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THE NEW COVENANT OR TESTAMENT BAPTISED INTO THE BODY OF CHRIST AND CHURCH LIFE

In the last few messages, we have considered the significance of what was accomplished at the Cross, its implications for mankind and the fulfilment of God's purposes. In this message, we will dwell on two points:

1. The New Covenant or the New Testament
2. Baptised into the body of Christ and church life (which is part of God's provisions for us in the New Covenant)

1. The New Covenant or the New Testament

On this subject of the New Covenant, have you ever wondered why the portion of the Scriptures from Matthew to Revelation is called the New Testament?

In your reading of the Scriptures, have you ever come across the term the *New Testament* or even the term *testament*? If you go through the New American Standard version (NASB) of the Bible, you will not find this term being used.

As I understand it, the New Testament is actually a reference to the New Covenant. The Greek word translated as *covenant* in the NASB is *διαθηκη*, and this word has two shades of meaning. One is *testament* or *will*, and the other, *covenant*.

A *testament* is a will, and the one who makes it is known as the testator. If a person dies without making a will, we say he has died intestate.

A *covenant* is a solemn agreement entered into. It can be between men or between God and man. The two are not the same. In a covenant between God and man, God lays down the terms and the conditions and we cannot bargain with Him.

In the NASB, the word *διαθηκη* is always translated as *covenant* and never as *testament*. But in the King James Version (KJV), this word is often translated as *testament* or *will*. For example:

Verses	NASB	KJV
Matt. 26:28	for this is My blood of the <i>covenant</i> ...	For this is my blood of the new <i>testament</i> ...
Mark 14:24	This is My blood of the <i>covenant</i> ...	This is my blood of the new <i>testament</i> ...
Luke 22:20	This cup... is the new <i>covenant</i> in My blood...	This cup is the new <i>testament</i> in my blood...
1 Cor. 11:25	This cup is the new <i>covenant</i> in My blood...	This cup is the new <i>testament</i> in my blood...
2 Cor. 3:14	for until this very day at the reading of the old <i>covenant</i> the same veil remains unlifted...	for until this day remaineth the same veil untaken away in the reading of the old <i>testament</i> ...

As far as I can understand, the NASB translation of this word *διαθηκη* as covenant is generally more appropriate because it is a continuation of the Old Testament idea of the covenant between God and man.

The Scriptures records that God made several covenants with various individuals and groups of people. For instance, God made covenants with Noah and Abraham, and with Israel at Sinai, which was later renewed in the land of Moab.

Noah	Gen. 9:9	"Now behold, I Myself do establish My covenant with you, and with your descendants after you."
Abraham	Gen. 15:18	On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I have given this land..."
Israel	Ex. 19:5, 6	'Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'
Israel— renewal of covenant in Moab	Deut. 29:1	These are the words of the covenant which the Lord commanded Moses to make with the sons of Israel in the land of Moab, besides the covenant which He had made with them at Horeb.

The Scriptures tells us that the nation of Israel failed to live up to their part of the covenant. Consequently, the Lord spoke through the prophet Jeremiah about instituting a new covenant and about writing His laws on their hearts (Jer. 31:31-34).

The term *New Testament* is not used in the Scriptures itself to refer to the set of books from Matthew to Revelation. If I am not mistaken, it is used because the KJV is an older version of the Bible compared to the NASB, and was a widely read translation for many years.

Following this line of reasoning, the New Testament would be more appropriately called the *New Covenant*, and the Old Testament, the *Old Covenant*. However, I am not suggesting that we should from now on change the way that we have been referring to the Old and New Testaments because Christians have generally accepted these terms.

Both concepts included

While this word *διαθηκη* may be translated either as *covenant* or *testament*, in some contexts in the Scriptures, it incorporates both concepts of covenant and testament (or will), especially so when it refers to the New Covenant. This can be seen in Hebrews 9:13-22 where the term covenant appears repeatedly.

Hebrews 9:13-22

13 For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh,

14 how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

15 For this reason He is the mediator of a new *covenant*, so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first *covenant*, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.

16 For where a *covenant* is, there must of necessity be the death of the one who made it.

17 For a *covenant* is valid only when men are dead, for it is never in force while the one who made it lives.

18 Therefore even the first *covenant* was not inaugurated without blood.

19 For when every commandment had been spoken by Moses to all the people according to the Law, he took the blood of the calves and the goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people,

20 saying, "This is the blood of the *covenant* which God commanded you."

21 And in the same way he sprinkled both the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry with the blood.

22 And according to the Law, one may almost say, all things are cleansed with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

In verse 15, the term the *first covenant* is used. This term also refers to the Old Covenant, as Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 3:14. As we have seen earlier, it is not really the first covenant between God and man. But it can be called the first covenant from the angle that in the whole of the Scriptures, there are basically two main covenants: the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. So, when Paul talks about the

Old Covenant, he assumes that his readers understand what he is referring to because there is one major covenant in the Old Testament between God and Israel and one after the coming of Christ, the New Covenant in Christ's blood.

In both covenants, God lays down the terms, the promises and the conditions. Not only that, both hinge on the shedding of blood or death. In the Old Covenant, it is the shedding of the blood of bulls and goats; in the New Covenant, the death of Christ.

While the Old Covenant talks about the shedding of the blood of bulls and goats, it is clear that the Old Covenant also hinges on the death of Christ because the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away our sins (Heb. 10:4). It is a representation of the death of Christ.

The writer to the Hebrews takes pains to explain this to us in this passage and in several other portions in Hebrews. We see then that both concepts of covenant and testament or will are referred to. And man must respond to God's terms in the covenant or testament in order to benefit from it.

A covenant does not require the death of the one who made it, for example, the covenant between David and Jonathan is one of friendship and it didn't require the death of either of them. But this is not the case with a testament or will. For a will to come into effect, the testator must die.

Taking a closer look at verses 16 and 17, we see that the term "covenant" also has the idea of testament or will. In verse 16 we read, "For where a covenant is, there must be of necessity the death of the one who made it." Thus the meaning of a testament or will is reflected in the term covenant used by the writer to the Hebrews.

The writer goes on to explain that during the period of the Old Covenant, it was already made quite clear that for men to be forgiven of their sins, there must be the shedding of blood (vs. 18-22).

He further argues that the copies of the things in heaven are cleansed with the blood of bulls and goats, but the heavenly things, the realities themselves, need to be cleansed by better sacrifices, referring to the shedding of Christ's blood on the Cross. So Christ is the fulfilment of the type in the Old Testament.

We have then this idea of the covenant where God lays down the terms, the promises, the conditions, and simultaneously, the idea of testament, where there is the requirement of the death of Christ.

Concerning the New Testament or the New Covenant, Christ has already died for our sins and He has opened the way for us to benefit from all that God has provided for us. And God is now calling us into His kingdom and is drawing us to Himself, and we need to respond in repentance and faith. And as we do so, we are born of the Spirit and can then benefit from all that God has provided for His children under the New Covenant or testament.

The significance of the New Covenant and what God has provided for us in Christ

The New Covenant is so central and far-reaching in its implications for mankind and the fulfilment of God's purposes that the Scriptures, from Matthew to Revelation, is appropriately known as the New Testament (or the New Covenant). And the heart and substance of this portion of the Scriptures is Christ. That is basically the gospel, the good news of what we can have and find in Him. As Isaiah puts it, Christ is "our covenant" (Isa. 42:6, 49:8).

The New Testament helps us to understand how we can respond to this good news, how we are to live out our lives and attain to all that God intends for us in Christ. For example, in Colossians 2:6, Paul talks about how having received Him, we are now to walk in Him. And in Colossians 3:4, he refers to Christ as "our life". Seeing the centrality of Christ in the New Testament, we can appreciate better why Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:2, "I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified".

Multiple roles of Christ

From all that we have considered, we can see clearly that the role of Christ is crucial in the New Covenant. Not only that, we can also see that there are multiple roles of the Lord Jesus Christ in the New Covenant. He is the testator whose death is crucial for the will (testament) to take effect, as we read in Hebrews 9:16-17. He is also the mediator of the New Covenant as we see in Hebrews 9:15. Not only that, Christ is also the substance of what we can have in the New Covenant. In Colossians 2:17, we read that the rituals commanded by God in the Old Testament are "things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ". At the heart of what we can benefit in the New Covenant is Christ Himself. And that is why not only is His death important, so also is the fact that He has risen, because what we are, what we can have and what we can attain to, are all found in the risen Christ.

Furthermore, the Lord Jesus Christ is also the means by which we fulfill our part in the covenant. As I have mentioned, there are two parts in the covenant: God laying down the terms and conditions and making known His provisions for us, and we fulfilling our part. But it is not just we ourselves trying to fulfill our part in the New Covenant, but the Lord Jesus Christ Himself is also at the very heart of the means by which we fulfill our part. How do we fulfill our part? With a repentant spirit and a heart of faith, we learn to walk in Him, abide in Him and He in us. The essence of this is captured in what Paul declares in Colossians 1:27, "Christ in you, the hope of glory" and what he testifies in Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me."

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We have also seen in an earlier message that God spoke through Isaiah, saying that the coming Messiah is to be our *covenant* (Isa. 42:6; 49:8). It is rather strange and unusual to say that a person is a covenant. But Christ, the coming Messiah, is God's covenant for us. This can help us to appreciate why Paul tells us in Colossians 2:2 that Christ is the *mystery*. From my study, Paul generally uses the word mystery, especially in his epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians, with reference to God's revelation of important truths pertaining to or having a bearing on the fulfilment of God's purposes including how it is to be attained and fulfilled¹. And at the heart of what has been revealed is that God's plan and purposes are to be fulfilled in and through Christ. This is so central that Paul equates the mystery with Christ and Christ with the mystery.

So it is interesting and helpful for us to note that God is trying to communicate to us that Christ has multiple roles. The various terms like testator, mediator, substance, means, covenant and mystery are meant to help us understand this truth. God often tries to communicate the different facets of major areas of truths in various ways and by using different terms. He wants to reveal to us a body of truth and reality. If we are not sufficiently observant and reflective, we may appreciate these truths only from certain angles and will then miss out on a wholesome appreciation of the entire body of truth and the ultimate reality that the Lord wants us to learn and grasp.

2. Baptised into the body of Christ and church life

I will now consider with you another aspect of the New Covenant as part of the significance of the death of Christ.

In a previous message, we have asked ourselves why the Lord Jesus was willing to endure the Cross when it involved such terrible agony and pain. Hebrews 12:2 tells us that it was for the joy set before Him that He endured the cross, despising the shame. But what is this joy that is set before Him? It is likely to include the significance of what was accomplished at the Cross, its implications for mankind and the fulfilment of God's purposes, that is, what God has opened up for us in the New Covenant in Christ's blood. It also tells us that the Lord Jesus was looking forward to something extremely beautiful and important, things concerning the fulfilment of God's purposes.

The area of truth I will now consider with you will help us to further appreciate the meaning of this joy set before the Lord Jesus. It can also help us understand how we can fulfill our part in bringing about this joy that the Lord Jesus is looking forward to.

Every believer baptised into the body of Christ

Every believer on conversion is born of the Spirit and *baptised by the Spirit into the body of Christ. This is a spiritual reality and an important part of God's plan and provision for His children under the New Covenant.*

¹ This is substantiated and elaborated on in five messages P002-6 in the ongoing series of messages: The fulfilment of God's purposes.

As believers, we should prayerfully seek to appreciate what this means. Let's consider several passages on this subject.

1 Corinthians 12:12-13

12 For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ.

13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Notice here that all the members of the body, though many, are one body. Both aspects are true: many, yet one. How does this come about? Verse 13 says, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body..." Notice the words "for by one Spirit" and "we were all".

"For by one Spirit" tells us that this is done by the Spirit of God and not by us. Our part is repentance and faith, and once we are converted, we are born of the Spirit and He baptises us into the body of Christ.

"We were all" tells us that firstly, this has already taken place and secondly, that this is true of all believers, regardless of spiritual maturity, ethnic background (Jews or Greeks), sex (male or female), social status (slave or free) or any other factor.

Members of one another—a spiritual reality

We must appreciate this point that we are all part of *one body*. The term "one body" is not to be taken in the literal sense because we are not joined physically as one. We are still separate individuals. Neither should the term "one body" be taken merely as a figurative expression. It is a spiritual reality. We are spiritually joined, not only to Christ, but also to one another. We are members of one another and we are spiritually part of one another. Together, we form the body of Christ.

When we read 1 Corinthians 12:12-14, we may sometimes think that Paul is merely giving an analogy of the human body to illustrate that members of Christ's body have different roles, functions and gifts. But let us realise that we are individually members of one another and it is a spiritual reality that together we form the body of Christ. Romans 12:4-5 makes this very clear.

Romans 12:4-5

4 For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function,

5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

An appreciation of this spiritual reality can help us gain a fresh insight into the meaning and intentions of God for His people as well as the meaning and basis of

unity amongst believers. It will also help us understand in a fresh and deeper way what it means to care for one another and how our lives affect one another.

In one sense, we can say that we are incomplete in ourselves and the spiritual life of a believer is not merely a relationship between the individual and God. We need one another and are inter-dependant. Each part of the body is incomplete in itself and by itself. In a very vital way, our lives, including the quality of our lives and how we are faring, affect one another spiritually because we are spiritually bound to one another.

Inter-dependence of members of the body of Christ

Let us look again at 1 Corinthians 12. Following from the spiritual fact that we have been baptised by the Spirit of God into one body, Paul goes on to explain the meaning and implications in a lengthy passage in 1 Corinthians 12:14-27. I will go through some of the verses in this passage and make some comments as I go along.

v. 14 For the body is not one member, but many.

Paul wants to emphasise that although there is one body, there are many members that make up that one body.

v. 15 If the foot says, "Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body.

It is a spiritual fact that we are a part of the body. We cannot, by denying it, make it not so. Even if we say we are not a part of the body, we still are. Whether or not we recognise it, we are a part of the body.

vs. 16-17 And if the ear says, "Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?

These two verses communicate to us the importance of recognising that the body is formed of different parts and each has its different function. We are not all the same and we are incomplete in ourselves. The body cannot just consist of an eye. If that were so, the body cannot perform many other functions. Not only is the body made up of parts, each part is different and important. Together they form the body.

v. 18 But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired.

God has, in His wisdom, created each one of us differently, with distinct features and endowed us with different gifts. He places us in the body and assigns us different roles according to His perfect wisdom.

v. 21 And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

This verse reminds us that we are incomplete by ourselves. We need one another. The members of the body need to recognise this truth for them to fit properly into

God's plan and purposes, and for the body to grow wholesomely unto maturity. This is the way God desires it.

vs. 22-24 On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; and those members of the body which we deem less honourable, on these we bestow more abundant honour, and our less presentable members become much more presentable, whereas our more presentable members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honour to that member which lacked.

Paul warns us not to look down on others or to deem certain ones as unimportant. All are important and we need to give due respect to one another and recognise that all members of the body are important to God and all members of the body are important in order for the body to function well.

v. 25 so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another

We must be very careful on this issue of unity. We are in the body of Christ and there is only one body. Thus we should be united. But it is possible for us, in our attitudes, ways and conduct, to live contrary to this oneness in the body and thus cause divisions in the body. And Paul is trying to communicate to us here that it is a very serious matter if we were to cause divisions in the body. We should learn to care for one another because we are vitally linked to one another. Not only that, Paul went on to say how our lives affect one another spiritually.

v. 26 And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honoured, all the members rejoice with it.

Whether we like it or not, whether we acknowledge it or we deny it, what happens to one member affects the rest because we are vitally, spiritually joined to one another. Thus if one member suffers, the other members are affected. We should not be competing with one another. If anyone does well, the others should rejoice. If one member is honoured, all the members rejoice with it. We are part of one another.

v. 27 Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it.

Paul rounds up his exhortations about body life by declaring that each believer is a member of the body, and that together we form the body of Christ, He being the head.

This passage that we have just considered covers an important area of truth and spiritual reality. The Spirit of God baptising us into the body of Christ is a deliberate part of God's plan in the fulfilment of His purposes. God desires individuals to have a deep relationship and fellowship with Him. But God is not just calling and reconciling individuals to Himself. He is also calling each one of us into the body of Christ so that we can have deep fellowship with one another. In this way, we may appreciate more deeply what it means to encourage and build up one another, and to cooperate with one another as members of the body of Christ, just as members of the physical body need to cooperate for the body to function properly.

All these are to take place within the framework of truth and God's revelation. As each one of us learns to submit to Christ as the head of the body, we will find true unity. God desires that we experience and work out His intentions for church life in an increasing measure.

The importance and potential of healthy church life in the fulfilment of God's purposes

The growth, development and blossoming of church life have tremendous potential for spiritual life and power and for God's wisdom to be manifested. It also has great potential in contributing to the advancement of God's kingdom and in the fulfilment of His purposes.

Let us now look at some passages in the Scriptures on this subject.

Ephesians 4:11-16

11 And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers,

12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ;

13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.

14 As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming;

15 but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ,

16 from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

In verses 11-13, Paul tells us that God gave us apostles, prophets and teachers to equip the saints so that we may attain to a mature man. By this, he is referring to the growth and development of individuals to maturity. But notice in verse 12 that this is done in the context of the body of Christ. Paul went on to explain how this is to be expressed.

v. 15a speaking the truth in love.

This can also be translated as "be truthful in a way that manifests love". It is not confined to the area of speech, but extends to other areas of life too. We are to be truthful in a way that manifests love.

v. 15b ...we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ.

This portion of verse 15 talks about the headship of Christ. Over the centuries, the issue of unity has been much discussed among believers. It is still a major issue today. Many attempts have been made to achieve unity. But what is true unity? Is it

achieved when various groups come together under one big umbrella? This passage helps us to understand what true unity is.

True unity comes about when members of the body of Christ recognise the headship of Christ and learn to submit to Him within the framework of truth. Men's ideas and attempts at achieving unity, without true submission to the headship of Christ, will lead to false unity and various complications. There may be apparent unity, but it is not true unity. The basis of true unity is submission to Christ as the head.

It is when we are one with Christ that growth takes place, as we learn to appreciate and understand more and more what it means to be united with Christ, submitted to Him, abiding in Him and He in us, and as each member functions as he ought.

v. 16 from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part...

As we are all properly joined to the head, submitted to Christ and to His instructions and revelations through the Scriptures, it leads to the proper working of each individual part and this brings about not only true unity, but also the growth of the body.

In healthy church life and body life, each member is properly submitted to the head and is functioning well. There is mutual help, encouragement and edification. In such a context, each member is able to develop his full potential and attain unto maturity.

Ephesians 1:22-23

22 And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church,

23 which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

We all know the greatness, glory and majesty of Christ. But we see in this passage in Ephesians 1:22-23 that the church is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. With the establishment of the church after His death and resurrection, we can say, in one sense, that Christ is no longer complete in Himself. In the ultimate sense, we know that Christ is perfect and complete in Himself. But in another sense, He is not complete without His body, the church. Henceforth, God desires that His purposes be accomplished together with the church and no longer by the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit on their own.

This is a very deep and profound truth. God wants not only individuals but also the church, the body of Christ, to have an important part in the fulfilment of His plan and purposes. This reality of church life or body life is so awesome that Paul describes it as the "fullness of Him".

If the church, the body of Christ, is in a sorry state, and we are not growing and functioning well, the fullness of Christ is affected because we are part of Him. We are now His body, joined to Him and a part of Him. We are no longer separate from Him.

Thus, our state now reflects on Christ and bears a relationship with God's plan and purposes.

Let us turn to Ephesians 3:8-11 for a further treatment of this subject.

Ephesians 3:8-11

8 To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ,

9 and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things;

10 so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places.

11 This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord

In this passage in Ephesians, Paul soberly talks about the ministry that God has entrusted to him, which is to make known to the Gentiles *the mystery* that had up till then been hidden. This mystery has to do with God's eternal plan and purposes. Paul says his preaching and his ministry is to bring to light the administration of this mystery, so that God's manifold wisdom may be made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realm, in accordance with God's eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ (vs. 9-11).

This indicates to us that if the church is functioning well, it has tremendous potential for spiritual life and power and beauty, and in that context, manifesting the wisdom of God and advancing His kingdom in the spiritual realm. It also tells us that the issues shared in this message—church life, body life, submission to Christ—have to do with and are a part of the fulfilment of God's purposes through Christ.

These are deep things that the Lord has revealed to us in the Scriptures. We need to look to Him for growing insight and understanding, and cooperate with Him so that what has been shared above may come about.

Personal and corporate responsibility—a balanced view

It is important for us to have the correct understanding and approach with regard to personal and corporate responsibility. Sometimes, there is an over-emphasis on one to the neglect of the other. But to be wholesome and balanced, we need to bear in mind both:

Personal. This refers to personal growth, personal relationship with God, personal service, personal responsibility and accountability. There is the personal aspect. But we need also to bear in mind the other aspect.

Corporate. This includes church growth, church life, body life, corporate responsibility and corporate accountability.

Illustration from Revelation—Message to the church in Sardis

This aspect of personal and corporate responsibility can be seen in Revelation, when the risen Christ addresses the seven churches. On the one hand, He refers to the churches corporately; on the other hand, He addresses the issues of personal responsibility and personal accountability and noted individual differences amongst the believers. We can read this in several passages, but we shall look at one example in chapter 3, when He addresses the church in Sardis.

Revelation 3:1-3

1 "To the angel of the church in Sardis write:

He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars, says this: 'I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.

2 'Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God.

3 'So remember what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. Therefore if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you.'

He first addresses the church in Sardis corporately. In verse 1, He says, "You have a name that you are alive, but you are dead." Then he refers to individuals in verse 4:

Revelation 3:4

'But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.'

"But you have a few people..." Although God looks at us corporately, He also bears in mind the individuals. There were some individuals in the church in Sardis who had "not soiled their garments" and were commended by the Lord as worthy. The individual part is thus very critical.

Again in verses 5 and 6, the Lord addresses the issue of individual responsibility and accountability.

Revelation 3:5-6

5 'He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life.

6 'He who has an ear, let him hear.'

"He who overcomes..." and "He who has an ear..." indicate individual responsibility. We can overcome as a group, but the individual also needs to overcome. The Lord may be speaking to the church as a whole, but how each individual receives and responds to His message is a critical issue.

Illustration from 1 Corinthians 12—The reality of body life

Both aspects of personal and corporate responsibility are real, important and relevant. We need to bear in mind the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:12—"the body is one and yet has many members"; we are many but at the same time, we are also one.

Believers should not view their spiritual life as merely between the individual and God. We must recognise the spiritual reality of the body and not become individualistic in an unhealthy sense, ignoring the fact that we are members of one another and neglecting the reality of the life of the body and the meaning of caring for one another and moving forward and serving together.

There is such a reality as oneness of the body. We must realise that our lives are integrally bound to one another and our lives affect one another's. The health of the whole body is affected by the health of the individual members. As such, we need to pay attention to personal growth, personal responsibility and personal accountability.

However we must not think that if others build the house, we will also be built up, since we are a part of the house. We must also not think that if we are in a context that is healthy, we will be all right, since we are a part of the body. No, this is erroneous thinking. Not only is it wrong for us to shirk our responsibility and leave the building of the house to others, it is also wrong for us to think that we will be well when the house is being built up. On the contrary, the house may be built up, yet we may degenerate. Thus the Lord may commend the body, the congregation as a whole, but at the same time He may also rebuke individual members and be displeased with their lives.

Illustration from 2 Corinthians 5—Before the Judgment Seat of Christ

This truth of personal responsibility and accountability comes through clearly in 2 Corinthians 5:10.

2 Corinthians 5:10

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

Yes, we will all appear before the judgement seat of Christ. There is the corporate aspect in which God will view and treat us as a whole. But there is also the personal accountability and responsibility in which God will recompense each one according to the deeds done in the body, whether good or bad.

If we are growing well, we will and can contribute to the health of the body of Christ. If we degenerate, we will adversely affect the body of Christ. Conversely, whether church life is healthy or unhealthy, it will have a bearing on the health of the individual and how the individual grows. The health of the individual believer and the

health of church life bear a relationship with each other and both are important to the Lord.

Being members of Christ's body—its implications

Being members of Christ's body not only communicates to us the spiritual reality of our being part of one another and joined to one another; it also communicates to us how much we are a part of Christ. We are members of His body; we are therefore very close to Him. In fact, we are part of Him. The Scriptures uses these words "members of His body" not merely as a descriptive phrase, but it intends to communicate to us that it is a spiritual reality. There are serious implications to this spiritual reality. One aspect has to do with how we ought to live our lives as it has a direct bearing on the Lord because we are members of His body. The second aspect relates to the deep assurance we can have of how much we mean to the Lord and how much He loves and cares for us.

How we ought to live

Let's consider the first part—how we ought to live our lives.

1 Corinthians 6:15-17

15 Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? May it never be!

16 Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a prostitute is one body with her? For He says, "The two shall become one flesh."

17 But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him.

In verse 15, when Paul asks the two questions, "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?" and "Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute?" he is telling us that the matter he is considering is a very serious matter, not just in relation to our own lives, but also to the Lord. Paul's concern is not merely the physical but the spiritual implications. The issue is not merely sexual immorality, but the spiritual realities involved because we are joined to the Lord spiritually, being one spirit with Him (v. 17), and being members of His body.

The Scriptures seeks to communicate to us that we are very much a part of Christ. So then, what we do, how we conduct ourselves, how we live our lives, whether we live well or we live a life of sin, affects and involves the Lord. This is a very solemn responsibility. If we do not live our lives properly, we not only put God to shame, but also involve the Lord Jesus in our lives because we are members of His body. We represent Him in a far deeper sense than the word "representative" normally suggests. This is what Paul tries to communicate when he asks rhetorically "Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute?"

However, we should not just be thinking of the negative aspects, of a life of sin. If we live well, it is also a glory to Christ, because Christ is directly involved in our lives. So let us be more conscious of this very important area—the implications of how we live our lives—for it directly involves the Lord.

How much we mean to the Lord

The other aspect is the deep assurance of how much we mean to the Lord, how precious we are to Him and how close we are to Him. Let us turn to Ephesians 5:28-30. This is a context where Paul is talking about marriage and the relationship between husband and wife.

Ephesians 5:28-30

28 So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself;

29 for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church,

30 because we are members of His body.

In verse 29, Paul says, “No one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body.” We nourish, cherish and look after our body. Christ also nourishes and cherishes the church because we are members of His body. The Lord Jesus has bought us with His own blood. He died for us to redeem us and now we are members of His body. We mean very much to Him. He deeply loves us and cares for us in whatever we may be going through—our difficulties, our pains, our struggles. Whatever disturbs, perturbs, assails or confronts us and whatever may come upon us, the Lord Jesus is very deeply concerned. He cares very much for our welfare and our well-being.

Let us be deeply gripped by this area of truth so that we will never entertain the question—Does Jesus care? Of course He does! We are members of His body. Not for a single moment is He unaware of what is happening to us or is uncaring towards us.

The issue is not whether the Lord Jesus cares. Rather it is whether we know how to pay due attention to our own lives. “Pay close attention to yourself”, Paul wrote to Timothy (1 Tim. 4:16). God wants us to take good care of our own lives, to live well. But do we know how to care for ourselves—how to respond to the Lord and His perfect will for us, how to cooperate with Him in what He desires to do in our lives, in what He desires to teach and train us—so that we can become a source of blessing, someone through whom He can work out His plans and purposes?

Concluding Remarks

These things that we have been dwelling on are very deep truths. The whole subject is very important but I have only covered it in a manner that you may have the big picture, a bird’s eye view, of the major issues pertaining to the Cross and its

significance. To consider them more fully, much elaboration is needful, but I will not do so in the present context.

So then, let us ponder on the primary issues we have considered in this message. Have we come to appreciate the centrality of Christ in the New Covenant? Have we gained spiritual insight into God's eternal purposes and how He seeks to fulfill them through the church, which is the body of Christ? Do we realise that our lives are integrally bound up with those of other believers and do we strive for true unity in the Spirit? Will we diligently seek to be a healthy member of the body of Christ and contribute our part to the building up of the body? This is what our Lord Jesus Christ suffered and died for. Let us not disappoint Him.

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