

# THE LOCAL CHURCHES IN REVELATION

*by Witness Lee*

The book of Revelation is very well composed. Apparently, the various points included in chapter 1 are unrelated to each other. But if we approach them from the viewpoint of our experience, we shall see that they follow one another in a very good sequence. The coming again of the Lord Jesus requires that some partake of the tribulation, the kingdom, and the endurance in Jesus. The best way to do so is to be in the local churches. Outside the church, it is difficult for anyone to participate in these three things.

## **The Progress of the Divine Revelation in the Scriptures**

The divine revelation in the Bible begins with God and consummates with the local churches. The first two chapters of Genesis, along with the entire Old Testament, are a revelation of God Himself, and the four Gospels are a revelation of Christ. This fact reveals the progress in the divine revelation from God to Christ. Following the four Gospels, we have the Acts and the Epistles, which are mainly a revelation of Christ as the Spirit. Hence, the revelation of the Spirit is the continuation of the divine revelation in the Bible. Following this, the church is revealed. Thus, there are four main sections of the divine revelation in the Bible: the section of God, the section of Christ, the section of the Spirit, and the section of the church.

The Jews have only the first section of this revelation, for the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament cover only the revelation concerning God. Most Christians have more than this, having the Old Testament plus the four Gospels. Although they have the whole Bible, in practicality they have little more than the Old Testament and the Gospels. They may know God as He is revealed in the Old Testament and they may know the stories in the Gospels about Christ, but they know nothing of either the Spirit of life or the church. In the concept of many Christians the church is a physical building. On Sunday morning many parents say to their children, "Let's go to church." According to their concept, the church is a bungalow or a cathedral with a high tower. They know hardly anything of the church as revealed in the Holy Word.

During the past two centuries other Christians have progressed in their knowledge of the Bible, having not only the Old Testament and the Gospels but also the Epistles. These Christians know God, Christ, and the Spirit. Of course, they do not know much about the Spirit of life. They know the Spirit mainly as the Spirit of power for baptism. They know very little of the indwelling Spirit. Although these Christians may know a little concerning the church, they see only the universal church, not the local churches. However, the first three chapters of Revelation are not concerned with the universal church; they are emphatically concerned with the local churches.

As the church, the Body is the means by which Christ carries out God's eternal economy. In God's economy the church is a crucial matter. Without it, Christ cannot accomplish anything. To carry out God's eternal plan, He must have the church.

Today, we have the whole Bible: the Old Testament, the Gospels, the Acts, the Epistles, and Revelation. I was with the Brethren Assembly for seven and a half years. During that time we devoted considerable attention to the books of Daniel and Revelation. However, most of what I heard concerning Revelation was about the beasts and the ten horns. I had no impression that in the book of Revelation there were the local churches. I did not even hear much about the New Jerusalem. I was told only that it was a city in heaven with heavenly mansions, that its street was paved with gold, and that its doors were made of pearls. Praise the Lord that today our book of Revelation is not like this! In our book of Revelation, there are the local churches with the Son of Man in the midst, and there is the New Jerusalem with Christ as its centrality and universality.

### *Concerning God*

First, God reveals Himself to us (Gen. 1:1). In Genesis 1:26 God is revealed as Elohim, a Hebrew word meaning "the mighty One." The English word *God* is the translation of the Hebrew word *Elohim*. Following this, in Genesis 2:7 God is revealed as Jehovah, which means, "I am who I am." God is the great I Am, the ever-existing One. As the ever-existing One, He is the reality of every positive thing. This name, Jehovah, denotes God in His relationship with man. Concerning His creation, God is revealed as Elohim; concerning His relationship with man, He is revealed as Jehovah. *Jehovah* is the Old Testament form of the name *Jesus*, and *Jesus* is the New Testament form of *Jehovah*. In other words, in the Old Testament Jesus was called Jehovah, and in the New Testament Jehovah is called Jesus. The entire Old Testament, which comprises thirty-nine books, is mainly a revelation of the two divine titles, Elohim and Jehovah.

### *Concerning Christ*

The second step in the progress of the divine revelation is the revelation concerning Christ (Matt. 1:1). At a certain time God was incarnated as a man called Jesus Christ. Thus, following the Old Testament, we have the four Gospels, which reveal a wonderful person named Jesus Christ. The name *Jesus* mainly means the Savior (Matt. 1:21), and the title *Christ* mainly means the anointed One (16:16). Jesus is not only our Savior but also God's anointed One or, using today's term, God's appointed One. God has appointed Him to carry out His eternal economy. He is not only Jesus to save us, but also Christ to carry out God's eternal plan.

In order for Christ to carry out God's eternal plan, He needs the church. And to produce the church there is the need of two things—redemption and the imparting of life. After redeeming the fallen, created man, Christ had to impart life into the redeemed ones. For this there is the need of the Spirit of life, the life-giving Spirit. Therefore, following the four Gospels, we have redemption and the imparting of life in the Acts and the Epistles. In these books the blood of Christ is frequently mentioned. Along with the blood, we have the Spirit. Blood is for redemption, and the Spirit is for the imparting of life. After being redeemed and regenerated, we become the living members of the Body of Christ, the church. As the church, the Body is the means by which Christ carries out God's eternal economy. By this we see that in God's economy the church is a very crucial matter. Without it, Christ cannot accomplish anything. If He would carry out God's eternal plan, He must have the church.

### *Concerning the Spirit*

God is revealed as Elohim and as Jehovah, and Christ is revealed as Jesus and as Christ. The revelation concerning the Spirit, however, is not simple (Matt. 28:19); rather, it is a mystery. Few Christians have ever fought for the revelation of God, and

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not many have fought for the revelation of Christ. But when we come to the matter of the Spirit, there is much argument because the revelation of the Spirit is a mystery. The Spirit is mysterious because it is related to life. There are many aspects of the revelation of the Spirit: the Spirit of truth or reality (John 14:16-17), the Spirit of life (Rom. 8:2), the Spirit of power (Luke 24:49), the Spirit of God (Rom. 8:9), the Spirit of Christ (v. 9), the Spirit of Jesus (Acts 16:7), the Spirit of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:19), the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:32), and the seven Spirits (Rev. 1:4; 4:5; 5:6).

Do you know the difference between the Spirit of life and the Spirit of power? Those in the so-called Pentecostal or charismatic movement talk about the Spirit of power. Only the Lord knows whether or not they have the genuine power. I have heard much so-called speaking in tongues, but I have not seen power in the work of these tongues speakers. The baptism of the Holy Spirit empowers people. But so many of the supposed tongues speakers today are just as powerless as the non-tongues speakers. They may have the power to babble incoherently, but they do not have the power to save souls. Although some never have spoken such “tongues,” thousands of people have been saved through their preaching. That is real power. Not only is there no real power in the so-called charismatic movement; neither is there any life. After speaking in tongues, many will proceed to fight with their wives or to smoke cigarettes. Is this life? No! Life transforms people. We need both the Spirit of power and the Spirit of life.

**W**e are here for the testimony of Jesus. This testimony is not a term or a form; it is a life. How we need to open up ourselves to Him that He may impart more life into us. If we truly have Christ as our life, we shall walk, live, and behave ourselves in Christ. Now we can understand why the Epistles repeatedly speak about the Spirit. As we have seen, the book of Revelation speaks of the seven Spirits of God. For the church life, there is the need of this intensified Spirit. Out of this intensified Spirit, the real church comes into being. While I do not oppose any genuine Pentecostal gifts, I can testify that in the past I have not seen one proper church built up by the so-called Pentecostal movement. Consider the Catholic charismatic movement today: it is saturated with the worship of Mary. If this movement is proper, how could it tolerate idol worship? That it tolerates idolatry proves that it is not proper. Dirt can be added to a snowball, but not to a diamond. The so-called charismatic movement is like a snowball to which unclean things can be added. Our eyes need to be opened to see that today God desires the real, living, and practical local churches.

### *Concerning the Church*

The last section of the divine revelation concerns the church. It is difficult to know the church because Satan, the subtle enemy, is not willing for Christians to see what the real church is.

*The Universal Church:* The church as the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-13) is universally one (Eph. 1:22-23; 4:4-6). Christ as the unique Head has one unique Body, which is constituted with all His genuine believers.

*The Local Churches:* 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 (Rev. 1:12, 20), are locally one (Acts 8:1; 13:1; Rom. 16:1; 1 Cor. 1:2). Revelation 1:4 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 1:11. The seven churches were in those seven cities respectively, not all in one city. Revelation does not deal with the one universal church but with the local churches in many cities. The church is first revealed as universal in Matthew 16:18 and then as local in 18:17. In Acts the church was practiced in the way of local churches, such as the church in Jerusalem (8:1), the church in Antioch (13:1), the church in Ephesus (20:17), and the churches in the

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provinces of Syria and Cilicia (15:41). Except for a few Epistles written to individuals, all the Epistles were written to the local churches. Not one was written to the universal church. Without the local churches there is 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. Concerning the church, the book of Revelation is in the advanced stage, for it is written to local churches. If we would know this book, we must advance from the understanding of the universal church to the realization and practice of the local churches. Only those who are in the local churches are rightly positioned with the right angle and the proper perspective to see the visions in this book.

In 1:11 the voice said to John, “What you see write in a scroll 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. In this verse we see that sending this book “to the seven churches” equals sending it to 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. In no city was there more than one church. This is the local church, local city-wise, not street-wise or area-wise. 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.

Revelation 1:4 speaks of “the seven churches.” Seven is the number for completion in God’s operation, such as seven days for God’s creation (Gen. 1:31—2:3), seven seals (5:5), seven trumpets (8:2), and seven bowls (15:7) for God’s move on the earth. Hence, the seven churches are for God’s move in completion.

**T**he church 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 we do not have the local churches, we do not have the church. Likewise, if we do not have the members, we do not have the Body. If we do not have the local church, we cannot have the universal church, for the universal church is composed of all the local churches, just as the human body is composed of its many members. To have only the universal church is to be in a vanity fair.

Revelation 1:20 says, “The mystery of the seven stars which you saw upon My right hand and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are messengers of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.” When John saw the seven stars in the right hand of Christ and the seven golden lampstands in the midst of which was Christ, it was a mystery to him. He did not realize the significance of the seven heavenly stars and the seven golden lampstands. Hence, the Lord unveiled the mystery to him, saying that “the seven stars are messengers of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.” The significance of this was not only a mystery to John but also to believers today. All believers need the unveiling of this mystery to see the churches and their messengers.

The churches, signified by the golden lampstands, are “the testimony of Jesus” (vv. 2, 9) in the divine nature, shining in the dark night locally, yet collectively. The churches should be of the divine nature—golden. They should be the stands, even the lampstands, that bear the lamp with the oil (Christ as the life-giving Spirit), shining in the darkness respectively and collectively. They are individual lampstands locally, yet at the same time they are a group, a collection, of lampstands universally. They are not only

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shining locally but also bearing universally the same testimony both to the localities and to the universe. They are of the same nature and in the same shape. They bear the same lamp for the same purpose and are fully identified with one another, not having any individual distinctiveness. The differences of the local churches recorded in chapters 2 and 3 are all of a negative nature, not of a positive nature. Negatively, in their failures, they are different and separate one from another; but positively, in their nature, shape, and purpose, they are absolutely identical and connected one to another. It is easy for believers to see the universal church, but it is difficult for them to see the churches. The revelation of the local churches is the Lord's ultimate unveiling concerning the church. It has been given in the last book of the divine Word. To fully know the church, believers must follow the Lord from the Gospels through the Epistles to the book of Revelation until they are enabled to see the local churches as unveiled here. In Revelation the first vision is concerning the churches. The churches with Christ as their center are the focus in the divine administration for the accomplishment of God's eternal purpose.

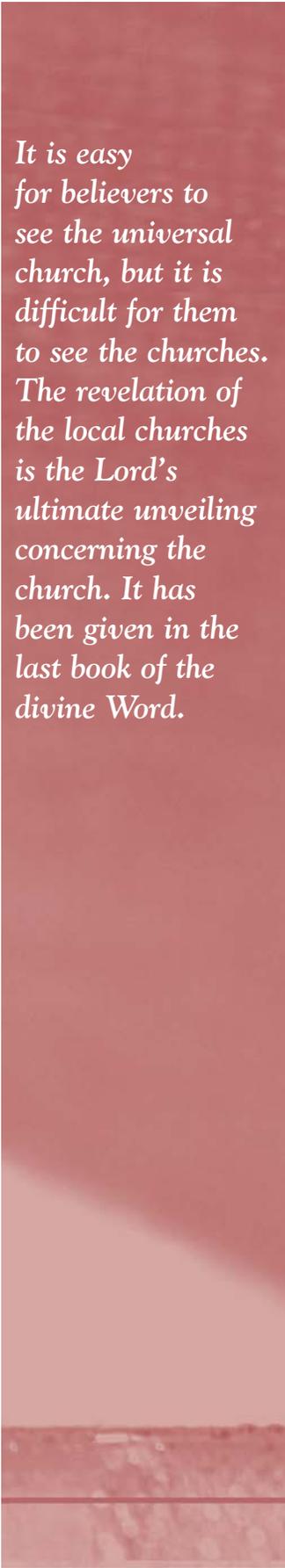
I hope that we all, especially the young people, will see that the destination of God's revelation is the local churches. God's revelation continued progressively, only stopping when He had reached the local churches. The local churches are God's destination. God has brought His revelation into the local churches. This is the reason that the churches are full of revelation, light, and truth. Outside the churches there is the shortage of light, revelation, and food. But the churches are full of revelation because they are the destination of God's revelation. Thus, all the riches of the divine revelation are here.

If we would see this, then we would realize that we are not over-zealous for the church. Our spirit testifies to this. Whenever we do not testify of the local churches, our spirit abates. Whenever we try to be wise and not arouse opposition against us by avoiding discussion of the church, we are immediately deadened within. But when we boldly speak of the local church, we are stirred up, our spirit is living and burning, and we feel like shouting, crying, and even thundering. I realize that it is better not to offend people. However, when I try not to offend people, I offend the Lord. But when I strongly tell people that the local churches are the Lord's destination, I sense that the Lord is with me. According to the whole Bible, the Son of Man, Christ, is walking in the midst of the local churches. If we are seeking Christ, then we must come to the local churches. The Son of Man is moving among the churches and caring for them. If we would participate in this caring, we must be in the local churches. Our burden today is to bring God's people to His goal, and our purpose is to help the saints to reach God's destination.

Before we came into the local churches, we were wanderers. We never had the sense that we had come home or that we had reached our destination. But the day we came into the local churches, we realized that we had come home. After wandering for years, we knew that we had finally reached our destination. When we first came into the local church life, something deep within said, "This is the place," and we knew that we were home. Because we have arrived at our destination, we do not need to travel anymore. So many seeking Christians today are travelers; they travel from one denomination or group to another. But the day we came into the church life, our wanderings ceased. The local churches are what God desires today. This is the last station of His revelation. Our need is simply to live the local church life. Our testimony is that we are not an organization—we are the local expressions of the Body of Christ.

### **The Progress of the Manifestation of God**

God is embodied and expressed in Christ (John 1:1, 14; 1 Tim. 3:16; Col. 2:9), and Christ is realized and experienced as the Spirit (John 14:16-17; 1 Cor. 15:45b; 2 Cor. 3:17;



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Rom. 8:10; Phil. 1:19). The Spirit is the very constituent of the church, which is the Body of Christ, His fullness (Eph. 1:22-23; 1 Cor. 12:12). Now the Body of Christ is expressed in all the local churches, for the local churches are the expressions of the universal church (Rev. 1:11-12). The local churches are the expression of the Body, the Body is the realization of Christ as the life-giving Spirit, and Christ is the embodiment of God. Thus, in the local churches we have God, Christ, the Spirit, and the church. This is why the local churches are so rich.

Where can we meet God with His purpose? In the local churches. Where can we gain Christ with all His riches? In the local churches. Where can we participate in the intensified life-giving Spirit? In the local churches. Where can we be a practical part of the Body? In the local churches. We are no longer wanderers—we are people in the local churches! We have reached our destination and have come home! We are home for eternity! Here in the churches we have God with His purpose, we have Christ with His riches, we have the intensified life-giving Spirit, and we have the proper church life. Here the Bible is not only open—it is real. Hallelujah for the local churches!

God's revelation began with God Himself and continued with Christ and the Spirit until it reached its goal in the local churches. Without the local churches we do not have the goal of the divine revelation. Here the shortage among the Jews, many Christians, and even many so-called spiritual people becomes evident. The Jews have God, most Christians have God and Christ, and the improved Christians also have the Spirit, but very few Christians have the proper church life in the local churches. Today, in the local churches we have God, Christ, the Spirit, and the church.

**T**he issue of the progress of the manifestation of God is the church. God is embodied in Christ, Christ is realized and experienced as the Spirit who imparts life to us, and the Spirit issues in the churches. When we experience and realize Christ as the life-giving Spirit, the issue is the church life. The church is the Body, the fullness of Christ. The progress of this revelation is God, Christ, the Spirit, the church, and the local churches. This is the revelation of God in His Holy Word. In this, we can see how God is realized by us and how He is actually expressed and manifested.

God first took the step of being incarnated, of being embodied in Christ. If we want to meet God, we must meet Christ. Do we want to come to God? Then we must come to Christ. Outside of Christ, it is impossible to touch God. God is embodied in a practical and real man by the name of Jesus Christ. When we meet Him, we meet God. When we touch Him, we touch God. When we gain Him, we gain God. When we receive Him, we receive God, because He is the very embodiment of God Himself. This Christ is realized and experienced by us as the life-giving Spirit. He is not only our Savior, our Redeemer, our Lord, our holiness, and our righteousness; He is the very life-giving Spirit. His being our Savior, Redeemer, and Lord is for Him to be the life-giving Spirit. What we actually and practically have today is the life-giving Spirit. Most Christians have missed this very crucial point because the subtle enemy has done his best to hide this matter.

If Christ were only our Savior, Redeemer, and Lord, how could the church be practically produced? The Savior does not produce the church directly; neither does the Lord produce the church directly. In order for the church to be produced, there is the need for Christ to be the life-giving Spirit. In knowing Christ as the life-giving Spirit, we must not rely upon our mentality, for it is too limited to comprehend this. Although we cannot understand it thoroughly, we can experience it. Our daily experience testifies that the Christ whom we enjoy is the life-giving Spirit within us. Not only is Christ Himself wonderful, mysterious, unlimited, and unsearchable, but even the food we enjoy each day is beyond our understanding. Although we cannot know food by exercising our mentality, we can know its taste by our experience. By our

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experience, we know what food is. Do not pay attention to theological talk. Those who engage in this talk are snared by the over-exercise of their mentality. We just care for the pure Word in the divine revelation and for our personal, practical experience. Our experience testifies that the very Christ whom we enjoy each day is the life-giving Spirit. Do we not have the reality of the living One within us? This is the very Christ whom we are enjoying, experiencing, and partaking of in our spirit. This is the life-giving Spirit who is Christ Himself. Thus, God is embodied in Christ, and Christ is realized and experienced in us as the life-giving Spirit.

This experience issues in the church. The more we experience Christ in this way, the more we long for the church. This experience creates a hunger and a thirst deep within. Formerly, when we were not in the local churches, we could not specify what we were hungry and thirsty for. But after coming into the church, we realized that our experience of Christ created a hunger and thirst for the church life. When we came into the church life, our hunger and thirst were satisfied. This satisfaction creates within us a deeper appreciation of Christ, and this in turn causes us to enjoy Him more and more. The more we enjoy Christ, the more we long for the church life; the more we long for the church life, the more we get into the church; and the more we get into the church, the more we appreciate and enjoy Christ. This is a glorious cycle, and we can testify that we are in it.

**T**oday we are here for the testimony of Jesus, which issues from the genuine experience of Christ as the life-giving Spirit. Thus, I say, once again, that God is embodied in Christ, Christ is realized and experienced as the life-giving Spirit, and the experience of Christ as the life-giving Spirit issues in the church life. The church is the Body, the expression and the fullness of Christ. As such, it must have its local expressions. The universal church is the Body, the fullness, of Christ, and the local churches are the expressions of this universal church. We are in these expressions today.

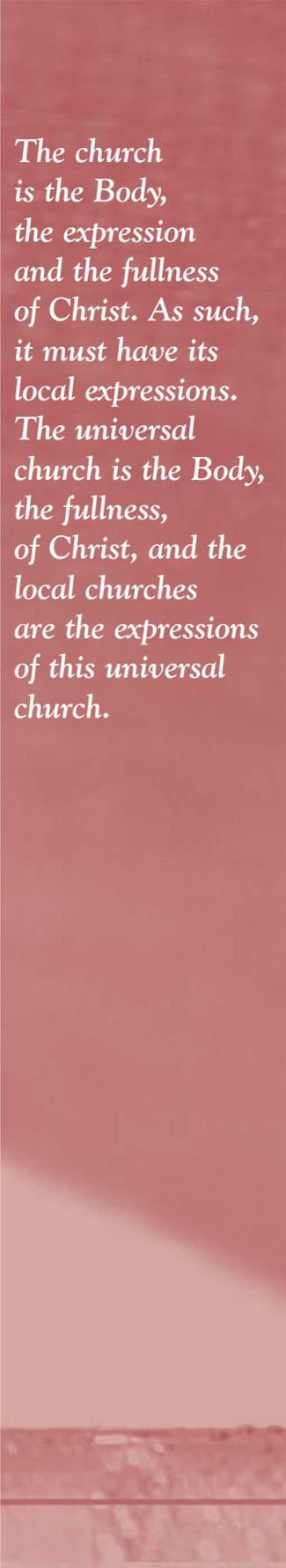
### **The Way to See God's Revelation and to Realize God's Manifestation**

#### ***To Be Separated unto God***

To see God's revelation and to realize His manifestation, we need to be separated unto God. The apostle John was fully separated unto God on the island of Patmos (v. 9). He was also brought to the open door of heaven (4:1) and to a great and high mountain (21:10), and thus saw God's revelation and realized God's manifestation. Today, many Christians who are talking about the church do not see the local churches mainly because they are not separated unto God.

#### ***To Be in the Human Spirit***

Revelation 1:10 says, "I was in spirit on the Lord's Day and heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet." The book of Revelation stresses not only the Spirit of God as the sevenfold intensified Spirit for God's intensified move but also our human spirit as the organ for us to realize and respond to God's move. Only (our) spirit can respond to (God's) Spirit. The book of Revelation is composed of four major visions: the vision of the churches (chs. 1—3); the vision of the destiny of the world (chs. 4—16); the vision of Babylon the great (chs. 17—20); and the vision of the New Jerusalem (chs. 21—22). To see these four visions, John was in his spirit (1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10), as mentioned in Ephesians 3:5, for the revelation of the mystery of Christ. We also need to be in our spirit to see the visions of this book. It is not merely a matter of mental understanding but of spiritual realization. In the first vision of this book, the vision concerning the churches, both Christ and the messengers of the churches are unveiled with the churches as never before, and this in a most particular way. For this the believers need a particular vision in their spirits.



*The church is the Body, the expression and the fullness of Christ. As such, it must have its local expressions. The universal church is the Body, the fullness, of Christ, and the local churches are the expressions of this universal church.*

If Christians only understand the doctrine concerning the local churches, they may not see the vision. All Christians need to hear the voice, the present and living speaking of the Lord. The Lord's voice directs us to the vision of the local churches.

The Lord's Day in this verse should be the first day of the week, the day the Lord was resurrected (John 20:1). The early church used to meet on this day (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2). It was on this day that John was in spirit to see the visions of God's economy. To see the revelation of the local churches, we need to turn from our reasoning mind to our seeing spirit. Remaining in the reasoning mind confuses the vision of the churches.

#### *To Hear the Lord's Voice*

If Christians only understand the doctrine concerning the local churches, they may not see the vision. All Christians need to hear the voice, the present and living speaking of the Lord. The Lord's voice directs us to the vision of the local churches.

#### *To Turn to the Lord's Voice*

Revelation 1:12 says, "I turned to see the voice that spoke with me; and when I turned, I saw seven golden lampstands." To see anything requires the right position with the right angle. The apostle John first heard the voice (v. 10), and when he "turned to see" the voice, he saw the golden lampstands. He was rightly positioned, but he still needed the right angle to see the vision concerning the churches; thus, he turned. It is the same with us today. Many Christians need to be adjusted in their position and turned that they may see the vision of the churches. **AFG**

### **Maintaining One Expression of the Church in a Locality**

Many of the divisions of the church exist only because of different views that the believers have concerning the truth. Certainly, the truth is absolute, but the Scriptures allow for different doctrinal views. However, the Scriptures absolutely do not permit us to divide over our different doctrinal views. First Corinthians 1:10-13 and Titus 3:10 show that to be sectarian, to be divisive, is absolutely condemned by the Bible. The Bible allows us to keep this day or to keep that day, but the Bible does not permit us to divide over our different concepts concerning the keeping of days. We may have a different view concerning the truth, but we cannot be divided from others because of our view. We must bear with those whose views are different from ours...To keep the oneness of the church, we need to tolerate these things. Our heart should be enlarged; it has to be as large as the heart of God. God does not require us to have the same doctrinal concepts; God requires us only to have the one faith...This is the oneness of the church. We should never divide from others over doctrines. The Bible absolutely does not permit us to be divided because of doctrines, even the best doctrines.

Of course, this does not mean that there is not an accurate understanding regarding a particular matter. There is an accurate understanding of the truth regarding baptism, regarding the Lord's Day, and even regarding all other matters. Concerning these matters, the apostles have given us complete and precise teachings. But while they were accurate and serious in teaching, they were tolerant and broad in attitude and practice, not requiring uniformity...They absolutely insisted that the church could not be divided. Today we also must insist on this matter. Truth involves accuracy, but many different views concerning the truth must be tolerated. There should not be any division because of different views regarding the truth.

From *The Testimony and the Ground of the Church* by Witness Lee, pp. 122-123