

THE ADVANCEMENT OF THE DIVINE REVELATIONS AND THEIR APPLICATIONS

By Titus Chu

MESSAGE FOUR: PAUL'S APPLICATION OF THE VISION HE RECEIVED

Paul ministered, lived, and wrote his Epistles based upon the high revelation of Christ and the church he had seen. Paul's ministry focused on the various aspects of the ascended Christ with His heavenly, universal Body.

The revelation John received was even higher than Paul's, and in his revelation the local churches are emphasized. Therefore, what began with Peter's revelation of Jesus being the Christ and the Son of the living God culminated in the local churches. Therefore no one should say, "If I see Christ, that is enough." Eventually, we also need to see the local churches. Before we can arrive at the local churches, however, we must pass through a high mountain. What is this mountain? It is the Body of Christ, as seen by Paul. If we do not see the Body of Christ, we will not be able to truly see the local church.

Furthermore, if you do not see the local church as its practicality, you will not be able to truly know the Body. I have heard people say, "We are for the Body of Christ, not for the local churches." Whoever makes such a comment cannot truly know the Body, for the Body can only be practically known in the church life. The revelation that the apostles received for their operation culminated in the local churches. Before we can say that we are for these local churches, however, we must first see the ascended Christ with His heavenly, universal Body.

When I say we must see Christ and the church in such a way, I do not just mean that we must doctrinally understand this term: "the ascended Christ with His heavenly, universal Body". No. We have to see Christ in His resurrection. We have to know Him

as the ascended One who is head over all things to the church, which is His Body (Eph. 2:22). From this one verse we should be able to realize that the Body of Christ is totally something in the heavenlies, and something universal. In Christ's resurrection we were begotten by Him, and as He is in His ascension, we have become His Body, His fullness.

Therefore, when we speak of the Body, we must understand that we are speaking of an entity that is far beyond our earthly understanding. Paul's ministry is always focused upon this ascended Christ, who is also this heavenly, universal Body. The focus of all Paul's writing is Christ and His Body.

In Romans, for instance, Paul writes about Christ being the economy of God. In First Corinthians he tells us that Christ meets all our needs, and in Second Corinthians he shares how Christ gives us growth, perfects us, and eventually constitutes His ministry into His servants. In Galatians he tells us that Christ, who is the Spirit, is the substance and reality of all that comes from God, including the Law. In Ephesians he writes how Christ is the person of the Body. To the Philippians he wrote that Christ is the goal for us to pursue so that we might labor on Him. In Colossians Paul lifts up Christ as the One who is head over all. Paul wrote his two Epistles to the Thessalonians to explain matters of Christ's coming. His three Epistles to Timothy and Titus address how Christ is operating in the church life through His governmental administration. Hebrews, then, is the conclusion, telling us that Christ is the totality of all spiritual things. He is the reality of the angels, of Moses, of the priestly service and of the tabernacle. He is the reality of whatever is described in the Bible. Whatever portion of the Bible you read, it must lead you to Christ! Paul's writings therefore begin with God's economy, and conclude with Christ being the reality of every spiritual thing.

Paul expected the saints to grow through his revelation. In the book of Romans, he told us that Christ was God's economy. Based on this, he expected the saints to experience God's organic salvation, passing from justification to sanctification,

renewing, transformation, and eventually being conformed to the image of Christ. Furthermore, he expected the saints to operate in the local church according to the realization that they were members of His Body. In every book, Paul stresses the same thing: Christ is our all-sufficient supply to carry out God's economy, and the operation of His cross deals with every negative problem. Praise the Lord! Now we have everything we need to partake of this heavenly Christ!

Besides stressing the all-sufficient Christ, in his writings Paul also stresses Christ's heavenly Body. We believers live in two realms. On the one hand, we dwell in the heavenlies. On the other hand, we dwell on earth. While we are living on this earth, we are experiencing something heavenly. And, as we experience this heavenly life, we express it here on the earth. If we wish to be for the Body of Christ, we must be brought into the heavenly realm, for the Body is heavenly. If we are totally of the earthly realm, we cannot know the Body of Christ, for the Body of Christ is something that is totally of the heavenly realm and something spiritual.

The sphere of Paul's living was organically for the heavenly body of the ascended Christ. He lived for this heavenly Body of Christ. In order to do this, however, he himself had to learn how to function organically. It would not have been enough for him to simply say, "Now I see it! Now I give myself to it!" He realized that the Body of this ascended Christ was something organic. Therefore his zeal, his talent, his ability, his exercise, and his giftedness had to be something organic if his operation was to be for Christ's Body.

Paul's exercise to fulfill his ministry was not in the heavenlies, however, but in the local churches! It was relatively easy for Paul to realize that his ministry in the Body must be something organic, but to apply this realization to all the situations he confronted in the local churches was not so easy. First of all, it required a certain kind of stand while he labored in the church life. What was this stand? It was to know Christ, and only Christ, in the midst of all the situations here below.

When the fundamental stand in our human life becomes “I must know Christ,” then we begin to experience something called the power of resurrection. After we decide that, above all things, we want to know Christ, we find that we are able to go on in the Christian life in spite of everything that would otherwise frustrate us. This is because when we take this stand to know Christ, we begin to experience the power of His resurrection.

The fact of the matter is this: our daily life is full of failure, weakness, discouragement, and all that is mundane. It would seem that when someone becomes a Christian, his life should be full of victory, and every day should be an exhilarating adventure.

When we awake in the morning, we should immediately begin to pray ourselves into the Spirit, should we not? And when we go to school or work, or when we are with our family or friends, shouldn't those around us see a shining Christian testimony? But is this our case? Usually not. That is why we possess this stand that we want to know Christ. If this is our stand, then we find that we are able to continue on following the Lord in the church life even when we feel we are unable or unworthy to do so.

From a certain angle, nothing seems more difficult, oppressive, or depressing than serving the saints in the church life. Consider all the people and situations you have to deal with, and how things often do not turn out how you wish them to. Yet after all these years, I can still tell the Lord that I love Him. I tell you, the Christian life is a mystery. I should be “burnt out” by now, but I feel that the Lord to me is more fresh and real than ever. This is because I am experiencing the power of His resurrection.

This power causes us to rise up and go on even when we do not desire to do so. Perhaps one day you even made a vow that you would not come to any more meetings. Such a vow means nothing as far as the Lord is concerned, for He realizes that His resurrection is operating. Once you begin to love the Lord and take a stand that you want to know Him, the Lord will begin to bring you into many things just so that you might know this

power. Those who have not experienced death cannot experience the power of resurrection! Therefore the Lord allows you, as the one who wants to know Him, to experience those things you do, day after day. In this way, you can know the power of His resurrection. Your diligence will fail and must fail. Your promises to the Lord will all turn out to be lies. To know Christ in the church life, you must know the power of His resurrection.

Why is it that it is the *power* of His resurrection, and not simply resurrection? If you were to ask me how many truly joyful moments I have had as a Christian, I would have to tell you that they have been few. Then if you were to ask me, Would you select another life for yourself if you could? I would say, Absolutely not. It is true that I have experienced a lot of suffering over the years. I have shed a lot of tears. But I feel that I have lived the best life.

You may think that I might wish that I had lived a life filled with happiness. But then, brothers, where would be my experience of the power of Christ's resurrection? Within me I have come to know this organic inward operating element called resurrection. When I am defeated, I find it is there. When I am woefully wrong, I find it is there. When I lose my health, I find it is there. When I am discouraged, I find it is there. Resurrection has carried me through.

How does this power carry me? As a kind of power, but not as we think. To our mind, resurrection power must be something like Superman experiences when he flies around saving people. That is not resurrection power as we come to know it in our daily life. Resurrection power in our experience is: "Lord, though I fail, I love You more. And though I cannot seem to please You, I still am able to rise up to touch You." This is the power of resurrection in our experience.

Out of such power comes the fellowship of His sufferings. What are "His sufferings"? These are the sufferings we experience from all that God measures to us according to His purpose, even though it seem unjust or unreasonable. It is such sufferings that

build the church. In Christ's experience, nothing that happened to Him was fair; nothing was reasonable; nothing He did was understood. But everything He experienced was according to the desire of God for the fulfillment of His purpose. The Lord's suffering and death are what produced the church. Today there is still something called "the fellowship of His sufferings." The Lord's suffering produced the church, and through our sufferings today, the church is being built up. Our "fellowship" in the Lord's sufferings has this goal in view.

Therefore, if you want someone to grow, be prepared to suffer. If you want to be built up with another brother, you both had better be prepared to suffer. We were begotten through the Lord's resurrection, but for us to be practically built up in the church life, we need the fellowship of the Lord's sufferings.

The final aspect that we experience after we determine to know Christ is being conformed to His death. What is death? When someone is dead, he is at rest - he has no opinions, he does not react, and he cannot protest. When a dead person is mistreated or misunderstood, he remains at rest. He does not protest. He doesn't argue. He's dead. Everything has been finished by the Lord. Everything is accomplished. Now we can be conformed to His death. Many years ago, we reacted to everything. Now we find that more and more we are being shaped to His death. This is wonderful.

So the Christian experience is something totally different than what we might have imagined when we first desired to know Christ. We thought we would become more and more victorious and prevailing. Instead, we find that Christ is our resurrection power in the midst of our experience of being depressed, oppressed, and suppressed. This organic power of resurrection then ushers us into the fellowship of the Lord's sufferings for the Body's sake. Yet in these sufferings there is the rest of the Lord's death. We learn to hand everything over to God and to submit ourselves to Him.

Paul tells us he is pursuing Christ so that he might lay hold of Christ. In order to lay of Christ, he stretches forward to what lies ahead and drops whatever he may be holding on to. He was pursuing towards the goal of gaining Christ. It is easy to declare this if you have nothing much to leave behind. But Paul had been given much and had accomplished much in his life. And, could he forget about how he had seen Christ on the road to Damascus? Could he forget about how he had been taken up to the third heavens to see unspeakable things? (Even an astronaut who only sees the earth from space cannot forget that sight. How could Paul forget what he saw, for he was taken to the very highest point in the heavens?) We may declare we give up everything to gain Christ, but our “everything” and Paul’s “everything” may not quite match.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PAUL’S EXPERIENCE

In Damascus, Arabia, And Jerusalem

According to my study, Paul was saved around 38 AD. After being called by the Lord, Paul became a zealous preacher. He remained in Damascus among the saints for a short period of time until some tried to kill him (Acts 9:22-25), at which time he escaped and went away to an Arabia for a period of three years (Gal. 1:17-18). It was there that I believe he began to consider the Bible from the beginning to the end in light of his revelation.

After this, around 41 AD, Paul went to Jerusalem (Acts 9:26). This was then his second experience of the church life. Because of his reputation, he was still kept at arm’s length by most of the saints until a dear brother named Barnabas began to take care of him (Acts 9:27). Barnabas introduced him to Peter, and I believe in that interview Paul asked Peter quite a number of questions based upon his study of the Scriptures. Peter no doubt perceived that Paul had truly received something of the Lord.

To Tarsus and Antioch

While in Jerusalem, Paul's life was again in danger due to his gospel preaching (Acts 9:28-29). Wherever Paul went, people reacted! When he spoke, people got stirred up. I do not know why Peter's preaching did not have the same effect. Perhaps Paul's speaking threatened people's way of life; perhaps he told people that everything God required in the old covenant, whether circumcision or feast or offering, was fulfilled in Jesus. At any rate, he escaped again, this time to Tarsus (9:30), his home town (9:11). Tarsus at that time was like today's Boston; it was a major center of learning. Perhaps Paul chose to go back there so he could receive more education! Around 44 AD Barnabas went to Tarsus find him and bring him to Antioch, where Barnabas now was (11:22-26).

The First Journey and the Conference in Jerusalem

It was in Antioch that Paul really began to experience the church life in a rich way. His ministry really developed there. In Antioch he labored along with other believers from many different backgrounds, including Gentiles! Antioch may have been the first such church. It was as those brothers in Antioch were praying that the Spirit directed them to send out Paul and Barnabas to do the work He had appointed for them (Acts 13:2). After this journey (primarily to Galatia) they returned to Antioch. Remember, the church in Jerusalem by this time was already manifesting signs that a religious element had begun to take over. Those in Jerusalem who were zealous for the law found out that Paul had bypassed their "headquarters," and made sure to go to all the churches Paul had raised up to teach the believers that they needed to be circumcised. Thus there was the conference in Jerusalem in Acts 15.

The Second Journey and Back

Thankfully, at that conference there was a document produced and signed by everyone, in which it was agreed that the Gentiles need not be circumcised. Paul was surely relieved. His realization was that he needed to keep the oneness of the Body by keeping in fellowship with the church in Jerusalem. He went out a second time, as recorded in Acts 18, to visit the churches he had raised up, and to pioneer new territory with the gospel. While in Ephesus, he became burdened to return to Jerusalem (18:19-21).

When he returned to Jerusalem, was he warmly received by the saints there? It would seem the problems had been taken care of at that past conference. Yet for some reason, the feeling one gets when reading this portion is that Paul was not well received, even though he had just finished raising up new churches, and had suffered much for the Lord's sake. Was he honored? If he was, there is no mention of appreciation for his labors. Instead, it merely says he greeted the church in Jerusalem, and went on to his home church of Antioch (18:22).

The Third Journey and What Happened in Jerusalem After He Returned

Seeing how many were poor in Jerusalem, Paul became very burdened about their care. Therefore on his third journey he collected money for them from the churches of Galatia, Macedonia, and Greece (1 Cor. 16:1-3), and even preached to the Corinthians a long message on this matter (2 Cor. 8 - 9). After returning from this third journey, he carried with him a large gift for the church in Jerusalem. When he arrived, he was welcomed gladly by the saints (Acts 21:17), but Paul did not see James until the following day. From this I infer that the leaders there did not really take care of Paul; it was some who knew him personally, and who possibly prompted James to receive him. Then James saw Paul, and Paul related to James and the brothers with him all that the Lord had done through his labor among the

Gentiles. They praised the Lord for this, but James, or someone with him, said, “Brother Paul, observe how many tens of thousands there are among us, all zealous for the law of Moses.” He did not say, “zealous for Christ”!

Paul was told that all the believers in Jerusalem believed “that you are teaching all the Jews throughout the nations apostasy from Moses...What is to be done? For they will certainly hear that you have come.” Did Paul truly go about telling people, “Don’t be circumcised, and don’t follow the customs”? I believe he simply would have preached Christ. But this is what was reported. And because of this report, it seems Paul was in danger, for he was seen as an enemy of their “faith.”

What was proposed was that Paul should perform a Jewish ritual along with four others who were preparing for it. Paul was even to pay the expenses for whatever was required for their vow. If he were to do this, they felt he would be out of danger, for it would be evident to all that he truly was “one of them.” Just thirty years after its beginning, the church in Jerusalem had fallen into such a condition. Paul gave in and agreed to their plan. How strong was the atmosphere in that city, so that even the writer of Galatians would agree to go along with such a thing!

I believe God realized that if He did not intervene, the church would have lost the testimony of its champion of the faith. If Paul had gone through with the performance of that vow, his own faith might have been shattered, and so-called Christianity would today merely be a branch of Judaism. Just as his vow was about to be fulfilled, however, some came into the temple from the province of Asia (where he had labored much) and, recognizing him, they started a riot (Acts 21:27-31). The Roman guard pulled him away before he was beaten to death and had him bound with two chains (vv. 32-33). From this point onward, Paul came under persecution from both the religious and the political powers.

His Arrest and First Imprisonment

It was in this situation of being under arrest and imprisonment that Paul wrote many of his Epistles. We praise the Lord that Paul's imprisonment was greatly used by Him for our sakes. Without the many Epistles he wrote during this first imprisonment, how could we today know how to live the church life as we now do? Actually, through his writing, it can be said that more was accomplished for the Lord than his what he accomplished directly through his journeys.

(His first Epistle, written long before his imprisonment, was to the Galatians. It was probably written after James' Epistle, which was the first written in the New Testament. James in his letter told everyone that the Christian life was not just a matter of what you say, but how you live. In Galatians, Paul told the believers to forget about the law and take Christ. But compared to what they wrote, look at how these two behaved in Jerusalem in what was likely their final meeting together. This should be a warning to us. Religion is always waiting as a snare for those who love the Lord. Paul was right in his desire to go and fellowship with the brothers in Jerusalem. But after he arrived, he should not have allowed himself to be persuaded to do something so absolutely contrary to the revelation he had received.)

His Release, Second Imprisonment, and Martyrdom

He was released from his first imprisonment, and went on to labor in the gospel, perhaps fulfilling his desire to preach even unto Spain (Rom. 15:28). Not long after his release, however, all those who were in Asia left him (2 Tim. 1:15). Ephesus and Colosse were in Asia. Even the brothers whom he had raised up forsook him and became his opposers. Eventually, during his second imprisonment just before his martyrdom, there was no one left who was able to stand with him (2 Tim. 4:16). The Lord, however, stood by him. I believe at this time that there was a kind of threatening atmosphere among the churches that if anyone chose to stand with Paul, that person would have been in trouble. This is how Paul's labors ended.

PAUL'S OPERATION

In His Labor, He was One Who Suffered Deprivation and An Anxious Care for All the Churches

Paul operated as a brother who was so much for the saints. In Second Corinthians 11:27-28 he tells us, "In labor and hardship; in watchings often; in hunger and thirst; in fastings often; in cold and nakedness - apart from the things which have not been mentioned, there is this: the crowd of cares pressing upon me daily, the anxious concern for all the churches." What a servant of the Lord Paul was!

As he labored, watching unto the Lord's move, he often endured great hardships. We all should love such a brother. But beyond all the physical deprivations Paul endured there was this: the crowd of cares that pressed in upon him for all the churches.

For a brother such as Paul, there was no such thing as a vacation. Everywhere he went, the cares of the churches came upon him. Not long ago I went to visit someone and a brother from that place found out and put me up in his hotel, which was very luxurious. That was really restful. But soon after I arrived, the brothers there said, "We have planned something for you. Tomorrow please talk with this brother, tomorrow evening could you see this one, and the day after that this one" and so on. I told them, "Yes, I am available." A servant of the Lord has no right to say, "I am on vacation!" In another place where my wife and I visited, I was approached about perfecting some among the saints, for there were many in the church life, but few pillars. I felt I should go. Once there, however, I found myself becoming burdened with all the situations among the saints there. What marks the servant of the Lord is not how well or how much you can preach, but the crowd of cares pressing upon you daily.

Paul was not of the type of spirituality that says, "I commit all these situations and all these saints to the Lord's care." No. He realized that for people to go on, nothing comes cheaply.

Therefore he was filled with an anxious concern for all the churches.

Paul was a great man in God's economy, and was greatly used in the matters of the truth in a way we still greatly appreciate today. Yet his experience was that of being pressed by the crowd of cares, his anxious concern, for all the churches. He did merely inquire as to how a brother was doing, and remark about how it was "too bad" if he was doing poorly. His word was, "Who is weak and I am not weak? Who is stumbled and I do not burn? If I must boast, I will boast of the things of my weakness. I am weak. When I consider the churches and when I consider the saints, I become weak." Every saint with whom he came in contact with became a person he was concerned about and one he had to pray for. His prayer was, "Lord, I am weak, but You are the One who is able to build Your church. I hold this one up to You." He became weak, yet he bore the saints to God.

In His Epistles, Paul's Focus was Christ as the Reality of all Spiritual Things and the Church as His Heavenly Body

The operation of Paul's ministry as revealed in his Epistles focused on two things: First, his ministry focused on Christ as the reality of all spiritual things. Witness Lee has written many hymns along this line, for he also focused on Christ in his ministry just as Paul did. Second, Paul's ministry focused on the church as the heavenly Body of the ascended Christ and as the fullness of Christ. Christ is the reality of all spiritual things, and the church is the fullness of the reality of all spiritual things.

A person like this realizes the price he will have to pay when he comes into contact with the saints, yet he willingly gives himself to them. May the Lord gain such laborers among all the churches in these days.

This article is available online at
MinistryMessages.org

© 2009 Titus Chu