JOHN 17 FULFILLED

So That We May Be One in Him

THE ROADMAP TO MATURITY AND ONENESS IN CHRIST

INTRODUCTION

This message has been many years in the making. It comes from one who has experienced much failure, correction, suffering, mercy, and grace. Apart from the Lord's mercy, and grace I would have been disqualified from this race long ago. After spending many years "on the shelf," by His grace I am still in the race, learning Christ, and finishing the course He has set before me.

Through those many years one conviction has become increasingly clear: **God has an eternal purpose for His Church which is far greater than gathering saved individuals into religious organizations. He intends for His people to become a living and breathing corporate expression of His Son on this earth.**

The present immature and divided condition of His Church should grieve us, but our starting point must not be criticism. It must be Christ. The question is not first, "What is wrong with them?" but, "Lord, what are You seeking to accomplish in me, and where am I resisting Your work?"

This message is especially directed to those whom Christ has called to equip His people, but it applies to every member of His Body. The Lord is still building His Church. His eternal purpose has not changed.

WHY THIS MESSAGE IS VERY PERSONAL TO ME

I came to Christ in 1980 at 22 years old. I carried many deep wounds and destructive patterns from a broken childhood. Both my parents, and Grandfathers struggled with serious addictions, abuse and dysfunction issues marked our home. By the time I was a young man, many of those same patterns and addictions had been deeply ingrained in my own life. I came to Christ genuinely, but I did not come to Him whole, but as one with much hidden childhood trauma, many addictions, and lots of unhealthy baggage.

Almost immediately I believed God was calling me into "the ministry". So, I went to Bible college and soon became a pastor in a large growing church in Northwest Phoenix. Outwardly I was

studying Scripture, serving people, and doing the work of ministry. Inwardly, however, I was still fighting battles I could not seem to win. I prayed, repented, made new commitments, failed, and started over. I knew Christ had died for me, but I did not yet understand what His Cross meant as an inward, experiential reality.

In 1987, I lost my ministry position during a severe financial crisis at the church, my wife of one year left me, and in the devastating aftermath that followed I returned to the addictions from which Christ had delivered me. By the fall of 1989 I had reached a place of profound despair. At my lowest point, as I was in the process of taking my life, I sensed the Lord interrupt me with a very profound message:

"John, there is a death that needs to take place—but not death with a hand gun. Will you let Me teach you about this?"

I did not in that moment understand how important those words would become in later years.

The Lord began a long work of healing and restoration in me. Counseling helped bring buried wounds and destructive patterns into the light. In Dec. 1990 I was married to my beautiful wife, she had three awesome children from a previous marriage. and through many trials and much grace the Lord gave us two beautiful daughters in our first two years of marriage. This helped blend our family of now five, today we now have 16 beautiful Grandchildren. 😊 Through it all, He taught me many difficult lessons I could never have learned in a classroom. One of the most life changing, and foundational lessons the Lord began teaching me came shortly after the birth of our first child, Michelle in Sept. 1991. I remember sitting with her bundled in my arms, as I was rocking her outside one Fall evening. Suddenly I became overwhelmed in my heart with a love for her, a feeling unlike anything I had ever experienced. Having grown up in a deeply dysfunctional home, I had never truly known what it meant to feel being loved. Even after becoming a Christian, the Scriptures describing God's love for me had largely remained just words on a page. But as I looked at that baby girl that night, I felt a pure love previously unknown to me, a love that would gladly sacrifice my life for her. Feeling overwhelmed , I sensed the Lord speaking to my heart in that moment: **"John, I love you more than you love her."** For the first time in my life, I had a measurement by with which I could begin to comprehend the immeasurable love of my heavenly Father. What had previously been just words on a page gradually started becoming a reality which I began experiencing, this experience dramatically began changing the trajectory of my life.

In hindsight now I see His wisdom, in revealing His love for me prior to His beginning teaching me about the deeper work of the Cross, the Lord was teaching me the love from which that work must proceed.- Eph.3:16 that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, **17**so that Christ may dwell in

your hearts through faith; **[and] that you, being rooted and grounded in love,** **18**may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, **19and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge,** that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.

Then another decisive turning point came ten years later in 2001, when the Lord began to reveal to me the reality of the Cross- **Galatians 2:20 "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me."**-experientially in me, rather than being merely doctrinal information:

For the first twenty-one years of my Christian life, I had largely understood the Christian life as a continuing struggle to make myself into a better Christian. As the Holy Spirit began opening the meaning of the Cross to me, the basis of that struggle changed. I began to see that God's answer was not the improvement of the independent old self-life, but death of self-life and attaining to the new resurrection life of Christ—**"not I, but Christ."** For many years, I had struggled against generational deeply rooted sinful habits and addictions, often realizing inwardly that, despite my most determined efforts, I would eventually fail again. But in 2001**, I began understanding, and walking in His finished work- by faith**: That the victory I had been struggling to achieve for 21 years had already been accomplished at Calvary. I no longer needed to fight as though the old man were still alive, and victory depended upon my strength. By faith, I could now reckon myself as having died with Christ and made alive unto God. Now when those old temptations returned- as they always do, my response became remarkably simple: "**The man who used to reside here no longer lives here. He died with Christ two thousand years ago.- It is finished!**" What many years of self-effort had failed to accomplish, God began making real in my experience through faith in the finished work of His Son**. Twenty-one years of fighting and struggling stopped almost instantaneously.**

That discovery profoundly changed the course of my life and **gave birth to an intense burden that I have carried ever since**: that Christians, and especially those called to equip Christ's people, would know not merely forgiveness through the Cross, but **the Cross as God's answer to the independent/self-life, and Christ Himself as the Life of His new creation in us.**

That personal discovery quickly enlarged into a much greater question:

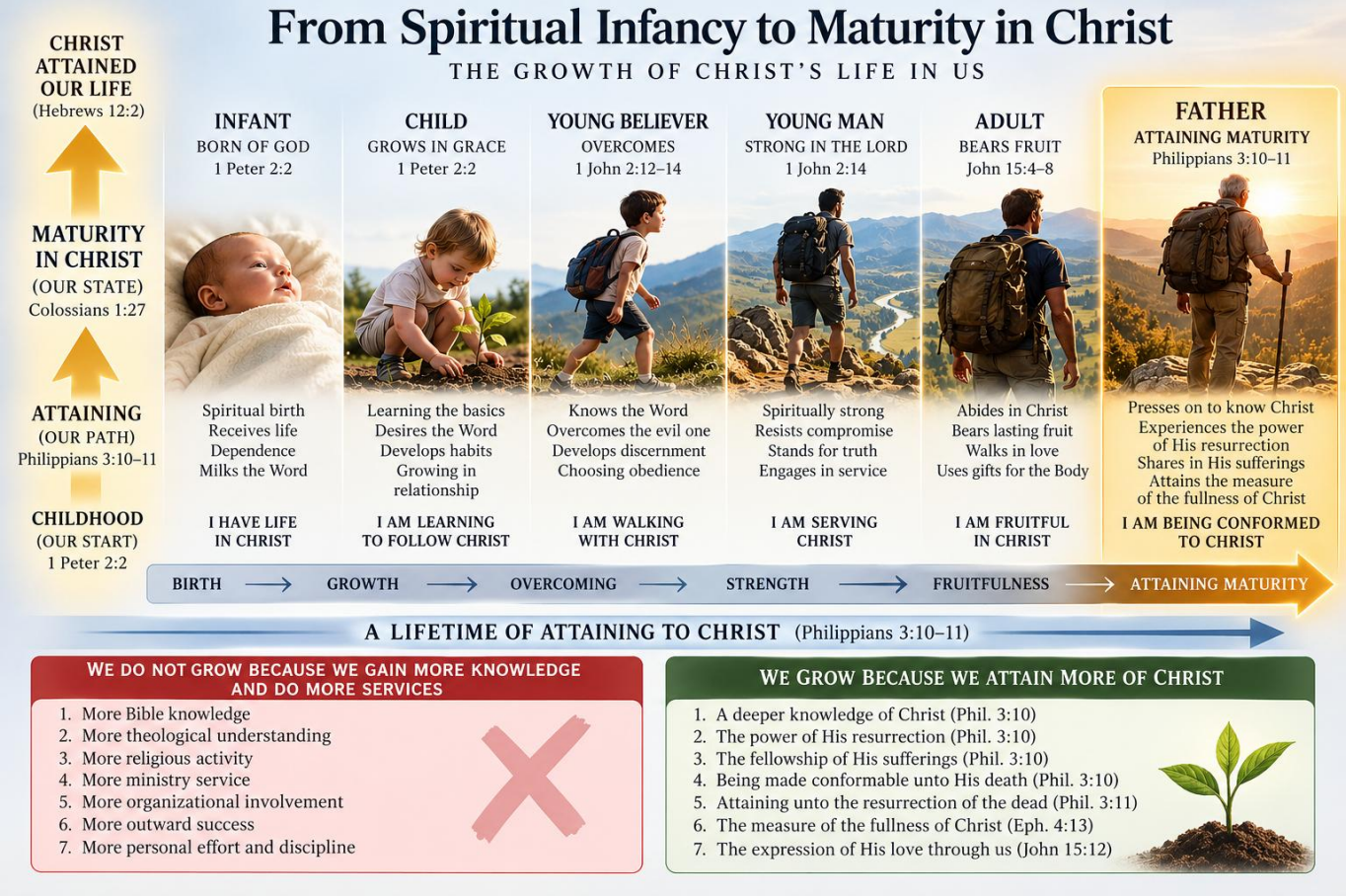
If the independent life is such an obstacle to Christ's expression in an individual believer, what happens when that same independent self-life operates corporately—in leaders, ministries, churches, movements, and denominations?

So, **my quest today**, and for the past 25 years **has been learning; How** does Christ who is received and revealed in us as babes, **become the Christ subjectively formed in us and corporately expressed through us as matured ones in Christ?**

Gal.4:19 My children, with whom I am again in labor until **Christ is formed in you**

Rom.8:20 For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined [to become] **conformed to the image of His Son,**

That question is one of the main reasons why I embarked on this journey in 2001.



BROKENNESS, ABIDING, AND ONENESS

From John 12 to John 15 to John 17

There are many truths concerning how to live the Christian life, but increasingly I have come to believe that, foundationally much of what Jesus intended for His people, can be understood through three simple principles:

Brokenness.
Abiding.
Oneness.

These realities appear with remarkable clarity in the closing chapters of John's Gospel.

In John 12, Jesus gives us the **grain of wheat**.

In John 15, He gives us the **vine and the branches**.

In John 17, He gives us His great prayer **that they all may be one**.

These are not three unrelated teachings.

They describe a spiritual progression:

John 12 — Brokenness
John 15 — Abiding
John 17 — Oneness

Or, stated another way:

The Cross begins dealing with the independent/self-life.
Abiding establishes Christ as our daily source of Life.
Oneness becomes the corporate expression of that Life.

Perhaps we have sometimes attempted to begin our work with **John 15,** or even **John 17**, without sufficiently understanding the foundational aspect of **John 12**.

We want fruitfulness.

We want abiding.

We want unity.

But Jesus begins with a grain of wheat falling into the ground and dying.

Perhaps that is where we must begin as well.

The Dwelling Place God Desires — Isaiah 57:15 and 66:1–2

Long before the Lord Jesus spoke of the grain of wheat falling into the ground and dying, the prophet Isaiah revealed something of God's eternal purpose concerning His dwelling place. In Isaiah 66:1, the Lord declares that heaven is His throne and earth His footstool. He then asks what kind of house man could possibly build for Him. His answer in verse 2 directs our attention **away from the outward accomplishments of man to the inward condition of the human heart. "The one upon whom He looks with favor is the one who is humble and contrite in spirit and who trembles at His word".**

This same divine principle is also beautifully expressed in Isaiah 57:15, where the Lord, who inhabits eternity and dwells in a high and holy place, declares that "**He also dwells with the contrite and lowly of spirit, in order to revive their hearts." What a remarkable revelation!** The

One whose throne is in heaven desires to make His dwelling with those who have been brought low before Him.

God is not seeking merely an impressive religious institution, an elaborate ministry, or a structure constructed through human effort. He desires a people through whom His own life, character, and authority may find expression upon the earth. His heavenly throne speaks of His sovereign authority, while the earth as His footstool reminds us that His purpose extends to the visible manifestation of His rule upon the earth.

Yet such a dwelling place cannot be established upon the foundation of man's independent self-life. The humble and contrite spirit described by Isaiah is not simply an outward attitude of religious humility, **but the inward disposition of one who has come to recognize the utter insufficiency of life apart from God. This is the very condition that prepares the heart for the deeper work of the Cross.**

Brokenness is not God's ultimate objective, nor is it an end in itself. Rather, it is through the surrender of our independence and self-sufficiency that the life of Christ finds increasing freedom of expression within us. **The purpose of brokenness is not merely the removal of self-confidence, but the manifestation of His life in its place.**

The great danger confronting the church is not necessarily a lack of knowledge, organization, resources, or religious activity. It is the possibility of possessing all these things while lacking the inward reality of Christ's life. God has never been impressed by man's religious accomplishments. He looks to those who are humble and contrite in spirit, who tremble at His word. The Cross brings the independent life of man to an end; abiding establishes our continuing dependence upon Christ; and oneness becomes the corporate testimony of His life expressed through His people.

This brings us directly to the Lord's teaching in John 12:24. The grain of wheat must fall into the earth and die before it can bear much fruit. Christ Himself is the supreme fulfillment of this principle through His death and resurrection, and He calls those who follow Him to surrender their independent lives. What Isaiah reveals concerning the kind of person with whom God desires to dwell**, Jesus reveals more fully through the principle of death and resurrection.** The Cross brings an end to the independent self-life, opening the way for the believer to live in continual dependence upon Christ. **This is the spiritual foundation for the abiding relationship revealed in John 15.**

The progression ultimately leads us to John 17, where the Lord prays that His people may be one, even as He and the Father are one. The oneness for which Christ prayed cannot be manufactured through religious organization, human agreement, or institutional cooperation alone. **It is the fruit of a shared participation in His life.** As believers individually learn the way

of the Cross and continually abide in Christ, His life becomes the common source of their fellowship and unity. **What begins with the surrender of the independent life in John 12 develops into the abiding relationship of John 15 and finds its corporate expression in the oneness of John 17.**

Here we begin to see the fulfillment of God's desire for a dwelling place upon the earth. As Paul declares in Ephesians 2:21–22, believers are being joined together and built into a dwelling of God in the Spirit. The Lord who declares heaven to be His throne and earth His footstool is forming a people through whom His heavenly life and authority may be expressed. **Such a dwelling place is not produced by the strength, wisdom, or religious ambition of man, but through the life of Christ manifested in a humble, contrite, abiding, and united people.**

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1. JOHN 12 — BROKENNESS

Jesus said:

"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."
— **John 12:24**

This statement first speaks of Christ Himself.

He was the Grain of Wheat who would fall into the ground and die, through His death at Calvary. Then, through His death and resurrection, **His Life would be multiplied in many grains**.

The Hidden Life Within the Grain

There is something remarkable about the grain of wheat that makes the Lord's illustration in John 12:24 particularly meaningful. Within that small grain is a living embryo, capable under favorable conditions of producing an entirely new plant. If the grain is properly preserved, that life can remain dormant for many years, sometimes even decades, without any outward evidence of its remarkable potential. The grain may appear dry, lifeless, and insignificant, yet within it remains the capacity for multiplication. But as long as the grain remains in its preserved condition, it abides alone. It may possess life, but that life has not yet been expressed in fruitfulness.

When the grain falls into the ground and the necessary conditions are present, a profound transformation begins. The living embryo resumes its growth, drawing upon the stored

nourishment within the seed. The outer covering, which has served the essential purpose of protecting the life within, now gives way as the emerging plant begins to grow.

That covering was never inherently an obstacle or something evil; it fulfilled its appointed purpose until the time came for the hidden life to find expression. Likewise, our natural abilities, personality, and human faculties are not necessarily evil in themselves. **It is our independent reliance upon them, apart from Christ, that the practical working of the cross must address**.

The original grain does not remain as it was; its stored reserves are consumed as new life emerges. The embryo itself does not die, but the seed undergoes a profound transformation. So, it is spiritually: **the cross does not destroy the divine life within the believer, but brings us to the end of our independent self-sufficiency, that Christ's life might increasingly be expressed through us.** What begins with the grain of wheat in John 12 finds its continuing expression in abiding in Christ in John 15, and ultimately in the oneness of His Body in John 17.

But the principle does not end with Christ, because Jesus immediately continues:

"He who loves his life-(psuche/self life) will lose it, and he who hates his life-(psuche/self life) in this world will keep it for eternal life-(Zoe-Gods life.)"- John 12:25

The principle of the Cross that operated in Christ must also become operative in those who claim to be called His disciples.

"Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple".- Luke 14:27

The grain contains life.

But that life is enclosed in a hard outer shell.

As long as the hard outer shell remains intact, the life remains limited within the grain.

The grain must fall into the ground.

The shell must be broken.

Only then can the life within be released.

This provides a profound picture of God's dealings with us.

When we receive Christ, we receive His Life. **The problem is not that His Life is insufficient. The problem is that His Life may remain greatly restricted by the dominating unbroken natural soulish life surrounding it.**

2 Cor. 4:7-But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves**16**Therefore we do not lose heart, but though **our**

outer man is decaying, yet **our inner man is being renewed day by day.** **17**For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.

Watchman Nee described this principle in his awesome little book- '**the breaking of the outer man and the release of the spirit'**. Which describes various aspects on our independent self-life;

Our natural strength.

Our opinions.

Our ambitions.

Our preferences.

Our emotional reactions.

Our need to control.

Our desire for recognition.

Our confidence in our own understanding.

Even our natural gifts and abilities.

None of these things is necessarily evil in itself. The deeper problem is the **independent source**—the human life functioning from itself as the source of life, rather than from Christ.

The Cross therefore does something far deeper than correct outward behavior.

It deals with **the source of life** from which we are living; natural or Christ.

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2. BROKENNESS IS NOT DESTRUCTION

Brokenness can easily be misunderstood.

God is not attempting to destroy the personality He created.

He is not trying to produce weak, passive, personality-less people.

The shell of the grain is broken **for one reason**:

to release the life within.

Brokenness therefore is not God's destination.

Life is God's destination.

T. Austin-Sparks repeatedly emphasized this principle of the Cross: God's dealings with the natural man **are always ultimately related to the enlargement and expression of Christ.**

What appears to us as **reduction** may actually be God's pathway to **enlargement**.

What appears as **loss** may become **gain**.

What appears as **weakness** may become the occasion for His **strength**.

What appears as **death** becomes resurrection **Life.**

Paul discovered this when the Lord told him:

"My grace is sufficient for you, for **My strength** is made perfect in **weakness.**"

Paul therefore concluded:

"When I am **weak**, then I am **strong**."
— 2 Corinthians 12:9–10

His purpose is never merely to make us weaker.

****It is to make room for Another Life****.

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3. WHY JOHN 12 MUST COME BEFORE JOHN 15

This brings us to something I increasingly believe is essential.

We often begin the Christian life with John 15:

"Abide in Me."

And certainly, abiding is central.

But there is a danger in attempting to teach abiding without first recognizing the principle of John 12.

The unbroken natural man can attempt to abide.

But we need to guard against turning abiding into just another Christian discipline performed through self-effort.

We become determined to pray more.

Read more.

Be more disciplined.

Become more spiritual.

Depend upon Christ more effectively.

And subtly, the independent self becomes responsible for accomplishing the very thing that was intended to bring an end to independence.

John 12 confronts this contradiction.

Before the branch can understand complete dependence upon the Vine, the believer must begin learning the lesson of the grain:

I cannot be the source of my own spiritual life.

The Cross brings us to the end of self-sufficiency. **2 Cor 1:8,9** For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came [to us] in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; **9**indeed, **we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead**.

Abiding is not the achievement of a spiritually capable person. It is the continuing dependence of a branch that possesses no independent source of life.

And that prepares us for John 15.

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4. JOHN 15 — ABIDING

Jesus now gives us another picture:

"I am the vine; you are the branches."
— John 15:5

The picture changes from a grain of wheat to a vine.

But the underlying principle remains the same.

Life comes from Another.

The branch possesses no independent life.

It does not manufacture sap.

It does not create fruit.

It does not struggle each morning to generate enough life to survive another day.

It simply remains in living union with the Vine.

Jesus therefore says:

“Abide in Me, and I in you.”

And then:

“Apart from Me you can do nothing.”

This is not merely a statement concerning occasional dependence upon Christ.

It describes the normal Christian life.

****Christ is not simply our helper.- Christ is our Life.****

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5. THE SURRENDERED BRANCH

Andrew Murray understood this principle particularly well.

He emphasized the distinction between the responsibility of the branch and the responsibility of the Vine.

The branch's responsibility is not to produce life.

The Vine supplies the life.

The branch's responsibility is to remain surrendered and available to the Vine.

This is tremendously freeing.

Much Christian exhaustion has come from branches attempting to perform the responsibility of the Vine.

We believe everything depends upon us.

We must make something happen.

We must keep everything going.

We must solve every problem.

We must accomplish something significant for God.

But the branch was never intended to carry that responsibility.

Its responsibility is surrender:

"Lord, I am Yours.
You are my Life.
What You desire to produce through me is Your responsibility.
My responsibility is to remain available and obedient to You."

This is where brokenness becomes abiding.-**2 Cor.4:10** always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. **11For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.**

The Cross removes our insistence upon independent life.

Abiding teaches us to live continuously, (****in the moment****) from Another - Christ.

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6. THE HAMPTON COURT VINE

Andrew Murray beautifully illustrated this principle of John 15 through the famous Great Vine at Hampton Court near London.

The vine became renowned for its extraordinary size and remarkable abundance of grapes. Murray related how it was eventually surmised that its roots had extended a good distance underground toward a rich source of moisture and nourishment on the nearby banks of the great Thames River.

People saw the fruit.

They did not see the roots.

What appeared above ground was explained by something hidden beneath the ground.

The secret was the source.

This is an extraordinary picture of the Christian life.

We naturally concentrate upon visible fruit.

God concentrates upon the hidden relationship with the Source.

We may be asking:

How much am I accomplishing?

God may be asking:

How deeply are you drawing life from My Son?

The great need of the branch is **not greater activity**.

It is deeper dependence.

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7. GOD WORKING WITHIN

But abiding does not produce passivity.

Paul gives us the balance:

"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure."
— Philippians 2:12–13

There are two workings.

God works in.
We work out.

This is the Christian life.

Not God instead of us.

Not us instead of God.

But God working within surrendered human beings who respond to His grace, through obedience.

This gives us another progression:

Abiding → Surrender → God's inward working → Our corresponding obedience → Fruit

We abide.

We surrender.

God works within.

We obediently respond.

His Life finds expression.

Fruit appears.

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8. FRUIT IS THE EVIDENCE OF LIFE

Jesus says:

"He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit."

Notice that the branch **bears fruit.**

It **does not manufacture fruit**.

This distinction is enormously important.

Our culture emphasizes productivity.

Christ emphasizes fruitfulness.

Productivity asks:

How much did we accomplish?

Fruitfulness asks:

Whose life is being manifested?

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

This fruit cannot ultimately be manufactured.

This is evidence that Another Life is finding expression through us.

And **the greatest manifestation of that Life is His love**.

That brings us naturally to John 17.

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9. JOHN 17 — ONENESS

Jesus prayed:

"**That they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us.**"
— **John 17:21**

Notice carefully **the basis of this oneness**:

"**One in Us.**"

Christian oneness is not fundamentally an organizational achievement.

It is not produced primarily through institutional structures.

It is not created by conferences.

It is not maintained merely because Christians agree about everything.

Its source is shared Life.

The branches are related to one another because they share the same life of the Vine.

This means John 15 leads naturally into John 17.

"Abide in Me."

becomes

"That they also may be one in Us."

The believer who learns individually to live from Christ begins discovering corporately that **the Christ from whom he lives is the same Christ living in his brothers and sisters**.

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10. WHY BROKENNESS IS ESSENTIAL TO ONENESS

Here we return to John 12.

Why is practical Christian oneness so difficult?

Perhaps because **oneness eventually confronts the independent natural life**.

My opinion.

My ministry.

My understanding.

My reputation.

My rights.

My preferences.

My church.

My tradition.

My way of doing things.

My need to be right.

It is relatively easy to speak about unity while everyone agrees.

The real test comes when deeply committed Christians disagree.

Then John 17 suddenly requires John 12.

Something, **someone** must go to the Cross. -**The first one to the Cross wins!**

This does not mean truth becomes unimportant.

It does not mean convictions must be abandoned.

It means that even while holding convictions, **the independent self that insists upon its own way must remain under the government of the Cross**.

Perhaps this explains why for centuries so many organizational attempts at Christian unity have repeatedly disappointed us.

We sometimes attempt to produce John 17 without passing through John 12.

We attempt to organize into existence something that can only emerge from one shared Life.

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11. ONE HEAD, ONE BODY, ONE LIFE

The New Testament does not present the Church merely as an organization.

It presents a Body.

Christ is the Head.

We are members.

Paul says:

"For as the body is one and has many members…but one body, so also is Christ."
— 1 Corinthians 12:12

This means **independence is ultimately incompatible with the nature of the Body**.

A hand cannot say:

"I have my own relationship with the head; therefore, I do not need the arm."

Every member receives direction from the Head.

But every member also exists in relationship with the other members.

This is the difference between autonomy and independence.

There may be legitimate differences in administration and responsibility among local churches.

But spiritually there are no independent members of Christ.

There is:

One Head.
One Body.
One Life.

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12. THE GREAT PROGRESSION

We can now see the relationship among these three chapters.

JOHN 12 — BROKENNESS

The grain falls into the ground.

The shell is broken.

Independent self-=life comes under the Cross.

His Divine Life within is released. **2 Pet.1:4** For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, **so that by them you may become partakers of [the] divine nature,** having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.

JOHN 15 — ABIDING

The branch discovers its Source.

Christ becomes not merely Savior or Helper but our Life.

The branch remains surrendered.

God works within.

The believer responds in obedience.

Fruit appears.

JOHN 17 — ONENESS

The believer discovers that the Life flowing through him is the same Life flowing through every other member of Christ.

Our oneness is no longer merely something we are commanded to manufacture.

It is something we discover and preserve because we share one Life.

Therefore:

Brokenness → Abiding → Fruitfulness → Oneness

Or:

The Cross → The Vine → The Body

Or perhaps most simply:

John 12 → John 15 → John 17.

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13. THE MISSING LINK

Perhaps this progression also explains something that has troubled me concerning much teaching on the Christian life.

We rightly teach believers to abide in Christ.

We rightly pray for Christian unity.

But perhaps we have sometimes neglected the connecting reality:

The Cross must deal with the independent self-life.

Without John 12, John 15 can become just another technique for personal spiritual improvement.

Without John 12, John 17 can become just another human effort at organizational unity.

But when the grain falls into the ground and dies, everything changes.

The shell begins to break.

Christ's Life finds increasing expression.

The believer discovers dependence upon the Vine.

And eventually that believer begins recognizing the same Life in others.

The progression is therefore not accidental.

Brokenness prepares the way for abiding-= John12.

Abiding produces the fruit of His Life-= John15.

And His Life, shared among many members, **provides the only adequate foundation for true oneness that Jesus prayed for so earnestly-= John17.**

"SIR, WE WOULD SEE JESUS"

When the Greeks came to Philip with the simple request, "Sir, we would see Jesus" (John 12:21), Philip told Andrew, and together they brought the request to Jesus. His response must have seemed strange: He did not say, "Bring them to Me." Instead, He immediately spoke of His approaching hour and declared, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain" (John 12:24). Yet Jesus was not avoiding their request; **He was answering it at a far deeper, and more profound level. They wanted to see Jesus- the man, but He was revealing how the world would ultimately see Him. The one Grain must fall into the ground and die so that His Life could be released and multiplied in the many grains-= you and me today.**

The principle reaches directly into our lives today. The greatest obstruction to the expression of Christ is not always obvious or outward sin. Often it is **the independent self-life—our own opinions, preferences, ambitions, abilities, methods, reactions, rights, and determination to do things our way**. Some of these things may not be wrong in themselves and may even appear useful in Christian service. **The true issue is their source**. When we refuse the working of the Cross and continue to live from ourselves, the Life of Christ within us is not absent, but its expression is limited**. Like the life contained within the grain, there is Life within us, but the unbroken shell can limit its free expression.** The Cross does not destroy the person; it deals with our independence so that the Life already within us can increasingly be released.

That same question therefore remains before us today: Where will the world see Jesus? The answer is not ultimately in our organizations, movements, programs, conferences, or religious activity, but in a people through whom His Life is actually expressed. **John 12 therefore becomes foundational.** The Cross deals with the independent life that obstructs the expression of Christ; John 15 reveals the resulting life of dependence and abiding in the Vine; and John 17 reveals the culmination—a people sharing one Life and becoming a living, corporate expression of Christ. **The world is still saying, "We would see Jesus." God's answer is still- a people in whom the one Grain has become the many, and through whom the Life of His Son can now be expressed and seen buy a world still wanting to see Jesus.**

FROM POSSESSING CHRIST TO EXPRESSING HIS LIFE

Sinclair Ferguson, in his excellent book *The Whole Christ*, reminds us of an essential truth: Christianity is not merely receiving the benefits of Christ, but receiving Christ Himself, in whom all the riches of God's grace are found. Drawing upon the eighteenth-century Scottish Marrow Controversy and the teachings defended by Thomas Boston, Ferguson emphasizes that we do not make ourselves acceptable to God through our own efforts, but by receiving Christ freely through faith, with holiness and obedience flowing from our union with Him. This same foundational conviction is reflected in the writings of Andrew Murray, F. B. Meyer, Watchman Nee, and T. Austin-Sparks, and others, who though representing different centuries, generations and theological traditions, consistently emphasized that Christ Himself is the source and sufficiency of the Christian life. Whether or not they were directly influenced by Boston or *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, their teachings bear witness to the same essential truth: **the Christian life is not produced by human effort, but by the life of Christ within us.**

Yet there remains another question of profound importance: **How does the Christ whom we have received become the Christ whose life is increasingly expressed through us?** Is it possible to possess a sound understanding of grace, union with Christ, and the doctrines of salvation, while still living much of our daily lives through our own judgments, preferences, ambitions, and natural abilities? The issue is not the insufficiency of Christ or His finished work, **but the degree to which we have yielded ourselves to the practical working of His life within us.** This was Paul's burden for the Galatian believers when he wrote, **"My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you" (Galatians 4:19).** They had received Christ, yet **Paul longed to see His life increasingly formed in them and expressed through them**.

This is where the relationship between John 12, John 15, and John 17 becomes so significant. John 12 reveals the principle of death and resurrection through which fruitfulness comes. John 15 reveals Christ as the continuing source of our life, apart from whom we can do nothing. And John 17 reveals the Father's ultimate purpose: that those who share the life of His Son might become one, expressing His love and nature together. **The cross is therefore not merely the foundation of our salvation; its continuing practical working deals with the independent self-life that obstructs the expression of Christ.** As we learn to abide in Him, His life becomes increasingly evident—not simply in greater knowledge, spiritual activity, or individual maturity, but in the love, humility, and oneness of His Body. Paul describes this corporate goal in Ephesians 4:13: **"Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."** This is the maturity toward which the whole Body is growing. **We have received the whole Christ; the question before us today is whether the whole Christ is being expressed through us?**

This understanding of Christ as the source of the Christian life is not confined to one century or theological tradition. Thomas Boston, in "*Union with Christ, the Only Way to Sanctification" published in 1848*, taught that holiness cannot be produced through human effort but must be derived from our union with Christ. More than a century later, Andrew Murray developed this same foundational truth through the illustration of the vine and branches in John 15, emphasizing that the branch bears fruit only through continual dependence upon the life of the vine. Then in 1939 Watchman Nee, in *The Normal Christian Life*- placed particular emphasis upon our identification with Christ in His death and resurrection, showing that God does not seek to improve the independent self-life but to bring us into the practical reality of Christ living within us. Though these men came from different centuries and traditions, their testimony converges upon one essential truth: **Christ Himself is both the source and the substance of the Christian life.** The question that follows, and which brings us to the burden of John 17, is; **how does this shared life of Christ become increasingly expressed through His people in humility, love, and genuine oneness**?

THE FINEST OF THE WHEAT — THE RICHNESS OF CHRIST IN EARTHEN VESSELS

Throughout the centuries, God has raised up men and women whose lives and ministries have borne witness to something far greater than theological knowledge or religious accomplishment. From John Bunyan, John Owen, George Müller to Andrew Murray, Hudson Taylor, F. B. Meyer, Watchman Nee, T. Austin-Sparks, Leonard Ravenhill, and many others, we discover a common testimony: **Christ Himself is the source, substance, and sufficiency of the Christian life.** Though separated by generations, cultures, and theological traditions, these believers pointed beyond themselves to the riches of Christ revealed through surrender, suffering, obedience, and the practical working of the cross. Leonard Ravenhill treasured such ministry, referring to the spiritual nourishment he found in T. Austin-Sparks writings as among "*the finest of the wheat"*. This expression recalls **Psalm 81:16**,"But I would feed you with the finest of the wheat, And with honey **from the rock** I would satisfy you.". These servants of God were not without weaknesses or limitations, nor were they themselves the source of spiritual life. Yet their writings continue to nourish believers today because they bear testimony not merely to truths they had learned, **but to something of Christ that had become a living and experiential reality within them.**

There is a danger in every generation of the Church, including our own, of becoming captivated by the newest voices, the latest books, and the most celebrated ministries, while overlooking the spiritual riches entrusted to us through those who have gone before. Watchman Nee deeply valued the spiritual riches entrusted to earlier generations of Christians, recognizing that much of his own understanding of Christ and the Christian life had been enriched by those who preceded him. A close associate described Nee as **"standing on the shoulders of many who had**

gone before him," a fitting testimony to a man who understood that spiritual insight is not confined to one generation, but that we are privileged to build upon the light God has given His servants throughout the centuries. Newness is not necessarily evidence of spiritual depth, nor does the passage of time diminish the value of truth that has been deeply tested and faithfully lived. Jesus declared, **"Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abides alone: but if it dies, it brings forth much fruit" (John 12:24).** He spoke first of His own approaching death, through which life would be multiplied; yet He immediately called His followers into the same principle of surrender and self-denial. The Church's greatest need is therefore not simply more information about Christ, but a deeper experience of His life through the continuing work of the cross. As Paul testified, **"So then death worketh in us, but life in you" (2 Corinthians 4:12).** The finest spiritual nourishment comes not from human brilliance, religious prominence, or the novelty of a message, but from Christ Himself, whose life is increasingly expressed **through yielded vessels**. **We would do well to benefit from the treasures left by those who have gone before us—not to exalt the vessels, but to receive more fully the riches of Christ they sought to make known, oftentimes through great suffering and persecution.**

RECOVERING THE LORD'S TESTIMONY IN FULLNESS

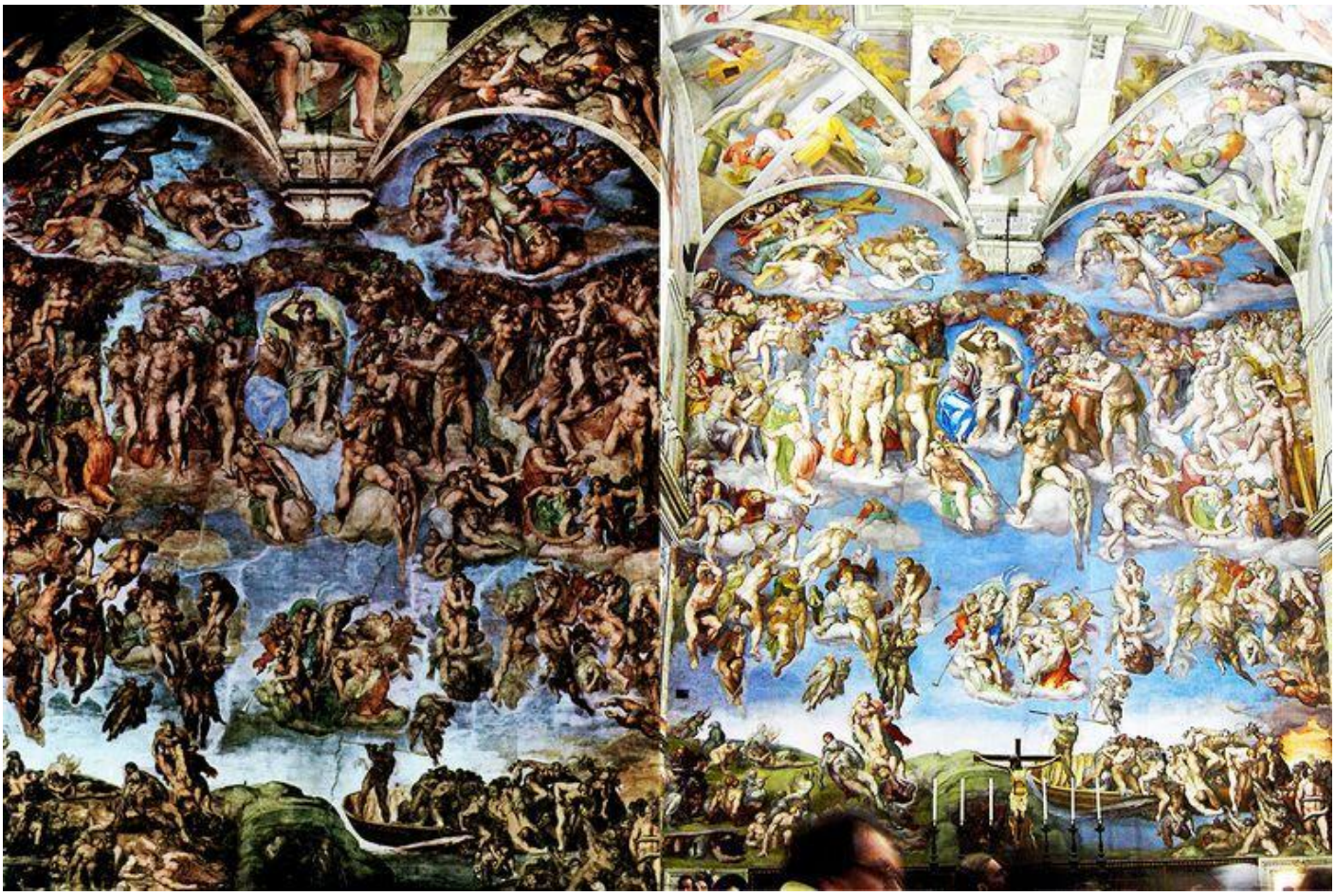
In a tribute to T. Austin-Sparks influence on his father written in 2000, Leonard Ravenhills son David compared Sparks's ministry to the restoration of Michelangelo's magnificent Sistine Chapel Ceiling. For centuries, the accumulation of soot and grime from candles and lanterns had obscured the brilliance of the original masterpiece, until later generations came to accept its darkened appearance as normal, with some even concluding that the artist intentionally painted with a "dark palette". Then the November 1991 issue of Life magazine carried this headline on its cover: "First pictures of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel as it hasn't been seen in five hundred years - **A CLEAR VIEW OF HEAVEN."** The restoration, finally completed, revealed for the first time in centuries the blaze of brilliant and vivid colors. Suddenly, this once drab fresco now confounded and embarrassed the experts who had concocted their own theories of its dark origin. When the ceiling was finally restored, its extraordinary colors and beauty were revealed once again. Ravenhill saw in this a picture of Sparks's lifelong burden: not to introduce something new to Christianity, but to recover what he called **"the Lord's testimony in fulness."** What a remarkable illustration of the Church's condition throughout history. **We have too often accepted the darkness of our religious traditions, divisions, scandals, human organization, and spiritual immaturity as though they were the normal expression of Christ through His Body. Yet God's original intention has never changed.** He desires a people in whom the life of His Son is formed and through whom His love and nature are expressed in genuine oneness. This restoration cannot be accomplished merely by our "good ideas" on how to recover forgotten teachings or rearranging our religious structures. **It requires the practical working of the cross**, through which the independent self-life is brought to an end and the life of Christ is increasingly

manifested. **John 12 reveals the principle of life through death; John 15 reveals the necessity of abiding in that life; and John 17 reveals the glorious corporate expression of that life in the oneness of His people.** What God seeks to recover is not simply a more accurate understanding of the Church, **but the fullness of Christ expressed through His Body.**

Michelangelo's magnificent Sistine Chapel Ceiling

Before **After**

,



Paul brings this divine purpose into even clearer focus in **Eph.5:25–27**, where he declares that **"Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for her; That he might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, That he might present her to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that she should be holy and without blemish."** What a wonderful assurance that the restoration of the Church is ultimately not the responsibility of gifted teachers, reformers, or religious movements, **but of Christ Himself**. He is both the One who gave Himself for His Church **and the One who is preparing her**

for glory. Those who have gone before us may help recover neglected truths and reveal something of His eternal purpose, but they remain, **like us**, only vessels in His hands. **The masterpiece belongs to Christ, and He alone can bring His Church into the fullness of what He has eternally intended.**

THE CROSS — THE MISSING ELEMENT IN CHRISTIAN UNITY

This may be where the ministries of many Christian leaders of old help illuminate an often-missing bridge. Christian unity cannot finally be attained merely by better theology about unity. The obstacle is not only doctrinal. **The obstacle is the independent self-life.**

John 12 therefore helps explain John 17. The grain that refuses to die "abides alone."

But the working of the Cross must not be understood as something mystical, distant, or beyond our practical experience. The Cross begins its practical work in us as we take on the attitude of Christ Himself. **Philippians 2:5–11** calls us to have the same mind/attitude that was in Christ Jesus—a mind of humility, surrender, and obedience to the Father, rather than independence, self-confidence, and self-assertion. This attitude took our Savior to the cross, and will bring us to that same destination as we humble ourselves and allow His Spirit to teach us His ways. This same attitude is expressed in Paul's testimony in **Philippians 3:13–14**: forgetting what lies behind, reaching forward to what lies ahead, and pressing on toward the goal. As the Father reveals His Son in us, **we begin to recognize both the insufficiency of our life apart from Him and the all sufficiency of His life within us**.

The Cross becomes practical as we yield our own judgments, ambitions, preferences, and self-sufficiency to the mind and life of Christ. This is not merely human determination to become more humble, **but our willingness to become nothing**, surrendering to the Spirit's working, that Christ Himself might be our all expressing His life through us.

The Cross deals with the independent life **that separates**;

His resurrection supplies the one Life **that unites**;

the Holy Spirit makes that Life both practical and experiential;

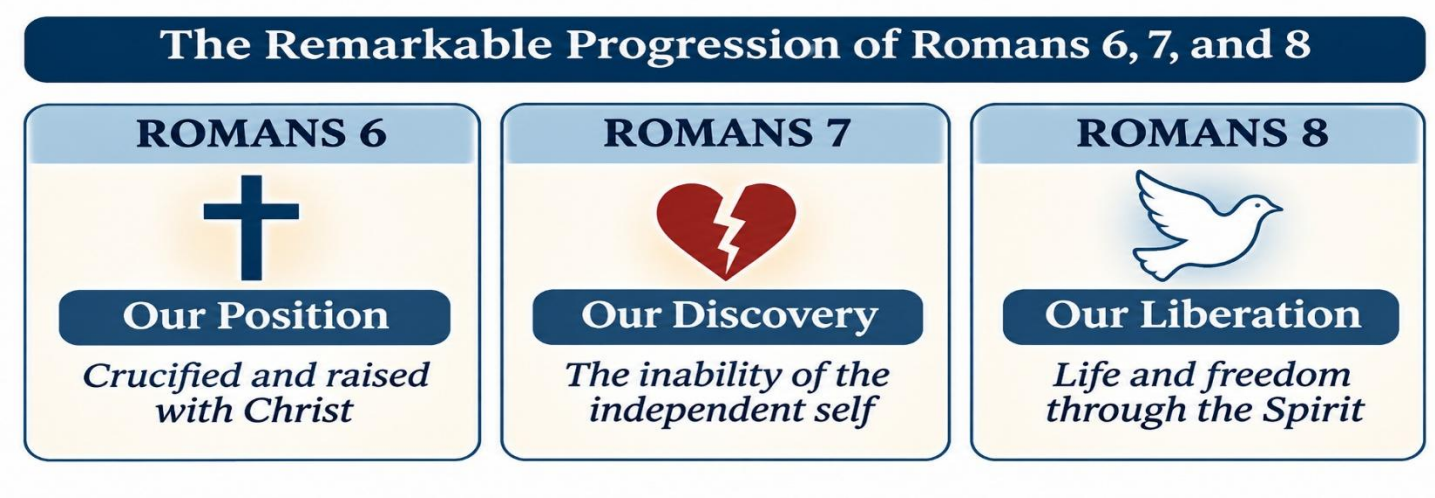
love becomes its expression;

Christ becomes Head;

and believers become the visible corporate expression of the Son.

John 12 explains how John 17 becomes possible.

From the Cross to the Law of the Spirit of Life — Romans 6, 7, and 8



Perhaps nowhere in Scripture is the transition from independent self-life to the indwelling life of Christ explained more clearly than in Romans chapters 6, 7, and 8.

In Romans 6, Paul establishes the foundational truth of our identification with Christ: we have been crucified with Him, buried with Him, and raised with Him to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:3–6). This is not something we accomplish through spiritual discipline or personal determination; it is something God has already accomplished in Christ. We are called to know it, consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God, and present ourselves to God as those alive from the dead. Yet knowing these truths intellectually does not necessarily mean we have learned to live in their reality. Herein lies the significance of Romans 7.

Romans 7 exposes the tragic contradiction of a person who sincerely desires to do the will of God but continually discovers an inability to accomplish it through the strength of self effort-the flesh. The law is holy, righteous, and good, but it cannot supply the life necessary to fulfill its righteous requirements. The problem is not God's commandments but man's inability to obey them through independent self-effort. Eventually, every avenue of self-sufficiency is exhausted, and the desperate cry arises: **"Wretched man that I am!"** (Romans 7:24, NASB). Paul then asks who will set him free from the body of this death. Notice that he does not ask what principle, discipline, or method will deliver him, but **who** shall deliver him. The answer is immediate: **"Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"** (Romans 7:25, NASB). This is the great discovery of the cross: the Christian life was never intended to be lived through the resources of the natural man. **The cross brings us to the end of confidence in ourselves, not to leave us helpless, but to bring us into conscious dependence upon Another**.

Romans 8 reveals that Other as the indwelling Christ through the Holy Spirit. **"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."** (Romans 8:1, NASB). And the reason follows: the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set us free from the law of sin and death (Romans 8:2). What the law could not accomplish because of the weakness of the flesh, God accomplished through His Son, condemning sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the law might be fulfilled in those who walk according to the Spirit (Romans 8:3–4). **The Christian life is therefore not the improvement of independent human strength, but the expression of Christ's own life through a yielded-(crucified) human vessel**. The law of sin and death is answered by a greater law—the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus. **What was impossible through self-effort becomes possible through the power and presence of the indwelling Spirit.**

The practical operation of this life is revealed in Romans 8:13, where Paul teaches that **"if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live"** (NASB). This is crucial. Paul does not tell believers to overcome the flesh through greater fleshly willpower and determination. Neither does he suggest that we remain passive while waiting for God to act. Rather, we are called to put to death the deeds of the body **through the Spirit**. The believer actively obeys, **but the power is supplied by Another**. This is the daily application of the cross: **a continual surrender of independent self-government and a present dependence upon the life of Christ. The cross is not merely an event we remember; its accomplished work becomes the foundation of a life continually governed by the Holy Spirit.**

Here we discover the profound relationship between Romans 6,7,8 and John 12–17. The grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die before it can bring forth much fruit (John 12:24). The branch can bear no fruit of itself unless it abides in the Vine (John 15:4–5). And the life flowing from the Vine ultimately finds its corporate expression in the oneness for which Christ prayed (John 17:21–23).

Romans 6 reveals our death and resurrection with Christ;

Romans 7 exposes the futility of independent life;

Romans 8 reveals the Spirit as the power by which Christ's life is expressed in us.

The cross ends our confidence in the independent self; abiding establishes our dependence upon Christ; and the Spirit of life brings forth the fruit of that union, both individually and corporately. Thus, the Christian life is not fundamentally a matter of what we can accomplish for Christ, but what Christ Himself accomplishes in and through His Body.

THE ETERNAL TEST OF WHAT WE HAVE BUILT

1 Corinthians 3:11–15

Perhaps one of the most sobering realities of the Christian life is that it is possible to spend an entire lifetime working for God, building ministries, teaching Scripture, serving others, and accomplishing things that appear spiritually successful, only to discover at the judgment seat of Christ that much of what we built has no eternal value. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 3:11–15 **that although Jesus Christ is the only foundation, what we build upon that foundation may consist of gold, silver, and precious stones—or wood, hay, and stubble. The Day will reveal the true nature of every person's work, because it will be tested by fire.** Some work may remain and receive a reward; some work may be consumed, and the builder will suffer loss, **"but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire"** (verse 15). Perhaps that's why Paul starts this section with the warning-**"be careful how you build".**

The distinction is profound. **The question is not simply how much we have built, but what we have built with and whether it will endure God's examination.** We may spend years acquiring biblical knowledge, developing ministries, gathering followers, and accomplishing religious objectives, yet none of these things, by themselves, establish that our work has originated in Christ's life. **The natural man is capable of extraordinary religious accomplishments.** But the Cross confronts not merely our sinful behavior; it confronts our independence—our confidence in our own abilities, understanding, methods, and determination to accomplish something for God apart from continual dependence upon Him and His life in us. **What appears impressive to men, may not necessarily be impressive in the sight of God.**

This brings us directly to the progression of John 12, John 15, and John 17. **John 12 reveals the necessity of the Cross**, where the independent self-life must be brought into death. **John 15 reveals the necessity of abiding**, where Christ Himself becomes the continuing Source of our life and fruitfulness. **John 17 reveals the intended result**, a people brought into oneness through the Life of Christ dwelling within them. **The work that endures is not measured merely by outward accomplishment, but by its inward relationship to Christ, the only foundation, and its faithfulness to His will.**

What a tragedy it would be to reach the end of our earthly lives and discover that we had spent decades building something for God without allowing Him to accomplish His deepest work within us. We might have built something large, admired, and successful in the eyes of men, yet find that much of it could not withstand the fire of His judgement. **The greatest loss would not necessarily be what we failed to accomplish for Christ, but perhaps what we accomplished without truly abiding in Him.** Our desire, therefore, must be more than to do great things for God. It must be that Christ Himself becomes our Life, our Source, and the One expressed through everything we do, **so that what remains is not merely the evidence of our labor, but the enduring fruit of His Life.**

The question becomes not merely, “What have we accomplished for Christ?” but “What has Christ been able to accomplish in us and through us—and what of that work will remain when He examines it?”

HEARING, UNDERSTANDING, AND DISCERNMENT

A recurring weakness in the Church has been not simply lacking of more knowledge, but **dullness of hearing**. Jesus repeatedly connected fruitfulness with hearing and understanding. Hebrews says mature believers have their senses trained by practice **to discern** good and evil.

A teachable heart is therefore essential. We can hold correct doctrine and still resist further light from the Lord. We can defend traditions, ministries, and interpretations **because they are familiar rather than because the Spirit is presently making Christ known through them.**

The Holy Spirit never contradicts Scripture, but He does illuminate Scripture and apply it to the hidden motives and patterns of our lives. Reason has a proper place, but the things of Christ cannot be reduced to human reasoning alone**. We need the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him (Ephesians 1:17). It all starts with “hearing with faith”-Gal.3:2**

PERHAPS HISTORY HAS BEEN ASKING THE WRONG QUESTION

For centuries Christians have asked, “How can we bring Christians together in oneness?” Perhaps the more **discerning** question is, **“What prevents Christians who already possess the same Christ from living as one?”**

That changes everything. The problem is no longer how to manufacture unity. It becomes: **What must the Cross remove so that the unity already created by the Holy Spirit can become visible?**

> ***I in them, and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me*. — John 17:23**

The fulfillment of John 17 will not come because Christians finally discover the perfect leaders, organization, doctrine, meeting structure, or unity movement. **It will come as the Cross deals with the independent self-life**, the Holy Spirit brings Christ into increasing expression, and believers who share one Life willingly lose what separates them so that the world can see—not merely a successful religious organization—**but Christ expressed corporately through His Body.**

The True Nature of the Church: Christ in the Midst

When the Lord Jesus declared, “For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst” (Matthew 18:20), He was revealing something far greater than the mere assembling of believers who acknowledge His name. **To gather in His name is to gather with Christ Himself as the center, under His authority, and in recognition of His living presence.** His name is not merely something we invoke, or add on at the end of a prayer; **it represents the Person to whom we belong and under whose headship we gather.**

When Jesus taught His disciples to pray, “Your will be done, **On earth as it is in heaven**” (Matthew 6:10), He revealed God's desire that His heavenly will find expression here on earth. In Revelation 5:6, John beholds the Lamb standing in the midst of the throne, and in Revelation 1:13, Christ is seen in the midst of the seven golden lampstands, representing the churches. What a remarkable picture! The One who occupies the central place in heaven also desires His rightful place among His people on earth. **Just as heaven acknowledges His absolute authority, so the church is called to live under His headship, expressing His life, love, authority, power, and purpose.**

This is the true nature of the church. **It is not fundamentally constituted by buildings, institutions, denominations, or religious organization, but by a people joined to Christ and to one another through His indwelling life.** His presence among us is not merely to bless our good ideas, plans and activities, but to govern and direct us according to His will. We are not called to build His church through our good ideas and plans, but rather to discern His mind, hear His voice, and obey His leading, walking in His power. He declared, “upon this rock I will build My church” (Matthew 16:18). The building of His church must therefore proceed from this rock of the revelation of who Christ is in us, through complete and humble dependence upon Him, and submission to His authority; **oftentimes this means waiting, praying, and fasting, before proceeding.**

Here again we see the divine progression of John 12, John 15, and John 17. The Cross deals with the independence of the natural man; abiding expresses our continuing dependence upon Christ; and oneness becomes the corporate expression of His life among His people. **As Christ is given His rightful place in our hearts and in our fellowship, the will of God finds increasing expression on earth as it is in heaven**.

A BRIEF LESSON FROM CHURCH HISTORY

Church history contains both glorious evidence of God's faithfulness and sobering evidence of how easily living movements become institutions, organizations, traditions, and systems. The Reformation recovered vital truths, yet the centuries that followed also produced many repeated divisions among many believers.

Since the Reformation, Christians have repeatedly tried to recover or express the oneness of the Body of Christ across denominational, national, racial, and theological divisions. Some movements sought organizational union; others rejected organizational unity and sought a deeper spiritual unity in Christ.

WHY HAVE SO MANY UNITY MOVEMENTS EVENTUALLY DIVIDED?

The historical problem may not primarily be that Christians have failed to understand unity. We have repeatedly understood it. The greater problem has often been maintaining it.

> *Diligently endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.* — **Ephesians 4:3**

Paul does not say that we create the unity of the Spirit. He tells us to keep what the Spirit has created. Why must we be so diligent? **Because something within us continually works against it:**

our self-interest,

personal ambition,

doctrinal pride,

natural reasoning,

loyalty to personalities,

institutional preservation,

fear of losing control,

the need to be right,

and **the desire to possess God's truth as though it were ours**.

revelation → doctrine → movement → identity → preservation → boundaries → separation

THE STONE-CAMPBELL MOVEMENT — A SIGNIFIGANT LESSON FROM CHURCH HISTORY

One of the most striking attempts to recover the visible oneness of Christians occurred in the early 1800's, on the tail end of the second "Great Awakening", through the movements associated with Barton W. Stone and Alexander Campbell. The two movements developed independently, yet both had become deeply dissatisfied with denominational divisions. Both desired to return to the simplicity and authority of the New Testament, laying aside sectarian names and creeds as tests of fellowship. Stone's followers generally called themselves simply "Christians," while Campbell's followers were known as "Disciples." In 1832, after decades of active ministry the two movements united.

What makes that union particularly significant is that Stone and Campbell did not agree about everything. **They understood that complete uniformity of opinion could not be the foundation of Christian oneness.** Their desire was to receive one another upon the basis of their common relationship to Christ and their shared commitment to Scripture. Stone even used an illustration remarkably similar to John 15: "branches cannot truly be united merely by tying them together externally; they must first share the life of the same living stock". Their hope was not merely organizational union, but Christians united because they shared one Life in Christ.

They started out very well, yet over the following decades, that remarkable beginning gradually gave way to division. The separation did not occur suddenly. Questions gradually arose concerning missionary societies, instrumental music in worship, the interpretation of Scripture, cooperation between congregations, and eventually the degree of organization beyond the local church. The Civil War and regional differences intensified some of these tensions. **Increasingly, Christians who differed on these matters associated primarily with those who agreed with them, until differences that had once existed within fellowship increasingly became grounds for separation from fellowship.** By the early twentieth century, the Church of Christ and the Disciples of Christ were being recognized as separate bodies, and further division later produced the independent Christian Churches/Churches of Christ.

The tragedy is not simply that sincere Christians disagreed. Christians will inevitably encounter differences of understanding and conviction. **The deeper question is what happens when disagreement becomes stronger than our recognition of the one Life we share in Christ.** The Stone-Campbell pioneers had correctly recognized that Christian unity could not require complete agreement on every question, yet succeeding generations still struggled to preserve fellowship when strongly held convictions collided.

Their history therefore raises a searching question for us today. Is recovering the New Testament pattern sufficient to produce the New Testament Church? **We may restore biblical terminology, biblical ordinances, congregational simplicity, and even a biblical doctrine of unity, yet still carry into that restored structure the same independent self-life that has divided Christians for centuries**.

Perhaps this is where John 12 must precede John 17.

The deepest obstacle to oneness may not finally be our denominational structures, our different traditions, or even our disagreements**. It may be the independent self-life within us that insists upon its own understanding, its own rights, its own position, and ultimately its own way.**

Jesus did not begin by giving His disciples a better organizational structure. He spoke of a grain of wheat:

"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

The lesson of the Stone-Campbell movement is therefore not that conviction is unimportant or that truth should be compromised for the sake of unity. It is something deeper: **oneness is relatively easy while we agree; the Cross is truly tested when we do not.**

A sincere return to New Testament principles cannot, by itself, produce the oneness for which Jesus prayed. **There must also be a people in whom the Cross has dealt deeply with the independent self-life, who are learning to abide in the one Vine, and who therefore recognize that their brothers and sisters are not merely people with whom they agree, but members with whom they share one Head, one Body, and one Life.**

A Modern Illustration: Calvary Chapel After Chuck Smith

A more recent illustration can be seen in the turmoil that followed the death of Chuck Smith, founder and longtime spiritual father of the Calvary Chapel movement. Smith had exercised an extraordinary relational influence among a large number of pastors and churches that otherwise placed considerable emphasis upon local autonomy and independence. After his death in 2013, significant differences concerning leadership, methodology, and the future direction of Calvary Chapel became increasingly difficult to reconcile. Within three years, the movement had divided organizationally into distinct networks.

Brian Brodersen, Smith's successor at Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa, made an unusually revealing observation about this period. Three years after Chucks death he described the senior pastors as "fiercely independent" and acknowledged that, apart from their relationship with Jesus Christ, **their great common bond had been Pastor Chuck**. Whatever one's judgment concerning the particular issues involved—and we should be careful not to presume the motives or spiritual condition of any of these brothers—this raises a searching question concerning the practical expression of the Body of Christ: What happens when strong and independent Christian leaders are held together substantially by another strong leader, and that leader is suddenly removed?

The issue reaches far deeper than Calvary Chapel. A gifted spiritual leader can become an enormous blessing to the Church. **But no human personality, however greatly used by God, can safely become the practical center of Christian oneness.** If our relationships are held together principally by loyalty to a man, a ministry, a movement, a particular teaching, or even a shared history, the removal of that external center may expose an independence that had existed beneath the surface all along. **What appeared to be unity may prove to have depended more upon the presence of a respected leader, or tradition, than upon the practical government of Christ as Head.**

Here again **John 12 must precede the practical fulfillment of John 17**. The grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die. The independent natural self-life—the insistence upon my ministry, my position, my understanding, my direction, my rights—**must daily encounter the Cross**. Only then can the one Life of Christ increasingly become the governing reality among His people. The answer is not another stronger leader capable of holding everyone together. **The answer is deeper submission of every member to the one Head, Jesus Christ. When Christ Himself becomes not merely our doctrinal Head but our practical and present Head, our oneness no longer depends upon the continued presence of a powerful human personality. It rests upon something infinitely stronger: one Head, one Body, and one Life shared by all.**

There is an important additional dimension to the Calvary Chapel story. The difficulties following Chuck Smith's death were not the first significant division within the movement. More than thirty years earlier, while Smith was still very much present as its recognized leader, John Wimber and his congregation separated from Calvary Chapel in 1982 over significant differences concerning the operation of spiritual gifts, healing, signs and wonders, and the direction of ministry. Wimber's congregation became part of what developed into the Vineyard movement, and a number of other Calvary Chapel congregations subsequently moved in that direction as well. Thus, the presence of a respected founding leader, by itself, was not sufficient to prevent separation when deeply held convictions concerning the life and practice of the Church diverged.

This makes the events following Smith's death even more instructive. The issue cannot simply be reduced to the disappearance of the strong personality who had held everyone together. Something deeper must be considered. Brian Brodersen himself described Calvary Chapel's senior pastors as “fiercely independent.” **This raises an important distinction: the autonomy of a local church is not necessarily the same thing as spiritual independence.**

AUTONOMY IS NOT INDEPENDENCE

The experience of Calvary Chapel also reveals an important distinction between **autonomy and independence**. A local church may properly be autonomous—free from centralized human

control and directly responsible to Christ as its Head—without being spiritually independent of the rest of His Body. Autonomy concerns **government**; independence concerns **life and relationship**. The danger comes when autonomy quietly becomes, ***my church, my ministry, my vision, my authority, my way***. Removing denominational control does not necessarily establish the Headship of Christ; it may simply transfer control from an institution to an individual leader. **The opposite of centralized control is not independence—it is the practical Headship of Christ. -Col.2:19**

This brings us again to the progression of John 12, John 15, and John 17. **John 12 deals with independence:** the natural life, including our own strength, opinions, ambitions, rights, and even ministry, must encounter the Cross. **John 15 establishes dependence:** the branch discovers that Christ alone is its continuing Source—"apart from Me you can do nothing." **John 17 reveals interdependence:** the Christ who is my Life is also the Life of every other member of His Body. The biblical alternative, therefore, is neither centralized human control nor isolated independence, but **locally responsible believers and churches, wholly dependent upon Christ and spiritually related to one another under one Head- interdependence.** When Christ is truly Head, autonomy need never become independence, because the Life that joins each member to the Head also joins us to one another.

Seen in this light, the Calvary Chapel experience of both 1982 and 2016 becomes more than a story about organizational disagreements. It raises the deeper question that runs through John 12, John 15, and John 17: **What is required for strong, gifted, deeply convicted believers to remain practically one when they genuinely disagree?** John 12 points us toward the Cross—the grain of wheat falling into the ground and dying. John 15 points us toward abiding—each branch drawing its life and direction from the same Vine. **And John 17 reveals the intended corporate result: "that they all may be one."** The answer, therefore, cannot ultimately be a stronger human leader capable of holding everyone together, nor can it be independence that simply permits everyone to go his own way. **The answer must lie deeper: the Cross dealing with the independent self-life so that Christ Himself can exercise His practical Headship over His members, producing interdependence in His body.**

Perhaps this is one of the most searching lessons these two historical divisions within His body leave us. **Unity that depends upon agreement will survive only as long as agreement survives. Unity that depends upon a leader will survive only as long as that leader can hold the parties together. But the unity of the Spirit has another foundation altogether: one Head, one Body, and one Life.** The great challenge of John 17 is not merely believing that such oneness exists positionally in Christ, but **allowing the Cross to work deeply enough in us, and through us** that **this already-existing spiritual reality can become visible** when our personalities, convictions, traditions, and preferences collide.

THE CONTINUING SEARCH FOR CHRISTIAN ONENESS

The Stone-Campbell and Calvary Chapel experiences are not isolated events. Since the Reformation, Christians have repeatedly recognized the tragedy of a divided Church and attempted in various ways to recover the oneness for which Jesus prayed in John 17.

The approaches have varied considerably. The **Pietists and Moravians** emphasized the common spiritual life of regenerated believers. The **Plymouth Brethren** sought to gather Christians simply to Christ outside traditional denominational structures. The **Stone-Campbell movement** attempted to overcome denominationalism through a return to New Testament Christianity. The **Evangelical Alliance** sought fellowship among believers across denominational boundaries. **Keswick** gathered Christians from many traditions around the pursuit of deeper spiritual life. The modern **ecumenical movement**, eventually expressed through organizations such as the World Council of Churches, and others sought visible unity through dialogue, cooperation, and relationships among existing church bodies. Numerous other "United," independent, charismatic, house-church, and restoration movements have pursued similar goals.

The methods have therefore been different: **restore the New Testament pattern; create home churches; recover correct doctrine; remove denominational names; gather simply as Christians; experience revival; cooperate in mission; create interdenominational fellowship; or construct organizations capable of bringing separated churches together.** Many of these efforts were sincere, and some produced genuine fellowship and lasting spiritual fruit. **Yet none has eliminated the persistent fragmentation of the Church**, and many movements originally established to overcome division eventually experienced divisions of their own.

Nearly five centuries of such efforts therefore leave us with a searching question: **Have we sometimes attempted to solve the problem of Christian division at a level that cannot finally reach its source?**

Jesus did not pray merely that His followers would become better organized, agree upon every interpretation, or construct structures capable of holding them together. He prayed:

"That they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us."
— John 17:21

The oneness Jesus describes originates **"in Us." Its source is the shared Life of God Himself.**

This brings us again to the progression of John 12, John 15, and John 17. Perhaps the Church cannot organize itself into the reality of John 17. **John 12 must first do its work.** The independent self-life must encounter the Cross. Then John 15 becomes practical reality as

believers learn to abide in Christ and receive their life from the one Vine. From that shared Life can emerge the practical expression of John 17.

Church history does not prove this conclusion, but it confronts us with the question. **After five centuries of sincere attempts** to produce Christian unity through restoration, agreement, cooperation, revival, and organization, perhaps the deepest need is not another method of unity but **a deeper work of the Cross and a deeper abiding in Christ**.

Brokenness.
Abiding.
Oneness.

Perhaps we have repeatedly attempted the third without going deeply enough into the first two.

The Testimony of Jesus: Fixing Our Eyes on Him

From the Witnesses of Hebrews 11 to the Overcomers of Revelation 12

Throughout Scripture, God has sought a people who bear His testimony—those whose lives reveal His character, His faithfulness, and His purposes. This testimony is not produced by human wisdom, religious activity, or natural strength, but through faith in Him and dependence upon His life.

Hebrews 11 presents a remarkable company of men and women who, through faith, gained God's approval. They lived under circumstances vastly different from our own. They did not possess the completed Scriptures, the privileges of the New Covenant, or the fullness of revelation available to the church today. Yet they believed God, obeyed His word, endured tremendous opposition, and bore witness to His faithfulness.

The Greek word translated “gained approval” in Hebrews 11:2 and 11:39 comes from *martyreō*, meaning to bear witness or receive testimony. These men and women received God's commendation because of their faith. Their lives became a testimony to the reality of the God whom they trusted, even when they could not see the fulfillment of His promises.

Yet Hebrews 11 concludes with an extraordinary statement:

“And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect” (Hebrews 11:39–40).

Here we discover that God's purpose extends beyond the individual lives of these faithful witnesses. Something remained unfinished. The fulfillment of God's promise would involve

those who came afterward, those brought into the greater revelation and provision of Jesus Christ under the New Covenant.

The faithful of old looked forward to what God had promised. We now look to the One in whom those promises find their fulfillment.

The Race Set Before Us

Hebrews 12 immediately turns our attention from those who have gone before us to the race that is now set before us.

Surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, we are exhorted to lay aside every encumbrance and the sin that so easily entangles us, and to run with endurance.

But how is this race to be run? How do we overcome the obstacles, distractions, trials, and opposition that confront us?

The answer is found in Hebrews 12:2: by **fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith**.

This is the great secret of the Christian life. Victory is not attained by concentrating upon the difficulties before us, nor by increasing our natural determination to overcome them**. It is attained through a living dependence upon the One who has already overcome.**

Jesus Himself endured the Cross, despised the shame, and sat down at the right hand of God. His victory is complete. Through His death and resurrection, He triumphed over the rulers and authorities, as declared in Colossians 2:13–15.

Yet Scripture also reveals that God intends the victory of His Son to find expression through His people. Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father, awaiting the fulfillment of God's purpose, while the church is called to stand in His victory and bear His testimony on earth.

The Testimony of Jesus and the Overcomers

This brings us to Revelation 12, where we behold a tremendous conflict in the heavenlies. Satan and his angels are cast down, and a great declaration of victory is heard in heaven.

Revelation 12:11 identifies three characteristics of those who overcome the accuser: the blood of the Lamb, the word of their testimony, and their willingness to surrender their lives even unto death.

Their victory rests first upon the blood of the Lamb. They do not overcome through their own righteousness or spiritual achievements, but through the finished work of Jesus Christ.

Second, they overcome through the word of their testimony. Their witness is not merely a declaration of what they believe, but the expression of **Christ's faithfulness through them** in the face of much opposition.

Third, they do not love their lives even when faced with death. Here we see again the principle of John 12:24–25: the grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die if it is to bear much fruit. The self-life must yield to the life of Christ.

Later, Revelation 12:17 describes the dragon making war against the woman's remaining children, **who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.**

What is this testimony of Jesus?

It is more than correct doctrine, religious identification, or verbal profession. It is a faithful witness to Jesus Christ—His person, His truth, His authority, and His victory—expressed through the lives of those who belong to Him.

The enemy's extreme opposition is directed against this testimony because it bears witness to the supremacy of the One who has already defeated him.

Peter Walking on the Water: A Picture of the Christian Life

Perhaps one of the simplest and most powerful illustrations of this principle is found in Matthew 14:22–33.

The disciples were in a boat, struggling against the wind and waves, when Jesus came to them walking upon the sea. Peter responded to the Lord's invitation and stepped out of the boat.

As Peter walked toward Jesus, he did what was naturally impossible. But when he became occupied with the wind, he became afraid and began to sink.

The wind had not suddenly appeared. The waves were already there**. What changed was the object of Peter's attention.**

This is a remarkable picture of our daily Christian experience.

We are surrounded by waves of every description: difficulties in relationships, financial pressures, political turmoil, responsibilities, disappointments, fears, and the endless demands of everyday life. These circumstances are real, and many require our attention and responsible action.

But they must never become the governing object of our hearts.

The answer is not to deny the waves, ignore our responsibilities, or pretend that difficulties do not exist. **Rather, it is to face them while keeping our eyes fixed upon Jesus.**

When our attention becomes consumed with the waves, fear, anxiety, frustration, and the natural self-life so easily take control. But when our hearts are turned toward Christ, we are brought again into dependence upon His wisdom, His strength, His peace, and His life.

Peter's deliverance was not found in his ability to master the sea. It was found in the Lord who stood before him and reached out His hand.

So it is with us.

Christ's Victory Expressed Through His Church

The Lord Jesus has already accomplished the decisive victory over Satan through His Cross and resurrection. Yet God's eternal purpose includes the expression of that victory through a people who live in union with His Son.

Ephesians 2:6 declares that God has raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly places. Although we continue to live upon the earth, our spiritual position and life are found in the risen and exalted Christ.

This is not merely a doctrine to be understood intellectually. It is a spiritual reality to be entered into and expressed through faith.

And here the progression of John 12, John 15, and John 17 becomes especially significant.

John 12 reveals the way of the Cross. The independent self-life must be brought to death so that the life of Christ may be manifested.

John 15 reveals the necessity of abiding. Apart from Him we can do nothing. Our fruitfulness and spiritual effectiveness depend entirely upon our continuing union with Him.

John 17 reveals the corporate expression of that life. The many are brought into oneness in the Father and the Son, that the world may believe that the Father sent Him.

The testimony of Jesus is therefore not merely an individual matter. **God is seeking a corporate expression of His Son through His church—a people who bear His character, live under His headship, and manifest His life and love.**

Such a testimony cannot be produced by religious organization, human ingenuity, or the collective strength of dedicated believers. It is the fruit of the Cross, abiding in Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit among His people.

The One Thing Necessary

From the faithful witnesses of Hebrews 11 to the overcoming saints of Revelation 12, we discover a consistent principle: God's testimony is borne through those who trust Him, obey Him, and remain faithful to Him.

The circumstances may change. The opposition may intensify. The waves may rise higher. But the way of overcoming remains the same.

We are called to fix our eyes upon Jesus!

Not upon ourselves, our weaknesses, our accomplishments, our circumstances, or even the enemy who opposes us, but upon Jesus Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith.

The Cross brings us to the end of ourselves. Abiding keeps our hearts dependent upon Him. Oneness brings His life into corporate expression. And through a people who continually behold Him, the testimony of Jesus is maintained upon the earth.

The victory belongs to Christ. The testimony is His. Our calling is to abide in Him, keep our eyes fixed upon Him, and; as one to allow His victory to find expression through our lives.

CONCLUSION: FROM REVELATION TO CORPORATE EXPRESSION

The current immature and divided conditions in today's Church have not taken our Lord by surprise. He has not abandoned His eternal purpose. Christ is still Head. The Holy Spirit is still at work. The Cross has lost none of its power. The prayer of John 17 still reveals the desire of our Lord's heart.

Our response must begin with humility. Before calling the Church to repent, we must allow the Lord to search us. Before asking Him to change His people, **we should ask Him to change us**.

Christ revealed → Christ received → Christ experienced → Christ formed → Christ governing → Christ corporately expressed

This is how the prayer of John 17 moves **from the lips of Jesus into the lived experience of His people**: Christ seen, Christ learned, Christ formed, Christ expressed—and **a people becoming one because they increasingly live by one Life governed under one Head**.

Perhaps a proper starting prayer is appropriate:

> ***Lord, by your mercy and grace help me to humble myself, so that I may have a teachable heart, so that I might learn Christ. Show me where I am still operating from myself. Teach me the reality of Your Cross. Fill me with Your Spirit. Make me a vessel through whom Your Son can be seen, and open the eyes of my heart, so that I might walk in Your love.***

Then, **little by little, member by member**, the prayer of John 17 begins to become a living reality:

> *That they may be one, just as We are one.* **— John 17:22**

May we have ears to hear, humble hearts willing to obey, and eyes fixed on Jesus.

a hidden voice in the desert-2020