may be qualified to carry out the work of ministry for the building up of the Body of Christ. First, the apostles, prophets, evangelists, and shepherd-teachers perfect the saints. This means that they build up the saints. The perfected saints then become the building members to build the Body of Christ directly. Therefore, the Body is

not built directly by the four special gifts—it is built directly by all the members of the Body.

If we realize that the four special gifts are for the perfecting of the saints that they may build the Body of Christ directly, we shall avoid the great heresy of the clergy-laity system. In this system the leading ones are the clergy and the followers are the laity. In the church, the Body of Christ, there is no such thing as either clergy or laity, and there is no hierarchy, which annuls and kills the function of all the members. In the church we all are priests to God and members of Christ. This means that in the church every member of the Body functions to build up the Body of Christ directly.

MESSAGE TWO HUNDRED THREE

THE CHURCH—THE FELLOWSHIP AMONG THE CHURCHES (1)

In this message we come to the very crucial matter of the fellowship among the churches.

VIII. THE FELLOWSHIP AMONG THE CHURCHES

As we consider the fellowship among the churches, we need to realize that the churches are the Body of Christ. There are many churches, yet one Body.

Just as there is the circulation of blood in the human body, so there is a kind of circulation in the Body of Christ, a circulation which the New Testament calls fellowship. The circulation of blood in the human body is the life-pulse of the body. We may say that this circulation is the fellowship of the human body. The body cannot live without this circulation, this fellowship. Likewise, fellowship is crucial in the Body of Christ.

Fellowship is a common participation, a joint participation. Therefore, to have fellowship is to have a corporate participation in something. The fellowship of the divine life is the issue and flow of the divine life. Because the divine life is organic, rich, moving, and active, it has a particular issue, a certain kind of outcome. The issue, the outcome, of the divine life is the fellowship of life.

This fellowship is first mentioned in Acts 2:42, a verse which speaks of the fellowship of the apostles. The fellowship of the apostles is the fellowship received by the apostles from the Triune God. According to 1 John 1:3, this fellowship is "with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ." This fellowship is from the Father and the Son to the apostles, and then from the apostles to all those who have received eternal life, the life of the Father. This means that the apostles receive the fellowship from the Father and transmit this fellowship to the believers by dispensing the divine life into them. Therefore, three parties are involved: the Father, the apostles, and the believers. Among these three parties something is circulating. This is the circulation of the

divine life among the believers through the apostles and from the Father. This circulation is the fellowship of the Body, which comprises all the local churches. All the churches on earth are one Body, and within this Body there is the circulation of the divine life. In the New Testament this circulation of the divine life in the Body is called the fellowship.

Fellowship is related to oneness. Just as the circulation of blood in the human body causes all the members of the body to be one, so the fellowship of the divine life in the Body of Christ causes the Body to be one. If any member of our physical body does not participate adequately in the circulation of blood in the body, that member will become unhealthy. The way to cure such a problem is to bring that member back into the circulation of the blood. The principle is the same with the fellowship of the Body of Christ. All those who believe in Christ Jesus, who have received Him as Redeemer, Savior, and life supply, have the divine life. This divine life has a circulation; that is, the divine life circulates within all of us. This circulation of the divine life in the Body brings all the members of the Body into oneness. This oneness is called the oneness of the Spirit; it is also the oneness of the Body. As long as we have the divine life flowing within us, we are in this oneness, the oneness of the Body, the oneness among all the saints. This oneness includes not only the believers but also the Triune God. This is the fellowship among the churches.

If we realize what the fellowship among the churches is, we shall not have the concept that a local church should be altogether independent. In its local administration a local church is independent. However, according to the nature, essence, and intrinsic element of the church, no local church can be independent. To be independent is to be in darkness. Many Christian groups are in darkness because they have cut themselves off from the one, divine fellowship of the unique, divine life, the life of the Triune God. This may become the situation even with a church in the Lord's recovery if that church makes itself isolated and independent. No church or region should be isolated from the fellowship of the Body.

The Brethren were raised up in Great Britain a century and a half ago. They were very good, and we received much help from them. However, they made some serious mistakes. One of these mistakes was placing too much emphasis on the independence of the local assembly. It seems that the Brethren either did not see or forgot that a local church is a part of the unique Body of Christ.

It is possible that, among us in the Lord's recovery, certain churches or regions may make themselves independent. They may isolate themselves from the Body. They do not want to keep their church or their region open to the entire Body, that is, open to all the local churches on earth. As a result, to some extent at least, they cut themselves off from the fellowship among the churches. The result is darkness, confusion, division, and death. This should be a warning to us all. Whoever has the intention, either consciously or unconsciously, to separate his area from the fellowship of the Body of Christ eventually will suffer darkness, confusion, division, and death. Just as a member of the human body cannot live if it is separated from the circulation of blood in the body, so a church cannot be in a healthy condition if it isolates itself from the fellowship of the Body of Christ. From this we see that we all need to pay careful attention to the crucial matter of the one fellowship among the churches.

Although the administration of the church is separate and equal locally, the fellowship of the church is one universally. In fellowship there is no separation. On this entire earth there is only one fellowship, and this fellowship is universally one. The fellowship of the church is one not merely in a particular nation but throughout the earth. There are separate churches in many cities, but there is only one fellowship in the entire universe.

A. The Fellowship of the Body of Christ

The fellowship among the churches is the fellowship of the Body of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 10:16 and 17 Paul says, "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a fellowship of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a fellowship of the body of Christ? Seeing that we who are many are one bread, one Body; for we all partake of the one bread." The Greek word rendered "fellowship" here also means Joint participation. In verse 16 fellowship refers to the believers' communion in the joint participation in the body and blood of Christ. This makes us, the participants of the Lord's blood and body, one not only with one another but also with the Lord. We, the participants, make ourselves identified with the Lord in the fellowship of His blood and body.

In verse 17 Paul speaks a strong word concerning the one bread and the one Body, saying that we are one bread, one Body, because we all partake of the one bread. Our joint partaking of the one bread makes us all one. This

indicates that our partaking of Christ makes us all His one Body. The very Christ of whom we all partake constitutes us into His one Body.

If we isolate ourselves from the fellowship of the Body, we are not qualified to partake of the Lord's body, because the loaf on the table in the Lord's supper signifies the entire Body of Christ. To be sure, the loaf signifies the Lord's physical body sacrificed for us on the cross. This is one aspect of the significance of the bread. Another aspect of this significance is that the bread signifies the one Body. Hence, when we come together to partake of the Lord's table, we need to realize that the bread, the loaf, signifies all the churches. If the church in our locality or the churches in a particular region are isolated from the fellowship of the Body of Christ, we lose the ground and also the right to partake of this loaf. Whenever we come to the Lord's table, we come to practice the fellowship of the Body. The Lord's table is not simply a remembrance of the Lord; it is also a testimony that we who belong to Christ are one.

1. The Fellowship of the Apostles

The fellowship of the Body of Christ, which is the fellowship among the churches, is the fellowship of the apostles. Acts 2:42 tells us that the believers continued steadfastly in the fellowship of the apostles. Just as the teaching of the apostles is unique, so the fellowship of the apostles also is unique. From this we see that all Christians should have one fellowship, the unique fellowship, which is the fellowship of the apostles.

This fellowship is mentioned in 1 John 1:3. "That which we have seen and heard we report also to you, that you also may have fellowship with us, and indeed the fellowship which is ours is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ." The Greek word for fellowship is koinonia meaning joint participation, common participation. It is the issue of eternal life, and it is actually the flow of eternal life within all the believers who have received and possess the divine life. It is illustrated by the flow of the water of life in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 22:1). Hence, as indicated by Acts 2:42, all genuine believers are in this fellowship. It is carried on by the Spirit in our regenerated spirit. Therefore, it is called "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" (2 Cor. 13:14) and "fellowship of [our] spirit" (Phil. 2:1). Such a fellowship was first the apostles' portion in enjoying the Father and Son through the Spirit. For this reason it is called the fellowship of the apostles in Acts 2:42 and "the fellowship which is ours [the apostles']" in 1 John 1:3.

The word fellowship used in Acts 2:42 and 1 John 1:3 indicates the putting away of private interests and the joining with others for a certain common purpose. Hence, to have fellowship with the apostles, to be in the fellowship of the apostles, and to have fellowship with the Triune God in the apostles' fellowship, is to put away our private interests and join with the apostles and the Triune God for the carrying out of God's purpose. Our participation in the apostles' enjoyment of the Triune God is our joining with them and with the Triune God for His purpose, which is common to God, the apostles, and all the believers.

According to Acts 2:42, in the first church life there was only one fellowship, and that fellowship was of the apostles. The apostles' fellowship includes all genuine believers. In the church life in the Lord's recovery we follow and practice the fellowship of the apostles.

2. The Fellowship with the Triune God

The fellowship among the churches is also the fellowship with the Triune God. First John 1:3b says, "The fellowship which is ours is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ." The fellowship of the divine life is between the believers and the Father and His Son Jesus Christ. First John 1:3 says that the believers first have fellowship with the apostles through the divine life, and then this verse says that the apostles have fellowship with the Father and the Son. By this we see that fellowship joins the believers to the apostles and to the Father and the Son. Therefore, in this fellowship there is the full oneness of the divine life.

In 1 John 1:3 only the Father and the Son are mentioned, not the Spirit, because the Spirit is implied in the fellowship. Actually, the fellowship of the eternal life is the impartation of the Triune God—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—into the believers as their unique portion for them to enjoy today and for eternity. It is in this fellowship of eternal life that we participate in all that the Father and the Son are and have done for us; that is, we enjoy the love of the Father and the grace of the Son by virtue of the fellowship of the Spirit (2 Cor. 13:14).

Our fellowship with the Triune God, the fellowship of the divine life, is portrayed in Revelation 22:1. In this verse we see that in the New Jerusalem the river of the water of life flows out of the throne of God and of the Lamb, that is, out of the throne of the Lamb-God, the redeeming God. Out of this

redeeming God as the source flows the river of water of life. The flow of the river of water of life is the fellowship of life. According to the picture here, the river in the New Jerusalem flows downward in a spiral until it reaches the twelve gates of the city. This indicates that the entire city of the New Jerusalem is supplied by the flow of this living water; that is, it is supplied by the fellowship of life. The fellowship of the divine life flows out of the Triune God and through His people in order to reach every part of the Body of Christ, which will consummate in the New Jerusalem.

When we enjoy the Triune God in the divine fellowship, we shall be brought into a situation where spontaneously we join ourselves to the apostles and the Triune God for a common purpose. God has a purpose, and the apostles work out this purpose. By enjoying the divine life in fellowship with the Triune God, we participate in this purpose and its outworking.

The purpose the Triune God desires to fulfill through the apostles and also through us is first that the believers would grow in the divine life by abiding in the Triune God (1 John 2:12-27) and, based on the divine birth, live a life of the divine righteousness and the divine love (1 John 2:28—5:3) to overcome the world, sin, death, the Devil, and idols (1 John 5:4-21). Second, God's purpose is that the local churches would be built up as the testimony of Jesus and that ultimately this testimony would consummate in the New Jerusalem as the eternal expression of the Triune God. This is God's purpose, and this is the burden of the apostles in their work. They have this purpose in common with God. Now we should join them in the fellowship of the divine life, and this enjoyment of fellowship in the divine life will usher us into the interests the apostles have in common with the Triune God. Along with the Triune God and the apostles, our purpose will be the believers' growth in life and their living a life of righteousness and love to overcome negative things so that the local churches may be built up and issue in the New Jerusalem as the consummate expression of the processed Triune God.

3. Expressed and Practiced in Partaking of Christ's Blood and Body at the Lord's Table

The fellowship of the Body of Christ is expressed and practiced in our partaking of Christ's blood and body at the Lord's table (1 Cor. 10:16, 21). As we partake of the table of the Lord, we need to realize that this partaking is a

fellowship, a participation, in the fellowship of the Lord's Body. We drink the cup of the Lord and partake of the table of the Lord. The cup, which is the cup of blessing, is a fellowship of the blood of Christ, and the bread is a fellowship of the body of Christ. Christ, the all-inclusive One, has given His body for us to eat and His blood for us to drink that we may enjoy Him. As such an all-inclusive One presenting Himself to us for our enjoyment, Christ is the embodiment of the processed Triune God, who through death and resurrection, has become the life-giving Spirit. Today the One who presents His body and blood to us is Christ as the life-giving Spirit. As we enjoy Him in partaking of His blood and body at His table, we express and practice the fellowship of the Body of Christ, the unique fellowship among the churches.

MESSAGE TWO HUNDRED FOUR

THE CHURCH—THE FELLOWSHIP AMONG THE CHURCHES (2)

In this message we shall continue to consider the fellowship among the churches.

B. All the Churches Being the One Universal Body of Christ

All the churches are the one universal Body of Christ. The one Body, the one universal church, comprises all the local churches. There may be thousands of local churches, but together they constitute one universal church. Each local church is a part of the universal church.

In Ephesians 4:4 Paul says, "One Body and one Spirit." The Body is mentioned before the Spirit because the oneness among us is related to the Body and is for the Body. Furthermore, this verse not only reveals the uniqueness of the Body; it also shows that the one Body is determined by the one Spirit. Because there is one Spirit, there is one Body. There is not another Body because there is not another Spirit. We must keep the unique oneness of the Body because the Body and the Spirit are one.

The Spirit is the essence of the one Body. Without the Spirit, the Body is empty and has no life. The Body in Ephesians 4:4 is the Body of Christ, and the essence of the Body of Christ is the Spirit. Hence, the Body and the essence of the Body are one. It is impossible for the Body of Christ to have more than one essence. The unique essence of the Body is the Spirit.

Because there is one Spirit, there is only one Body. Moreover, there is only one circulation, one fellowship, of life in the Body. This circulation is the fellowship of the Body of Christ. All the local churches need to be in this unique fellowship.

1. Among Them There Being No Organization but the Fellowship of the Body of Christ

Among all the churches that compose the one universal Body of Christ, there is no organization, but there is the fellowship of the Body of Christ. This means that in the proper church life there is no organization, but there is much fellowship. Just as the human body does not have organization but does have circulation, so we should not have organization, but we should have fellowship. If all the churches stay in this circulation, in the fellowship of the Body, they will be healthy. However, the natural human thought is either to have organization or to have nothing to do with others. On the one hand, we should not have any organization among the churches; on the other hand, we should be open to have fellowship with all the churches. However, the church in a certain locality or the churches in a particular region may not be willing to have fellowship with other churches. This attitude is absolutely wrong. All the churches should remain in the fellowship of the Body.

2. All the Churches Being on the Same Level, None Being the Head Church, nor Any Ruling Over Another, as Indicated by the Seven Churches in Revelation Chapters One through Three

As indicated by the seven churches in Revelation 1 through 3, all the churches are on the same level, with none being the head church, nor any ruling over another. Among the seven churches in the book of Revelation, there is no church that is above the other churches and no church that is below the others. There is no thought of higher or lower. On the contrary, all the churches are on the same level. Furthermore, the churches are identical, each being a golden lampstand. The fact that the churches are identical indicates a prevailing fellowship among the churches, for without fellowship it is impossible for the churches to be identical.

3. All the Churches Being the Same in:

a. Receiving the Teachings

All the churches are the same in receiving the teachings of the apostles. In 1 Corinthians 4:17b Paul says, “Even as I teach everywhere in every church.” This indicates that the apostles’ teaching is the same universally, not varying in any place. In 1 Corinthians 7:17 Paul says, “Only as the Lord has allotted to

each one, as God has called each one, so let him walk. And so I direct in all the churches." This is a further indication that all the churches were the same in receiving Paul's teachings. In 1 Corinthians 16:1 Paul goes on to say, "Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you do also." Here Paul instructed the church in Corinth to do what he had directed the churches of Galatia to do. This is a further indication that all the churches under Paul's ministry were one in the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42).

Romans 16:17 tells us that some "make divisions and causes of falling contrary to the teaching which you have learned." "The teaching which you have learned" is the teaching of the apostles. Whatever is taught in the churches should be the teaching of the apostles. We should be cautious of anyone who teaches in a way that is contrary to the teaching of the apostles.

First Timothy 1:3 says, "Even as I urged you, when I was going into Macedonia, to remain in Ephesus in order that you might charge certain ones not to teach differently." Paul urged Timothy to remain in Ephesus to charge certain ones not to teach differently, that is, to charge them not to teach differently from the apostles' teaching. The apostles' teaching is not the teaching of a particular doctrine like baptism by immersion. The main emphasis of the apostles' teaching is God's New Testament economy. The constituents of God's New Testament economy are the person and redemptive work of Christ and the church as the reproduction of Christ and His work.

Some who do not realize that all the churches should be the same in receiving the apostles' teachings may think that a certain teaching is good for one church but not for their church. To have this attitude is to be closed to the fellowship among the churches. Any teaching that is good for a particular church is good for all the churches on earth. Likewise, if a teaching is not good for a particular church, it should be rejected by all the churches. There is no thought in the New Testament that a teaching is good for one church but not for the other churches. Rather, the New Testament reveals that the churches should be the same in receiving the teachings.

b. Practicing the Church Life

The churches should be one not only in receiving the teachings but also in practicing the church life. Nevertheless, some may think that a practice is good for a certain church but not for all the churches. However, Paul charged all the churches to have the same kind of practice.

Two portions of 1 Corinthians clearly indicate this. The first concerns head covering. There are different thoughts concerning head covering, but Paul told the saints in 11:16 not to be contentious concerning this. "If anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God." The custom here is the custom of contention, disputation, and debate. Neither the apostles nor the churches tolerated any disputation concerning the apostles' teaching. The fact that Paul here speaks of "the churches of God" indicates that all the churches should act in the same way according to the apostles' teaching. The practice of all the churches should be uniquely one.

First Corinthians 14:33b and 34 say, "As in all the churches of the saints, let the women be silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but let them be subject, as the law also says." This also indicates that all the local churches should be the same in practice. This prohibition of the sisters speaking in the church means that women are not permitted to teach with authority concerning the defining of doctrine (cf. 1 Cor. 11:5; Acts 2:17-18; 21:9; 1 Tim. 2:12). The two practices concerning head covering and concerning women's ministry confirm that all the churches should be one in the same kind of unique practice.

c. Acting Together

All the churches should be the same also in acting together. This is indicated by Paul's word in 2 Corinthians 8:18 and 19. "We sent together with him the brother, whose praise in the gospel is throughout all the churches; and not only this, but who has also been appointed by the churches as our fellow traveler in this grace which is being ministered by us to the glory of the Lord Himself." In choosing someone to take care of the offerings, conveying them from one place to another, the churches acted, moved, together. Therefore, the churches should be the same in receiving the teachings, in practicing the church life, and in acting.

4. All the Churches Being Identical, like the Seven Golden Lampstands as the Symbol of the Seven Churches

All the churches should be identical, like the seven golden lampstands as the symbol of the seven churches (Rev. 1:12b, 20b). The sign of the lampstands in Revelation 1 indicates that the churches should be identical in

essence, appearance, and expression. The golden substance of the lampstand signifies God the Father. The definite shape, or form, of the lampstand signifies Christ the Son, since Christ is the embodiment of God. The seven lamps of the lampstand signify the seven Spirits of God (Rev. 4:5) as the expression of God. Therefore, the golden lampstands signify the churches as the embodiment and expression of the Triune God. Every local church should be such an expression. This means that the substance of every church should be God the Father, and the form, the appearance, of every church should be Christ, the embodiment of the Triune God. The churches should not have an appearance other than that of the all-inclusive Christ.

The fact that all the churches are identical means that they all should have the same color and flavor. However, the saints from a certain region may have a special color or flavor. There should not be such a difference in color or flavor among the churches. Although the saints are of different races and nationalities, the churches should nevertheless be identical, for we all have been saved and regenerated and we are being sanctified and transformed. Regarding essence, appearance, and expression, all the local churches must be identical.

5. Only in Their Degradation the Seven Churches Bearing Their Different Characteristics Respectively

Chapters two and three of Revelation indicate that only in their degradation do the seven churches bear their different characteristics respectively. Yes, there are differences among the seven churches, but these differences are only in negative things. The Lord Jesus pointed out the differences between the seven churches, but He pointed them out in a negative and rebuking way. Actually, all the differences are contrary to the one testimony of Jesus. Hence, the differences among the churches in their degradation do not justify us but condemn us. The Lord Jesus has no intention of preserving these differences. Instead, He wants to eliminate them. For example, Thyatira was the only church in which there was Jezebel, an extremely negative item (Rev. 2:20). This illustrates that the differences among the churches are not on the positive side but on the negative side.

In Revelation 1 the standard is that all the churches, as golden lampstands, must be the same in God's nature, in Christ's shape, and in the Spirit's

expression. In the gold, in the shape, and in the seven lamps, all the churches should be identical. However, because the churches picked up many negative things from their localities, they actually were not identical. Instead of being identical, they had differences which the Lord Jesus needed to judge and deal with.

If in our church there is a difference that makes us distinct from the other churches, we are wrong. The church is a lampstand, golden and pure. If all the churches are golden and pure, there will be no differences among them. Any differences, any distinctions, must be dross, some mixture or impurity, not gold. It is possible for our opinions or practices to be dross. Therefore, we need to learn how to be purified and become altogether golden, not having our own opinion or practice. If all the churches are purified in this way, they will be identical.

C. The Contribution among the Churches

The fellowship among the churches also includes the matter of the contribution among the churches. For example, under Paul's ministry, the Gentile churches made a contribution to help the churches in Judea (Rom. 15:25-27, 31b). There was a fellowship of love, a communication in love, between the Gentile and Jewish saints. The Gentile saints communicated with the Jewish saints by means of giving practical, material things. The Gentile believers had it in their heart to care for the material needs of their Jewish brothers, and they offered their possessions as the expression of their desire to take care of the needs of the saints in Judea.

Romans 15:26 says, "Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem." Actually, the word "contribution" here is not the best translation of the Greek word koinonia. This contribution was a kind of communication, and this communication was an aspect of the fellowship among the churches, for when we have fellowship we have communication to the uttermost.

1. Caring for One Another by the Grace of God Given to Them

The contribution among the churches is a matter of the saints caring for one another by the grace of God given to them (2 Cor. 8:1-6; 9:1-2). In 2 Corinthians 8:1 Paul says, "We make known to you, brothers, the grace of God

which has been given in the churches of Macedonia." This grace is the resurrected Christ becoming the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45) to bring the processed Triune God in resurrection into us to be our life and life supply. Grace is actually the Triune God becoming life and everything to us. By this grace the Macedonian believers overcame the usurpation of temporal and uncertain riches and became generous in ministering to the needy saints.

If we give by such a grace, what we give will become grace to others. We give material things to help them, but these material things are accompanied by a spiritual grace. When we supply needy saints with material things in the proper way, in spirit and with life, life and spirit go with this supply. As a result, the needy ones are supplied not only with material things but also with the riches of life.

2. To Have Equality in Material Riches among the Churches

Concerning the contribution among the churches by the grace of God, Paul says that in material things there should be equality among the churches. Second Corinthians 8:13-15 says, "This is not to others relief and to you affliction, but by equality: at the present time your abundance for their lack, that their abundance also may be for your lack, so that there may be equality; as it is written, He who gathered much had no excess, and he who gathered little had no lack." God's principle is to have equality. The principle of equality is illustrated by the receiving of manna in the Old Testament (Exo. 16:18). If an Israelite gathered more, God sovereignly arranged for him to have no excess. If someone gathered less, by God's sovereignty that one had no lack. Those who were rather feeble and were not able to gather much manna did not have any lack. The divine way is that those who gathered little had no lack and those who gathered much had nothing over. This is the principle of equality, God's heavenly way of balancing the supply of material wealth among His people,

We should follow this principle today concerning material possessions. Those who have been favored by God with material things should be faithful to use them to care for the needy saints and for the full-time workers. As the saints share their abundance with others, there will be equality, not only among the saints in a particular locality but among all the churches. Our giving to produce equality indicates that we are in the fellowship of the Body, that is, in the fellowship among the churches.