

The Vision of Christ and the Church

by Witness Lee

Everyone who serves the Lord must be a person with a vision. The apostle Paul said that he was not disobedient to the heavenly vision (Acts 26:19). He served for his whole life according to the vision that he had received. If we have a desire to serve, we need a vision. We should ask the Lord to grant us a vision. We need to see the most central vision, the most fundamental vision, in God's purpose so that we may have a real understanding and seeing of the most basic and central matters concerning God's intention.

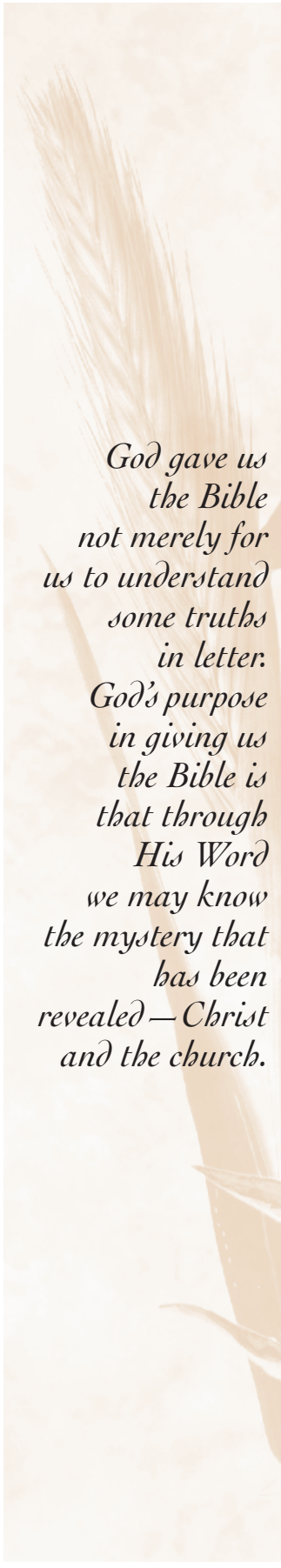
Christ and the Church Being a Great Mystery in the Universe

Ephesians 5:32, a simple verse from the Scriptures, shows that there is a great mystery in the universe—Christ and the church. In the Bible a number of mysteries are mentioned, but only this mystery, the mystery of Christ and the church, is a great mystery. First Timothy 3:16 says, “Confessedly, great is the mystery of godliness: He who was manifested in the flesh.” This mystery refers to Christ, on the one hand, and to the church, on the other. Therefore, we can clearly and definitely say that Christ and the church are a great mystery. Although the Bible says that the mystery of God is Christ and that the mystery of Christ is the church, only when Christ and the church are mentioned together does the Bible say that this is a great mystery. We can say that if there were only Christ and not the church, the mystery would not be complete, and if there were only the church and not Christ, the mystery would not be possible. Therefore, this mystery must be constituted with both Christ and the church.

According to common understanding, a mystery is something hidden and generally unknown to people. The meaning of the mystery mentioned in the Bible, however, goes beyond this. Strictly speaking, in the Bible a mystery not only refers to things that are incomprehensible and unknown to men but also to things that are hidden in God's heart.

For example, the universe with all the things created by God is very evident and therefore not a mystery. However, the purpose of God's creation of the universe is a mystery. All the people in the world have seen the God-created universe, but from the ancient days to the present time, very few have been able to fathom the purpose of God's creation. This is because the purpose for the creation of the universe was hidden in God's heart. It is nearly impossible for man to touch God's purpose, God's plan, which is hidden in His heart. Hence, it is a mystery. This is the principle concerning mysteries mentioned in the Bible.

Not only the purpose of God's creation is a mystery to the world, but even the church and the saints are a mystery to the world. Today people see that there are Christians and there is the church, but very few know why there are Christians and why there is the church. The unbelievers do not know this, and even many of those who serve and work for the Lord do not necessarily understand this, because this is also a mystery.



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The church is something hidden in God's heart. Unless God reveals the mystery hidden in His heart concerning the church, we, like others, cannot know what the church is all about. We may preach the gospel fervently and serve the Lord diligently, but it is quite possible that we do not have any idea concerning what God intends to have in the universe. Hence, we all need to see a vision. The central vision God wants us to see in this age is the vision concerning Christ and the church.

Knowing Christ and the Church Being the Key to Knowing the Bible

Today many people pursue to understand the Bible. We know, however, that a person cannot understand the Bible unless he knows Christ. Likewise, a person cannot understand the Bible unless he knows the church. Strictly speaking, we should not pursue to understand and know the Bible; rather, we should pursue to know Christ and His church. The purpose of our knowing the Bible is that through it we may know Christ and the church. God gave us the Bible not merely for us to understand some truths in letter. God's purpose in giving us the Bible is that through His Word we may know the mystery that has been revealed—Christ and the church. Therefore, unless we have seen the vision of this mystery and thereby know Christ and the church, we cannot understand the Bible.

Pursuing to Know Christ and the Church

Because we are touching Christ and the church, the subject of our fellowship, the center of our pursuit, and the content of our conversation are not just some biblical truths. What we treasure, pursue, and fellowship about is nothing other than Christ and the church. Christ and the church are too great! From the Word of God we can see that in Christ all the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily (Col. 2:9). God puts everything that He is and has into Christ in order that Christ may come into us to be our everything. Hence, Ephesians 3 says that when Christ dwells in us and is touched and experienced by us, the result is that we will be filled unto all the fullness of God (vv. 17-19). Therefore, not only Christ is full, but the church is full. What we are endeavoring to pursue is to know Christ and the church.

Christ Being Our Life

Christ to us is a matter of life. The Bible says that Christ is our life (Col. 3:4). Christ came to die for us on the cross; then in His resurrection He entered into the Holy Spirit. Christ redeemed us so that He could come into us to be our life. Christ was God incarnated to be mingled with man. The principle of Christ is the mingling of God and man, and this God who was mingled with man is in us to be our life. Hence, whenever Christ is mentioned, there is the thought of His being life to us. If we have a desire to serve God today, we must have a considerable amount of knowledge concerning this matter of Christ's being life to us. Instead of just listening to some messages about life, we must see the vision of Christ as life and live practically by Him as life.

A Thorough Consecration

If we desire to live practically by Christ as life, we must first consecrate ourselves. What is consecration? Consecration means that we hand ourselves over to Christ and let Him be our life. A consecrated person is a person who continually hands himself over to the Lord. Although we have our own will, we give it up and take Christ's will as our will. Although we have our own love, we give it up and take Christ's love as our love. In the same way, although we have our own thoughts and inclinations, we give them all up and take Christ's thoughts as our thoughts and Christ's inclinations as our inclinations. We must turn ourselves over to Christ completely and take Him into us to be our life. Although we have life and are living, we have given up our life and take Christ as our life instead.

Whether or not we can take Christ as our life depends on whether or not we are seriously willing to give everything of ourselves to Him. Only a person who gives himself completely

to the Lord can be a person who truly knows Christ as life. Such a person is usually a very strong person. Those who are weak are not willing to consecrate, to hand over, themselves to the Lord in a serious way. Reading from the Old Testament through the New Testament, you can see that those who loved the Lord intensely were strong. People such as Samuel, Daniel, Peter, Paul, and the martyrs throughout the generations were all very strong. They handed themselves over completely and took Christ to be their life. To them this was not a doctrine; rather, they practically received Christ into their daily walk and life. Hence, they could say, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me," and "For to me, to live is Christ" (Gal. 2:20; Phil. 1:21). Because they gave themselves up completely, they could practically experience Christ as their life.

A Renewed Love

This kind of consecration needs to be maintained by a fresh love to the Lord. We need consecration, and we also need love. Furthermore, this love needs to be renewed daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly. We have to renew this love every morning. We have to renew this love on the first day of every week, that is, on the Lord's Day; we have to renew this love on the first day of the month; and we have to renew this love at the beginning of every year. Furthermore, we even have to renew this love in everything and in every situation. We should tell the Lord, "I love You. I want to be Your lover." By always renewing our love to the Lord in this way, we will be able to maintain our consecration to Him.

Fellowshipping and Inquiring

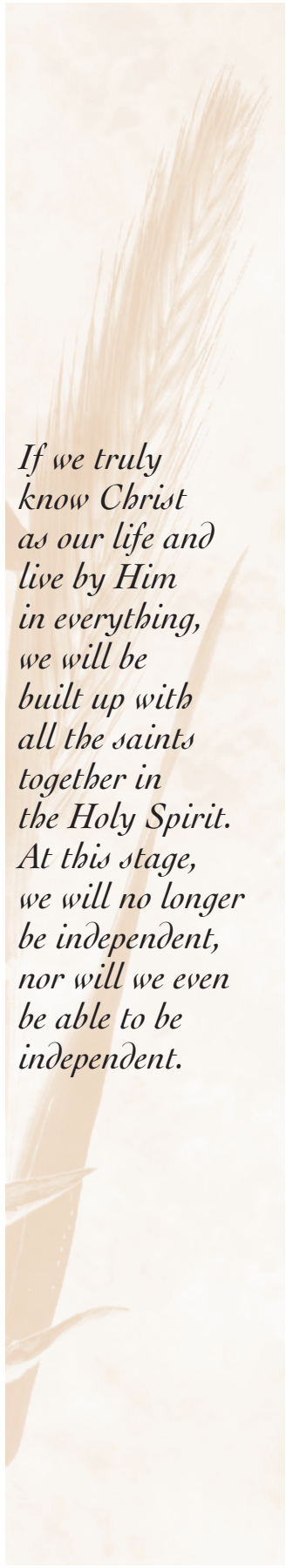
To experience Christ as life, in addition to consecrating ourselves and maintaining our consecration in love, we also need to have constant fellowship with the Lord, always waiting in His presence. We need to look to Him, inquire of Him, and take counsel with Him in our daily life concerning all matters, whether great or small. We have to always ask the Lord, "Lord, are You with me in all these things—in the way I speak, in the way I treat others, in the way I spend my money, and in the way I dress myself?" This is not to be religious or to keep certain regulations; rather, this is to allow Christ to be our life. When we fellowship with Christ and inquire of Him in this way, He will be our life practically in our daily walk. Therefore, we can see that Christ to us is a matter of life.

The Church Being Our Living

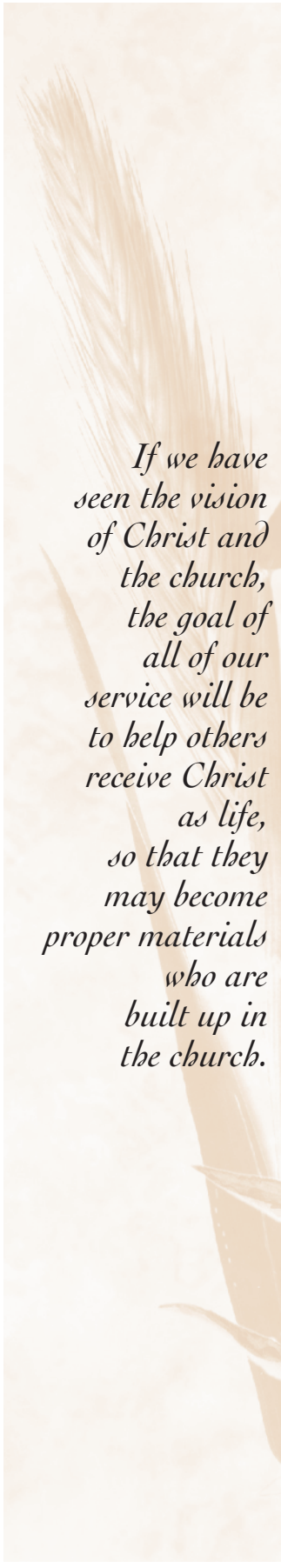
Then what is the church to us? The church to us is a matter of living. Our living includes not only our walk and conduct but also our work and service. Our visitations, our preaching of the word, and our various other services all constitute our living. With an actor, his acting on the stage is one thing, and his actual living off the stage is another thing. A disobedient son may act as a very obedient person on the stage, and his performance can be quite moving. Likewise, a person can act as a highly moral person on the stage, yet off the stage his living may be quite corrupt. This is to perform. We are not like this. Our preaching of the word, our visitations, and our services should be our living. All the work and services in the church are our living. Our living is the church.

Not Being Independent

Why is it that our living is the church? It is because if we truly know Christ as our life and live by Him in everything, we will be built up with all the saints together in the Holy Spirit. At this stage, we will no longer be independent, nor will we even be able to be independent. We will not be able to work independently or even live independently. I must live in the church with the brothers and sisters, because the Christ in me is also in them. Christ is life to me as well as to the brothers and sisters. We all enjoy the same Christ as life. Christ lives in me, and He also lives in them. I live by Christ, and they also live by Christ. We all live by the same Christ. Therefore, we cannot be separated, nor can we live an independent life any longer. We can only live together. When Christ is lived out through us in this way, that is the church. When we have the church, we will no longer be independent.



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In God's eyes the church life is worth much more than our individual life. Although we can pray by ourselves individually, we can enjoy the most crucial and best prayers when we pray together with the brothers and sisters, not when we pray by ourselves. Although we can worship individually, we enjoy more precious and higher worship when we worship together with the brothers and sisters. Likewise, the most effective gospel preaching is the gospel preaching by the whole church. We may say that all worthy services are services in the church.

Hence, our living, action, work, and service all should be in a builded condition and all should be in the church. This is not to say that we have an organization in which all of us are unified. Rather, this is to say that because we know the Christ who is life in us and because we love Him, consecrate ourselves and our everything to Him, have fellowship with Him, and live in Him, He spontaneously builds us up together. Therefore, the church is a corporate entity, a spiritual Body, formed by the building together of all the saved ones. Each one of us is just a member of the Body of Christ. As such, we cannot be detached from the Body, we cannot be Christians in an individual way, and we cannot serve the Lord independently.

Keeping the Order in the Body

In the church we cannot be independent, and we also cannot stay away from the order. Whenever we leave the order, we leave the Body. Whenever we lose the proper order, our fellowship with the Body is interrupted. Losing the proper order indicates that we are still living an independent life and have stopped living the church life. This also means that we have stopped taking Christ as our life. Whenever we let Christ be our life, our living will surely be the church, and spontaneously we will not be able to be independent, we will keep the order, and we will have the coordination. When we know the order in the Body and accept God's arrangement, we will know God's authority in the church.

Taking the Vision of Christ and the Church as the Goal of Our Service

The vision of Christ and the church is related not only to our personal growth in life but also to the building up of the church on earth. When we experience Christ as life, we can then have the growth in life. When we live the church life, the church can then be built up. Hence, each of us who serves the Lord must see the vision of Christ and the church. We need to see and live in such a vision. This vision should also become the goal of our service. It should be like a brightly shining lamp, and we should walk in its light. If we are serving the children in the church, we must help them to know Christ in their youth and to become materials for the building of the church so that one day they too will be built up together. If we are serving the young people, then by the wisdom given to us by God, we should help them to receive Christ, so that they may become useful materials in the church to be the future deacons, elders, and evangelists. If we have seen the vision of Christ and the church, the goal of all of our service will be to help others receive Christ as life, so that they may become proper materials who are built up in the church. In all of our services, we should exercise all wisdom to help people to gain Christ as life, so that they may become materials for the building and be built up as the spiritual house of God. Brothers and sisters, this is our vision.

Taking Christ as Life and Entering into the Body of Christ

We know that the one book in the Scriptures that most clearly depicts the levels of our spiritual life is the book of Romans. This book tells us clearly the stages of the believer's spiritual journey, spiritual experience, before God. From chapter 1 through the first half of chapter 3, Romans shows that all the people in the world are sinners who do not know God and who are under God's condemnation. From the second half of chapter 3 through chapter 4 it shows that by believing and receiving Christ's redemption, sinners are justified and accepted by God and thereby reconciled to God. In chapter 5 it tells us that those who have been redeemed and justified by God were formerly in Adam and had inherited

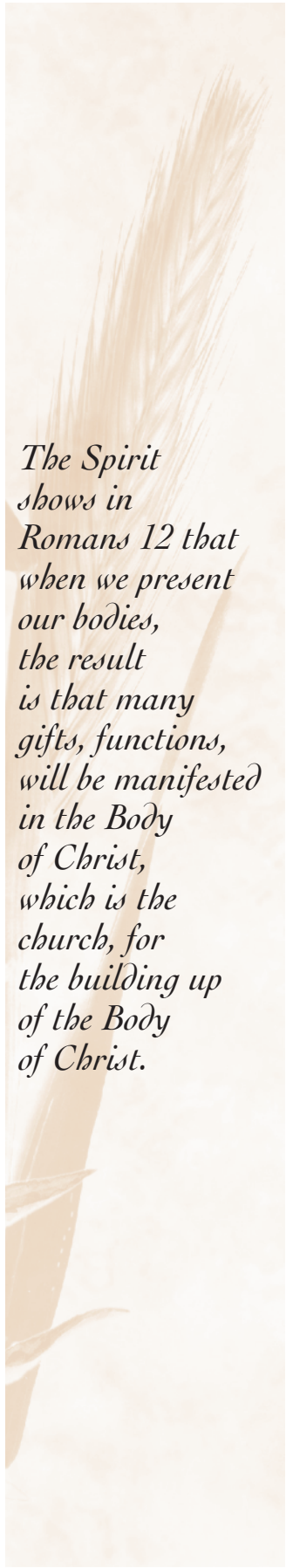
sin and death. Chapter 6 tells us that through faith and baptism we are united with Christ, that we are in Christ, and that we have received Christ's death and resurrection. Through Christ's death we have been delivered from the sin in Adam, and through Christ's resurrection we have been delivered from the death in Adam. Chapter 7 tells us that in our experience we know the old creation, in our practical daily life we know the impotence of our flesh, and as a result, we realize that the old creation and our flesh are incurable. The first half of chapter 8 tells us that if we live by the law of the Spirit of life and walk according to the spirit, we are those who live in the Holy Spirit. The second half of chapter 8 tells us that we are being conformed to the image of God's Son, not only through the work of the Spirit of God within us but also through the working together of all things outside of us arranged by God. Therefore, when we arrive at chapter 8, inwardly we are filled with the Holy Spirit, and outwardly we have been broken by the environment; our entire being is conformed to the image of Christ. At this point we have completely received Christ as our life and are also completely living in Christ. Chapters 9 through 11 are a parenthetical word. Chapter 12, continuing chapter 8, tells us that we have to consecrate ourselves to God in a practical way by presenting our bodies a living sacrifice to God. We live in our body, so we have to present our body to have a practical consecration. Chapter 12 goes on to say that we are one Body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. When we present our bodies, the Body of Christ is perfected and manifested.

In Romans 12 there are two bodies: our body and the Body of Christ. If we hold on to our body, the Body of Christ cannot be perfected. If we want to build up the Body of Christ, we must present our body. The question is, do we intend to keep our own body, or do we desire to build up the Body of Christ? If we hold on to our own body, there cannot be the Body of Christ. If we hold on to our self, there cannot be the church. To have the church, we must let go of our self. We must present our body a living sacrifice. Only then can we become members of the Body of Christ in practicality, and only then will gifts and functions be manifested in us.

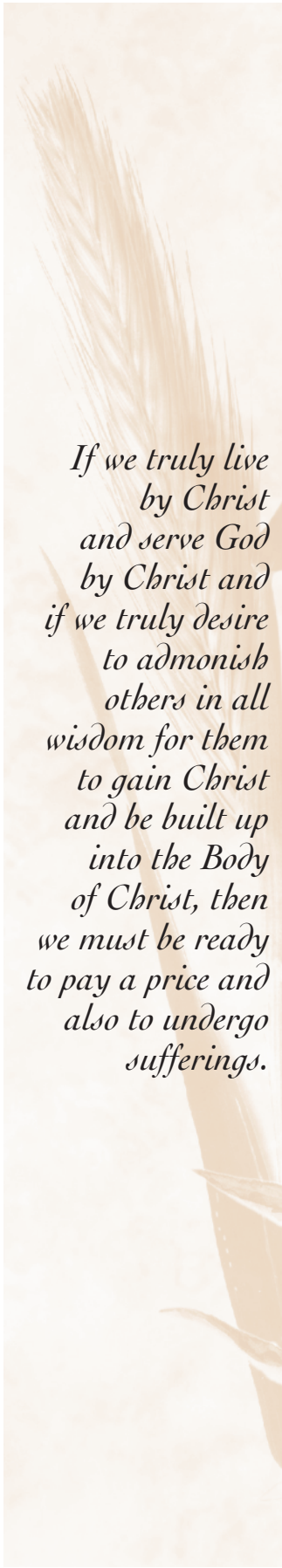
Some have been saved for many years, yet there is no function or gift manifested in them. This is because they are not willing to present their bodies; they are not willing to live in the Body of Christ. Romans 12 shows that even things in our daily life, such as showing mercy and loving the brothers, are gifts. You may not be able to preach the word, and you may not appear to know much, but if you are considerate toward others and have a heart to love the brothers, these are also gifts. Romans 12 joins the spiritual life and spiritual gifts together. The apostle mentions various gifts, including prophesying as prophets, serving as deacons, teaching, exhorting, giving, leading, showing mercy, and loving the brothers. He tells us that all of these are gifts. Not only prophesying, teaching, and leading are gifts, but even giving, showing mercy, and loving the brothers are gifts. All of these are spiritual gifts as well as aspects of the spiritual living. The Spirit shows here that when we present our bodies, the result is that all these gifts, functions, will be manifested in the Body of Christ, which is the church, for the building up of the Body of Christ.

Suffering on Behalf of the Body of Christ and Building Up the Body of Christ

In Colossians 1 the apostle Paul said that he suffered for the Body of Christ to fill up that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ. We have to know that Christ underwent two kinds of suffering. The first kind of suffering is the suffering for substitution in which He was judged and stricken by God for our sins. None of us can have any share in this kind of suffering. He alone went through this suffering for us. The second kind of suffering is the suffering for germination. This kind of suffering can be likened to a grain of wheat falling into the earth and dying and thereby bringing forth many grains. This kind of suffering is for the releasing and imparting of life to us for the producing of the church. Christ has not yet completed this aspect of His suffering; there is still a lack. This is what Paul refers to as "that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ" (v. 24). This kind of affliction needs to be filled up by all the lovers of the Lord throughout the ages. The three thousand and the five thousand who were saved in the early days of the church could not have



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been saved without the sufferings experienced by the first group of apostles. The early churches could not come into existence without the sufferings experienced by Paul and his co-workers. Likewise, if we do not undergo sufferings, we cannot cause others to receive Christ as life, bear many grains, or gain many members for the building up of the Body of Christ. Therefore, we who serve the Lord should fill up that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ for His Body.

The apostle Paul said that his sufferings were for the church and his serving as a minister was also for the church. He served the Lord as a minister of the church to complete the word of God, which was the mystery hidden from the ages and from the generations, which is Christ in us, the hope of glory. Therefore, Paul preached Christ, and the issue was the church. His work was to release Christ for the building up of the church. He ministered Christ to every man in all wisdom that he might present every man full-grown in Christ for the building up of the Body of Christ, which is the church (vv. 25-29). Therefore, the work of the apostle was, on the one hand, for people to receive Christ as their life, and on the other hand, for people to take the church as their living. This should also be our service today. In all of our service in the church, we should bring Christ to people that they may receive Him and be built up in the church.

The Requirements of the Vision

If we desire to serve the Lord according to this vision, we must be prepared to satisfy the requirements of this vision. A person who serves according to this vision must be willing to pay a price and to suffer. It is not enough to just pay a price; we must also accept sufferings. Hence, the apostle said that there is the need to fill up that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ. If we truly live by Christ and serve God by Christ and if we truly desire to admonish others in all wisdom for them to gain Christ and be built up into the Body of Christ, then we must be ready to pay a price and also to undergo sufferings. Only those who are willing to pay a great price and to undergo sufferings can walk on the way of service.

Please remember, however, that the price we pay will enable us to gain the glorious Christ and the glorious church, and the sufferings we undergo are for us to gain the glorious Christ and the glorious church. Compared to the glory that will be manifested to us in the future, the momentary lightness of affliction means nothing. Therefore, we should not hesitate from going forward, considering the price to be too great and the afflictions too heavy. We have to see what we will gain for the price we pay and the afflictions we experience. Praise God, what we get instead is a priceless treasure.

If we see this vision, we will know what race we are running, what work we are doing, and whom we are serving. If we have seen this vision, no amount of opposition and hardship will be able to cause us to be shaken or to be disobedient. This is because this vision is glorious and has eternal worth.

Pursuing to Know Christ and the Church

Finally, we need to pursue to know Christ, and we also need to pursue to know the church. Christ is our life, and the church is our living. For us to live is Christ, and what we live out is the church. When Christ grows in us, the church is built up. If we truly let Christ live in us, He will not allow us to be independent without any order and without any authority. That the church is our living is seen clearly in two matters: first, that the members cannot be independent but are coordinated with one another; second, that there cannot be the absence of order and authority. This is just like our body—no member is independent; instead, every member is coordinated with other members. Furthermore, every member has its order, and with this order there is authority. To cease from being independent is to be coordinated, and to keep the order is to be vertical. This is the church life. May the Lord grant every one of us to have this glorious vision of Christ and the church. 