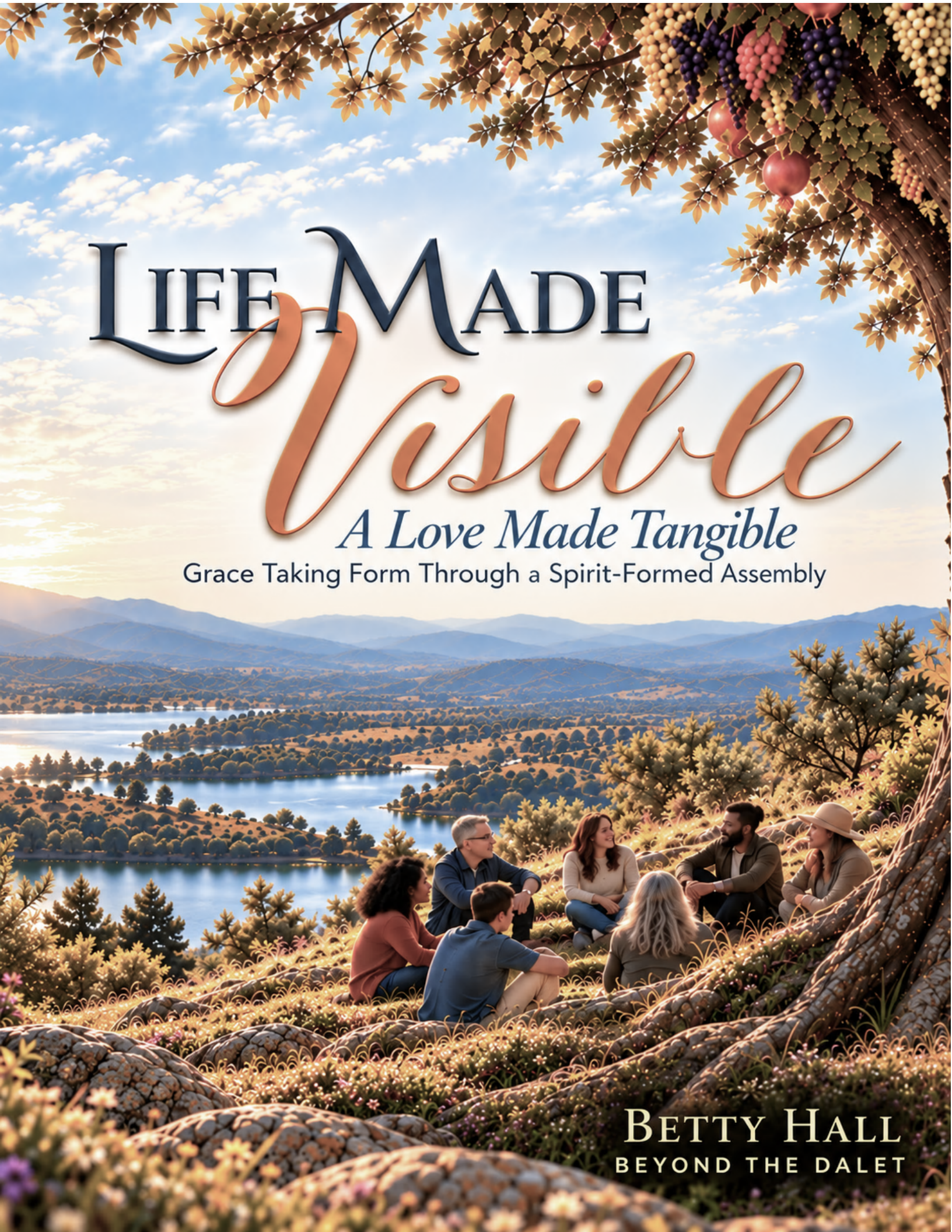
LIFE MADE
Visible
A Love Made Tangible
Grace Taking Form Through a Spirit-Formed Assembly
BETTY HALL
BEYOND THE DALET

LIFE MADE *Visible*

A Love Made Tangible

Grace Taking Form Through a Spirit-Formed Assembly

Written and developed by Betty Hall

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Dedication

To the loving memory of my grandfather and my mother.

God used you to shape me more deeply than any of us understood, and in ways that only time could reveal. You taught me to love the Lord, though in very different ways. Through your faith, your humanity, your strengths, and your weaknesses, the Father faithfully formed my life. From Grandpa I learned the simplicity of loving God and loving my neighbor. From Mom I learned to expect the living work of the Holy Spirit and to hunger for His voice. Because of you, I learned to seek something deeper than the approval of others—a life rooted in Christ and anchored in the truth of His Word.

Though neither of you saw these words take shape, your lives are quietly woven through them, bearing the fingerprints only God could leave behind. With love and gratitude for the Father's faithfulness, which reaches farther than our frailty and covers all that each of us carried imperfectly.

Acknowledgement

Long before I had language for what has become LIFE MADE *Visible*, a very dear friendship developed. Through it I truly learned that love is the *more excellent way*.

In the current of the Prophetic Movement, the Lord carried an Evangelical into the life of a staunch Charismatic. When I first met Lynne Anderson in 2008, I had no idea that one day she and I would become friends much less roommates. I also had no idea God was about to challenge that staunchness. What began as occasional discussions about the Spirit and how we each believed God was leading us soon became part of the rhythm of our days. We both came to anticipate those conversations with fresh questions in hand. Inevitably, the places where our faith had been formed differently began to rise to the surface. With the desire to set aside what was strictly denominational interpretation, we sought after what the Scriptures actually said. Those debates turned into negotiation as we each wrestled with our own inherited interpretations. We pondered, prayed, scoured the Scriptures, and came back with rebuttal. Those talks fueled a friendship that gave us both room to question those interpretations without jeopardizing our relationship with one another. We had much more in common than we had differences. Love did not eliminate disagreement. Neither did it ask us to abandon our conviction in order to settle for a false peace. But it did create room for trust and truth to be pursued without the relationship being held hostage to the outcome.

When we eventually became roommates, I was afforded the opportunity to pursue the work of writing. Lynne has been my greatest cheerleader. She has sustained her trust in me and belief in the work to which God has entrusted me.

Lynne, if it wasn't for our friendship, LIFE MADE *Visible* would not exist.

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Before We Begin

This book unfolds in two movements. *Foundation Before Platform* establishes the ground from which LIFE MADE Visible emerges, beginning with what was accomplished in Christ and then following that reality into the life that becomes visible through a people. The two belong together. What we encounter throughout LIFE MADE Visible grows out of what was established first.

For some readers, much of that foundation may initially feel familiar. You may already have a well-developed understanding of the finished work of Christ, our union with Him, and the grace in which we now stand. But *Foundation Before Platform* is doing more than revisiting truths you may already know. Along the way, I have drawn certain distinctions, given certain precision to familiar language, and established relationships between these truths. This becomes important as we move forward.

That shared understanding is especially significant in LIFE MADE Visible. Certain words and ideas will carry with them meaning that has been established in the foundation, and what follows will build upon those meanings rather than continually stopping to establish them again. So even where the territory feels familiar, I encourage you to travel through it with me. We are not simply reviewing what Christ has finished; we are establishing the ground from which we will explore what His finished work makes possible in and through a people.

LIFE MADE Visible does not leave that foundation behind when the subject changes. It grows from it. The finished work of Christ establishes a reality that is already complete in Him; what follows explores the life that proceeds from that reality and becomes tangible in a people. From there, we will begin to see something more than truths we can articulate. We will begin to explore a life that can actually be seen.

PRELUDE

For a long time, I struggled to find words to describe a season of my life that affected me deeply. The language I once used just doesn't feel right to express what I mean. Some of the terms I used while in Spirit-filled, Charismatic, and prophetic communities helped me for a while, but much of that language no longer gives voice to what I experienced. I am trying to relay that experience from inside what I actually lived.

I do not want to give the experience a name that would govern the interpretation or make manifestations the main focus. What is important to me is to convey what actually happened, what God permitted me to perceive, what Holy Spirit communicated to me within that living experience, and the deep personal formation that took place at the hand of God.

At the beginning of that season, I was not inexperienced in the things of God. I already had an extensive history of spiritual experience. I was familiar with the presence of God, experienced in discerning His activity, functioned in spiritual gifting, sat under years of teaching, and had been shaped by the Charismatic and prophetic environments in which I had lived and ministered. That history matters to me. I do not look back upon everything that led up to this season as though it were somehow less real or less significant. But I had never experienced anything like what was about to happen.

For about six months, there had already been an increase in what I would describe as the manifest presence of God, sometimes accompanied by an awareness of angelic presence. The environment led to an increased ability to discern when angels were present. It was exciting and exhilarating. At the same time, it wasn't just the presence of angels that God was highlighting to me. There was something Holy Spirit was ministering, revealing, or making recognizable through what God was allowing me to perceive. If I were to say that it wasn't both breathtaking and electrifying, I'd be lying. It was that and more.

Then one day while sitting at my desk working, I became aware of the presence of God in the room. I stopped what I was doing and began to listen to what Holy Spirit might be saying. I wrote down what I heard. I lingered, not knowing if there might be more. I did not know how else to respond except to wait on God. Eventually I prayed over the prophetic word I had received and returned to my work.

A short time later, the room became filled with an extraordinary weightiness. A close friend entered the room and almost immediately asked me, "Is there an angel here?" I had not prompted her or told her what I was perceiving. Her question was striking because she too was discerning something weighty. Although our perception of what was happening was not necessarily identical, what we both saw and heard confirmed that an angel was present.

The encounter continued and the weight increased until we both were overtaken by what I can only describe as the fear of the Lord. Holy, holy, holy. The holiness and majesty of God became so powerfully manifest that I found myself on my knees.

By spiritual sight I discerned what I understood to be a strong angel. I was not on my knees in worship of the angel. The angelic presence appeared as a bearer of the reality of the realm from which he had come—someone who had come from the presence of God and whose presence carried something of the weight of where he had been. How I described it at the time was as if he had come fresh from the presence of God. I was overwhelmed by the majesty and holiness of God.

I was not seeing with my natural eyes, but neither was I merely thinking about an angel or imagining one. I was discerning spiritually what God was permitting me to perceive. The encounter continued for approximately four hours, although I had no conscious awareness of the passage of time while it was happening. I only realized how much time had passed after the encounter ended.

What was becoming weightier was not a phenomenon. It was holiness.

At the time, I did not fully understand that distinction. Looking back, it explains much of what God was doing during the years that followed. Another distinction became increasingly important: I was only perceiving what God permitted me to perceive.

I did not learn a technique that allowed me to see into the spiritual realm at will. I did not acquire an ability that I could independently exercise. God had opened my eyes to see. He had given me vision. Yet, I could only see what God opened my eyes to see. God determined what was being made visible, and Holy Spirit taught me within what He permitted me to see. Everything was received.

That singular encounter became the entry into an intense period that lasted approximately three years in which what He opened my eyes to perceive was unusually heightened. What was happening was entirely different from anything I had previously experienced. And it's not that I hadn't had any prior experience. I had.

I already possessed a framework for understanding spiritual gifts, prophetic ministry, the presence of God, discernment, and spiritual activity. I had been trained by previous decades of ongoing involvement and engagement with the manifestation of the Spirit of God. So, it's not as if I didn't have previous experience from which to interpret what I encountered. But I found myself in an environment where my existing spiritual framework was almost completely inadequate.

There was genuine disorientation in that. It was not confusion about whether I knew God. It was the unsettling realization that much of what I thought I understood about how these things worked had been shaped by experience in prior moves of God, particular denominational doctrine, my own previous experience, and the spiritual environments in which I had functioned. Suddenly things were happening in real time that did not behave according to that framework.

I could no longer simply reach into my database of experience for an explanation because the explanations I already possessed were insufficient for what was happening in front of me. At times it felt as though the rug had been pulled out from under me. I was deeply dependent upon Holy Spirit, not because dependence was a spiritual principle I had decided to practice, but because I genuinely did not know how else to navigate what God was allowing me to experience. And it was inside that living experience that God began highlighting and shifting my understanding of Scriptures I already knew.

The Scriptures came alive because of what I was living. God would highlight a passage, and Holy Spirit would reinterpret what I thought I understood while I was actually experiencing something that allowed me to see those words from a place I had never stood before. My previous perceptions had been shaped by training, doctrine, previous experience, and the environments in which I had learned to understand Scripture and spiritual activity. Now Scripture and experience were meeting under the instruction of Holy Spirit, while things I thought I understood were being reinterpreted and I myself was being reconstructed.

1 Corinthians 13:8–13 became one of the clearest examples of this. During this period, I was regularly gathering with other believers who were familiar with the gifts of Holy Spirit. Some were

prophetically gifted. Some would have been described as seers. Some primarily heard. There were occasions when I would discern an angel entering the room. Some of the people present would become aware of an unusual manifestation of the presence of God without necessarily seeing the angel. Others might apparently perceive very little.

Initially, that disparity troubled me. There were times when the presence of God seemed so unmistakable to me that I struggled to understand how someone sitting in the same room could remain relatively unaffected. Because I had become so acutely aware of the holiness of God during this season, the lack of sensitivity I sometimes perceived in others would frustrate me. I had to practice not giving that frustration my attention or jumping to judge someone unfairly.

My own experience could also be intensely physical. There were occasions when I became physically debilitated by what I was perceiving. The spiritual realm pressed upon my sensory capacity in a way that did not seem to happen to most of the others present. I could experience what felt like something physically touching me, and the cumulative sensory effect could become overwhelming. Even among those who were strongly affected by the presence of God, while I was experiencing sensory overload, their experience did not necessarily have the same tactile dimension as mine.

I was having to live with the reality that people in the same room could be genuinely encountering God and yet perceive very differently.

There were times when I would perceive an angel holding what appeared to be a scroll. I would see the scroll opened and read from. Around the room, people who were prophetically gifted would begin receiving what they understood to be a word from the Lord. One person might see something. Another might hear something. Someone else might receive a particular phrase or impression. Another might receive something that initially seemed unrelated to what everyone else was receiving. Not every seer saw the same thing. Not every prophetic hearer heard the same thing. Most often, each person received a piece. When we leaned upon Holy Spirit rather than our own understanding and allowed Him to lead and direct our attention, the pieces would begin to come together.

Something one person heard would illuminate what another person had seen. An impression that seemed disconnected would suddenly bring two other portions into perspective. Someone would contribute something that made what another person was sensing clearer. While held individually, what was only partial became increasingly recognizable when the pieces were brought together.

For reasons I did not understand at the time, there were occasions when God permitted me to perceive what seemed to be the larger picture. I could sometimes see how the pieces belonged together. And it was while I was living these experiences, that God began highlighting Paul's words to me: "We know in part and we prophesy in part." Later, "For now we see in a mirror dimly."

I had known those verses before. I already understood what they meant, or at least I thought I did. But now I was standing in a room watching partial perception happen in real time. We really were seeing in part. Someone could genuinely hear from God and still only receive a portion. Even when I

was permitted to perceive what seemed to be the larger picture, I was still seeing in part. That was profoundly humbling. If what I was being shown was only a glimpse, then the reality itself must be far greater than anything any of us were apprehending.

There were other moments in those gatherings that affected me just as deeply. Sometimes God would draw my attention toward someone who was unusually quiet. I was being made aware by the Spirit that the person had received something, but they were reluctant to share it. When I asked what they were getting, they would sometimes dismiss it.

They might say it was nothing or that what they were getting was not like what everyone else was receiving. Sometimes they seemed almost embarrassed by how insignificant their portion appeared when compared with what was already happening in the room.

I would attempt to reassure them that what they were receiving mattered and urge them to share it. Even then, it could be difficult for them. But repeatedly, when that person finally shared what they had received, their contribution became a key. It might unlock deeper understanding of what had already been given. It might supply a vital piece that brought several other pieces together. Something that seemed small or unrelated when held by one hesitant person could suddenly make the larger picture recognizable. It was never insignificant.

I cannot diminish the importance of what happened in those moments. God was drawing my attention toward people who could easily have been overlooked. I did not know they were carrying something because they appeared impressive or because their gifting was obvious. God highlighted them to me. And repeatedly, what Holy Spirit had entrusted to the person most reluctant to speak proved necessary to what was happening among us. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 12 about the members who seem weaker being indispensable were no longer abstract to me. I observed it as a living reality.

Something else became visible as well. If the person seeing the angel, hearing the strongest prophetic word, or carrying the most recognizable prophetic gifting became the measure of what mattered, everyone else could gradually learn to discount what Holy Spirit had entrusted to them. The more visible gift could easily become the dominant gift. People could begin measuring what they received against what the strongest prophetic person received. Someone carrying an essential piece could remain silent because what they had did not seem sufficiently impressive.

And the person carrying the stronger gift was vulnerable too. Something received could become something possessed. What had been entrusted could begin shaping identity. Revelation could become status. Visibility could become significance. The very thing given for the building up of the Body could begin working against the shared life it was intended to serve.

What I was seeing made our interdependence upon one another unavoidable. If I genuinely see something and still see in part, I need what Holy Spirit has entrusted to someone else. If they genuinely hear something and still know in part, they need what has been entrusted to me. One portion does not negate another. Neither of us owns what we have received. We steward it.

This is where what I eventually referred to as shared responsibility within shared stewardship came from. I not only watched the necessity of it, but also saw it lived out before me. What Holy Spirit entrusts to one member belongs within something shared. The prominence of one gift cannot be allowed to diminish what has been entrusted to another member. I came away from those experiences with something I still cannot diminish: it takes all of us all the time.

The fullness was not demonstrated by one extraordinarily gifted person who saw everything. Holy Spirit distributed. The members received in part. And as those portions were brought together, what belonged to God became more recognizable among us. And while I had seen this in gatherings in the past, there was a tangible spiritual reality during this heightened season that made it more real than it had ever been before.

Paul's placement of 1 Corinthians 13 between chapters 12 and 14 began to carry a weight for me it had not carried before. I was living among spiritual gifts and manifestations while watching how vulnerable people could become within them. I was seeing the necessity of every member and the danger of allowing one person's gift to become the measure of the room. And right there, in the middle of Paul's discussion, stood love. Yet, I was not hearing love as merely human affection.

God is love. The life and love of God had to govern what came from Holy Spirit, how it was received, how it was carried, how room was made for another person, and how we responded when what someone else received was different from our own. Love allowed the hesitant person to matter. This love was what allowed me to hold something genuinely received without needing it to be the whole. It's God's love that allows another person's portion to enlarge what I perceived rather than threaten it. Humility, interdependence, discernment, and love were becoming vital necessities because I was seeing what happened without them.

At the same time, something else was happening to my understanding of discernment. In Spirit-filled environments, much of our practical discernment training can happen during times of increased anointing, heightened manifestation, or unusual spiritual activity. Something changes in the atmosphere, and our discernment becomes alert. The manifestation itself tells us to pay attention.

I began noticing what happened when that intensity was absent. People who could become very spiritually attentive during heightened manifestations could become much less discerning during quieter times. If nothing unusual triggered their attention, their discernment could decrease. This was troubling because I was beginning to see how easily we could become trained to recognize intensity rather than trained to discern.

Then Holy Spirit made Hebrews 5:14 come alive to me. The writer speaks of those whose senses have been trained through practice to discern good and evil. Practice. The spiritual senses were not simply awakened when something extraordinary happened. They were trained through use.

Some of the most important things happening in those gatherings did not arrive surrounded by extraordinary manifestation. That became profoundly real later on when those three years of intense spiritual activity gave way to what I can only describe as extremely mundane. Something

was shifting in me. I was learning to recognize His life when it seemed like nothing was happening. Extraordinary manifestations were not the goal. They were not becoming the evidence of spiritual fitness. What was happening was far more personal than that. Holy Spirit was changing me through what God permitted me to perceive.

What I was being permitted to see was shaping me.

Greater perception and deeper formation were happening together. What I encountered confronted me. It searched me. It exposed my reactions. It challenged assumptions I did not know I carried. It humbled me. My capacity not only to perceive but to bear what I was perceiving was being altered.

First Corinthians 13 continued to open within that process. Paul's language about knowing in part and seeing dimly was followed by his language about childhood and adulthood. His use of *teleios* began to look different to me. I did not understand Paul to be saying that spiritual maturity meant simply leaving behind the gifts he had just been discussing. I was living inside an experience in which the gifts themselves were exposing the need for growth.

When I placed that beside Ephesians 4:11–16, I saw the same movement toward a Body growing up into Christ. The gifts were present. The members were present. Every part was supplying. And growth did not produce increasingly independent spiritual people. The Body became capable of functioning together under Christ.

Over time, this is why the language of spiritual fitness became more fitting to me than the language of spiritual maturity. Maturity can easily sound as though someone has arrived at a spiritual status. What I was living felt nothing like arrival. My senses could be trained. My discernment could develop through practice. My capacity to faithfully bear and respond to what God entrusted could increase. But none of that made me more independent. If anything, greater spiritual fitness was increasing my capacity and need for interdependence.

The spiritually fit Ekklesia is not a collection of increasingly self-sufficient spiritual people. It is a people becoming increasingly capable of functioning together under Christ. And something else became very clear to me: spiritual fitness could develop, but access had already been accomplished.

I did not believe the manifestations occurring around me meant I had reached a superior spiritual level. I did not believe I had matured my way into greater access to God. Our access had already been purchased by the blood of Jesus.

What I was experiencing was not heaven suddenly becoming accessible because I had become capable enough to reach it. I was being shown a reality that was already present within an access Christ had already secured. My capacity to perceive was changing, but the access did not originate with that capacity.

My eyes were opened within an already-opened access. And even the opened eyes were received. I could desire greater capacity, but desire did not determine what God would permit me to perceive

or what He would entrust to me. I could not manufacture the increase. I could not reproduce it. I could not make myself spiritually fit enough to obligate God to give me more.

Ephesians 4:7 became important here: “But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” The measure belonged to Christ. That truth protected something in me because the more I experienced, the less distant the world of the New Testament seemed. Things I had read in Acts and the Epistles no longer felt as though they belonged to an inaccessible spiritual existence confined to the apostolic era. What I was experiencing gave me a glimpse into something that felt much closer to the living environment in which the apostles themselves had functioned.

I do not mean that I was reproducing their experience or carrying their authority. I mean that the world they wrote from had stopped feeling theoretical. And the effect was not, *Look how much I am experiencing*. It was almost exactly the opposite.

Look how little we have understood of what has been given to us. That realization overwhelmed me. What I was experiencing was greater than I had previously imagined possible, and at the same time I knew I was only seeing in part. That made the glimpse larger, not smaller. If this was partial, how much more was contained within what Christ had actually made available to His people?

I began to understand that I was being permitted to glimpse something of what was possible. Not a model. Not a formula. Not a spiritual environment I had been commissioned to reproduce. A glimpse.

I saw something of what becomes possible among people who are alive to Holy Spirit, secure in the finished work of Christ and continuing to live dependent upon God by the grace received through Christ; people who recognize their dependence upon one another, whose senses are being trained through practice, and who understand that what has been entrusted to each member belongs within something shared.

And I also saw the vulnerability of it. Greater perception did not eliminate weakness. Greater revelation did not make a person incapable of pride. Greater gifting did not automatically produce greater love. Greater spiritual activity did not make insecurity disappear. In fact, greater capacity could expose things that were already present.

Paul’s experience in 2 Corinthians 12 began speaking into that vulnerability. He had received surpassingly great revelations, and yet right beside those revelations stood the danger of self-exaltation. When he pleaded with the Lord, the answer he received was, “My grace is sufficient for you.” Greater revelation had not made Paul less dependent upon grace. Then James: “He gives greater grace.” (James 4:6 NASB) And Peter: “Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another,” (1 Peter 5:5) and “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God.” Those words were not becoming a theological system to me. They were speaking into something I had lived and was continuing to live.

Grace.

Humility.

Dependence.

I could see why they mattered; I knew that without them our capacity to carry what had been entrusted to us would diminish.

Greater capacity without greater dependence could actually increase vulnerability. Greater revelation, gifting, authority, visibility, or manifestation created greater opportunity for something entrusted to become something possessed. As the demands of stewardship increased, the need to live in ever-deepening dependence upon the grace God supplied became more apparent, not less.

And that dependence had to include vulnerability with one another.

If I could not acknowledge that I only knew in part, I would not be genuinely able to receive another person's portion. If weakness had to remain hidden in order to preserve the appearance of spiritual strength, gifting could easily become something used to protect an image. If I could not say, "I may be wrong; what are you seeing?" discernment would cease to be shared.

The quieter person needed to be safe enough to speak. The stronger person needed to be humble enough to listen. We needed grace. We needed humility. We needed complete dependence upon Christ. We needed one another.

What I saw during those years was both extraordinarily beautiful and extraordinarily vulnerable. I saw what could happen when people became responsive to Holy Spirit and what He was distributing among them. I saw how a room could become alive with pieces being brought together until something none of us carried alone became recognizable among us.

I also saw how easily that shared life could be damaged. Insecurity could silence someone. Strong gifting could dominate. People could become dependent upon the most recognizable prophetic person. Manifestation could become the measure of God's activity. Something entrusted could become something possessed. What had been given for the building up of the Body could become the means by which one member diminished another. I began to understand why the apostles guarded this life so carefully.

Paul's insistence upon love mattered. His insistence that the apparently weaker members were indispensable mattered. His refusal to allow one member to say to another, "I have no need of you," mattered. James's call to humility mattered. Peter's insistence that we humble ourselves beneath God's hand and toward one another mattered. They were protecting something precious.

The manifestation belongs to the Spirit. The portion is entrusted to the member. The member remains dependent upon grace. The portion is brought in humility. Discernment belongs among the gathered people. Love makes room. The purpose is edification. Every member matters. And Christ remains the Head.

The intense period of heightened revelation lasted approximately three years, but the work of God in me did not end when that season ended. In many ways, the deeper formation followed.

I have come to understand those years as a period of compressed reception followed by prolonged unfolding. Things were imparted in moments that have taken years—sometimes decades—to understand. They did not come to me first as ideas. They arrived more like seeds: whole in themselves but not yet unfolded into the form they would eventually take within my understanding.

Spiritual reception can precede the mind's ability to conceptualize what has been received. That does not make what is received irrational, nor does it place spiritual experience beyond examination. Eventually reason can examine it, Scripture can test it, language can articulate it, and theology can help situate it. But none of those processes accounts for the original reception. They may instead become the means through which human understanding gradually gathers around a reality that was received before it could be explained.

This is part of why Scripture became increasingly indispensable to me. Something received spiritually did not become its own unquestionable interpretive authority simply because I had experienced it. I found that experience could initiate a question, but I also discovered that experience, no matter how profound, should not be allowed to dictate the answer. Scripture could confirm something I had perceived while at the same time correcting an explanation I had initially given it. It could enlarge what I understood, expose assumptions I had brought to the experience, or give language to something I had carried for years without knowing how to articulate.

I learned that I could honor what I believed I had received without assuming that my first interpretation of it was complete. Reception and interpretation were not the same thing. Interpretation belonged to the unfolding. It could be tested, corrected, enlarged, and brought increasingly under the witness of Scripture without requiring me to deny that something genuine had been received in the first place.

And because what had been received was now carried within a human life, it did not remain isolated from the rest of me. Mind, will, and emotions were affected by it. What had initially been beyond articulation began to become recognizable. Understanding developed. Convictions formed. Choices changed. Language emerged. What had been received spiritually began to work its way into lived reality.

What had been perceived had to become lived. Things Holy Spirit had opened to me had to work their way into places in me that revelation alone could not change simply because I had seen them. What had been given had to be borne. What had been seen had to become substance. And I cannot take credit for that process either.

The experience had been initiated by God. What God permitted me to perceive had been determined by God. Holy Spirit had taught me within the living experience. Scripture had been highlighted and reinterpreted to me while I lived things for which my previous framework had been inadequate. And the formation that accompanied and followed those years was His work as well.

I have not figured something out. I have been given something.

Even now I find it difficult to say that I "learned" all of this without qualification. I understand what the word means, but it can make the process sound as though I observed what happened, studied it carefully, and reached conclusions. That is not how I experienced it. I lived it. Holy Spirit taught me while I was seeing. Scripture came alive within the living experience. My assumptions and interpretations were tested and sometimes changed, and I was being changed at the same time.

There was a difference between receiving something and being capable of carrying it. There was a difference between carrying it and being capable of expressing it. And there was a difference between being capable of expressing something and being released by Holy Spirit to share it. The encounter might last only moments. Reception could be immediate. But coming to understand what had actually been entrusted to me has taken years. Some of it will take the remainder of my lifetime. What I have attempted to describe is how Foundation Before Platform and Life Made Visible were birthed.

Foundation Before Platform and Life Made Visible were created to share a glimpse into what is possible among people who are alive to Holy Spirit, secure in the finished work of Christ and continuing to live dependent upon God by the grace received through Christ; people who recognize their dependence upon one another, whose senses are being trained through practice, and who understand that what has been entrusted to each member belongs within something shared.

I still believe it's possible.

FOUNDATION

We do not come to a conversation like this without having already been formed somewhere. Our traditions, teaching, experiences, and the communities in which we have lived have all contributed to the ways we hear certain words and understand certain ideas. Some language immediately feels familiar to us; other language can raise questions simply because it does not fit easily within the framework we already possess. I know that because it happened to me. As I have described in the Prelude, I had to remain with Scripture and Holy Spirit long enough for things I thought I understood to be examined, enlarged, and sometimes reinterpreted.

For that reason, the order of what follows matters. Before turning our attention to forms of gathering or expressions of the Ekklesia, I want to ask a more foundational question:

What are the people of God living from?

Before we consider what we do together, we need to spend time with what we share together. The life we are tracing is not primarily the life we produce for Christ, but the life we have received and now share in Him. Some of what follows may therefore seem familiar while its placement or emphasis feels unfamiliar. I am simply asking that we remain with it long enough to allow the larger picture to emerge.

The Ground Beneath Life Made Visible

Before there was a teaching about the life of Christ becoming visible through His people, another question had to be faced: what must be established in a people before they can faithfully carry what belongs to God?

What began as an examination of foundation before visibility ultimately reached much deeper into the life from which everything entrusted to us must proceed. *Foundation Before Platform* emerged.

Foundation Before Platform was never simply a warning about building a platform or a call to develop enough character to handle greater responsibility. Simply put, having a platform reveals deeper questions. What happens when identity becomes attached to what we carry? What happens when stewardship begins turning into ownership, when responsibility becomes a source of significance, or when the servant through whom something is given begins functioning as the source of what God alone can supply? Those questions cannot be answered by better structures, healthier leadership practices, or less visible ministry. They take us beneath everything we carry to the foundation upon which the life itself rests.

That foundation is Jesus Christ.

"For no one can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:11).

Before there is anything for us to build, carry, steward, or express, there is Christ and what Christ has accomplished. Before our obedience, there is His obedience. Before our participation, there is His finished work. Before our formation, there is a life already given.

This is where *Foundation Before Platform* began doing work that is too vital for Life Made Visible to leave behind. Its theological journey brought us beneath visibility and responsibility into the finished work of Christ, received identity, formation, stewardship, and ultimately the corporate life of a people centered in Christ. Its destination was not simply a person capable of carrying a platform safely. It was a people capable of carrying what belongs to Christ together without allowing what they carry to displace Christ as their center.

The Foundation Can Be Examined Without Putting Every Genuine Encounter With Holy Spirit On Trial.

That distinction matters to me because I have no desire to diminish what God has done in the lives of His people. I am interested in something far more consequential: understanding how the life He has already given us in Christ is intended to shape the way we live, relate to one another, and steward what has been entrusted to us.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he was addressing believers who were already experiencing the activity of Holy Spirit. In the opening chapter of his first letter, he acknowledged that they had

been enriched in Christ and were not lacking in any gift. Yet only a short time later, he confronted their jealousy, divisions, arrogance, and immaturity.

Paul did not dismiss their gifts because of their behavior. Neither did he overlook their behavior because of their gifts.

Instead, he directed their attention toward something more fundamental.

In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul addressed the divisions that had developed around different ministers. Some identified themselves with Paul, others with Apollos. His response was revealing. He described himself and Apollos as servants through whom the Corinthians had believed, each participating in the work God had entrusted to him. Paul had planted, Apollos had watered, but God was the One causing the growth.

Then Paul introduced the imagery of a building.

He explained that, according to the grace God had given him, he had laid a foundation, and others were building upon it. He cautioned them to pay attention to how they built, because no one could lay another foundation than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

I have returned to that passage many times.

The foundation was not Paul's apostolic authority. It was not the effectiveness of Apollos's ministry. It was not the Corinthians' spiritual experiences, their gifts, or their understanding of themselves as spiritual people.

The foundation was Jesus Christ.

And what strikes me is that Paul did not present this foundation as something the Corinthians needed to manufacture through greater spiritual effort. Christ was already the foundation upon which they had been established. The question concerned how they were building upon Him.

That distinction has become central to my understanding of spiritual formation.

We are not attempting to establish through our spiritual activity what Christ has already accomplished. We are learning to recognize, receive, and live from the reality of His finished work. Our gifts, our service, our relationships, and our participation in the life of His people are intended to proceed from that foundation.

And this brings us to something that I believe deserves careful consideration, particularly among those entrusted with spiritual influence.

A person may sincerely desire to nurture others and still become overly invested in being necessary to their development. The difficulty arises when the satisfaction of seeing someone grow becomes entangled with the need to be recognized as the person responsible for that growth. What began as a desire to serve can gradually become a need to remain indispensable.

I have come to recognize that there is a profound difference between being entrusted with something and becoming convinced that we are indispensable to its continuation.

What Holy Spirit entrusts to us does not originate in us. We may become vessels through whom His wisdom, encouragement, revelation, or power is expressed, but we are never the source of the life being imparted. We may participate in another person's growth, but that person's spiritual life does not belong to us.

Paul understood this distinction when he told the Corinthians that he and Apollos were servants through whom they had believed. He understood it when he declared that he did not exercise lordship over their faith but worked alongside them for their joy. And he understood it when he reminded them that the growth belonged to God.

There is a freedom in recognizing this, both for the person ministering and for those receiving ministry.

We can serve without needing to be indispensable. We can nurture without possessing. We can exercise spiritual authority without assuming responsibility for another person's relationship with God. We can rejoice when others mature, even when their growth carries them beyond their dependence upon us.

And we can acknowledge that Holy Spirit has genuinely worked through us while remaining willing to examine the ways we have understood and expressed what He entrusted to our care.

I believe this willingness is essential to the life of a Spirit-formed assembly.

The people of God were never intended to become an audience gathered around the spiritual abilities of a few. We have been joined together in Christ, made participants in His life, and supplied by Holy Spirit for the building up of one another. There are different gifts, different ministries, and different workings, but the life from which they proceed is not divided among competing sources.

Christ Remains The Foundation.

As I have continued walking with the Lord, I have become increasingly aware that the foundation does not change as my understanding deepens. What Christ accomplished does not become more complete because I recognize something I had not previously seen. His finished work remains established, even as Holy Spirit continues opening my understanding of what that accomplished work means for the way I live.

And perhaps this is why I have become so passionate about returning to the foundation.

I am not interested in inviting people to abandon the genuine encounters they have had with God. I am interested in discovering, together, what those encounters mean when understood in the light of the life already established in Christ.

I want us to consider what happens when spiritual gifting proceeds from secure identity rather than the need for recognition. When authority is exercised for the building up of others rather than the preservation of personal influence. When ministry becomes an expression of shared life rather than a platform upon which someone must continually establish their significance.

And I want us to recognize that spiritual maturity is not measured simply by how powerfully a gift operates, how many people respond to our ministry, or how visible our contribution becomes.

There is something much deeper taking place.

Holy Spirit is forming within us the expression of a life we did not originate and could never produce through our own efforts. It is the life of Christ, received through His finished work and increasingly made visible as we learn to live from what has already been established in Him.

That is where I want to begin.

Not with the platform, the gifts, the ministry, or even the things we hope to accomplish.

I want to begin with the foundation.

Because everything that follows must be understood in relationship to the One upon whom we have already been established.

The foundation is Jesus Christ.

And the life we are called to express proceeds from Him.

In the original teaching progression, that foundation comes first. Life Made Visible follows it. The relationship between them is not merely chronological. The second teaching depends upon theological ground established by the first.

Yet a book must be able to carry its own foundation. A reader entering Life Made Visible may never have encountered *Foundation Before Platform*, and what follows cannot depend upon familiarity with another teaching in order to be understood. At the same time, reproducing *Foundation Before Platform* here would obscure the work this book is meant to do. What is needed is the theological foundation itself: the ground that must already be beneath us before we begin asking how the life of Christ becomes visible through His people.

The five parts that follow carry that foundation forward. They are not a shortened reproduction of *Foundation Before Platform*, nor are they intended to replace it. They gather the theological realities upon which Life Made Visible stands and bring them to the place where this teaching can begin its own work.

And that means we must begin with the finished work of Christ.

When Jesus declared, “It is finished” (John 19:30), He was not announcing the beginning of a work His people would later have to complete. Hebrews tells us that Christ entered the greater and more

perfect tabernacle and obtained “eternal redemption” (Hebrews 9:11–12). Through the offering of His body we have been sanctified “once for all” (Hebrews 10:10), and “by a single offering He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified” (Hebrews 10:14).

Those words establish an order we must not reverse. Something has been perfected while something is still being formed. Something is finished while something is still becoming visible. Our ongoing formation does not mean Christ’s work remains incomplete.

What is unfinished in us must never be confused with something unfinished in Christ.

The gospel therefore does not begin by telling us what we must become. It announces what God has accomplished in His Son. “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:1–2). God has reconciled us to Himself through Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18–19), and those who were once far off “have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Ephesians 2:13).

Peace is not waiting at the end of successful formation. Reconciliation is not something maturity eventually secures. Access is not granted when we have become trustworthy enough to approach God, and nearness is not the reward of those who have finally learned to abide well.

Christ has brought us near.

That accomplished reality becomes the ground beneath everything that follows. We are not being formed in order to become reconciled; we are being formed as those who have been reconciled. We are not learning obedience so that we can gain access to the Father; through Christ, in one Spirit, we already have access to Him (Ephesians 2:18). Formation begins inside what grace has already given.

And the finished work has done more than change our standing before God. It has brought us into Christ.

Paul speaks of those who have been united with Christ in His death and resurrection (Romans 6:3–5). He declares, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). To the Colossians he writes, “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3).

Our life has been relocated.

This is the theological center from which Life Made Visible proceeds: in Christ. Participation does not create union. Expression does not produce identity. We do not live our way toward a place in Christ; the Christian life unfolds from the astonishing reality that God has already brought us into His Son.

Identity is therefore to be received rather than achieved. “If anyone is in Christ, this person is a new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17). We have received “a spirit of adoption as sons and daughters by

which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!'" and the Spirit Himself bears witness that we are children of God (Romans 8:15–16). Belonging precedes formation because sonship is not waiting at the end of maturity.

Neither has God merely declared something over us and then left us to imitate the life of Christ from a distance. "The Spirit of God dwells in you" (Romans 8:9), and the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead has made His dwelling within His people (Romans 8:11). New creation is not merely a new way of understanding ourselves. The risen life of Christ is present by His Spirit.

Only now can formation take its proper place. The Father forms those who already belong to Him. He is not forming us so that we can acquire a life we lack, but bringing the lives we actually live into increasing agreement with the life we have already received. Character, obedience, humility, endurance, teachability, and faithfulness become expressions of received life rather than attempts to secure it.

The Father also forms His sons and daughters to carry weight. What God entrusts places pressure upon the person carrying it, and capacity alone cannot bear that pressure faithfully. Hebrews places discipline inside sonship itself, declaring, "For whom the Lord loves He disciplines" (Hebrews 12:6). The Father's formation steadies those who belong to Him so that responsibility can increase without responsibility becoming identity.

What He entrusts, however, never becomes ours in the sense of ownership. Paul asks, "What do you have that you did not receive?" (1 Corinthians 4:7), and Peter tells believers to serve one another "as good stewards of the manifold grace of God" according to what each has received (1 Peter 4:10). Receiving comes before stewarding because stewardship begins with something that belongs to Another.

The kingdom itself comes to us in this way. Hebrews says, "we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken" (Hebrews 12:28). We do not manufacture the kingdom and then ask God to bless what we have built. We receive what belongs to the King and learn to carry faithfully what He entrusts.

This is where we see the foundation widening beyond the individual. The finished work of Christ has not merely produced reconciled individuals who now carry separate assignments for God. The same blood that brought us near has created a people.

Christ reconciled us "in one body to God through the cross" (Ephesians 2:16). Through Him we have "access in one Spirit to the Father" (Ephesians 2:18). Those who were strangers have become "fellow citizens with the saints" and members "of God's household," and in Christ we are "being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:19, 22).

The gospel that brings us into Christ also brings us into a people.

Christ remains the center of that people. He is "the head of the body, the church," and in Him "all things hold together" (Colossians 1:17–18). Paul may plant and Apollos may water, but God gives the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6). The servant participates deeply in what God is doing without becoming the source of what God is doing.

Here the concern behind *Foundation Before Platform* reaches its deepest conclusion. The danger was never visibility itself. The danger appears when what has been entrusted begins reorganizing life around the steward rather than around Christ. A genuine gift can become a center. A necessary leader can become indispensable in ways no human being was intended to be. People can slowly begin living from the servant through whom something came rather than from the Christ who gave it.

What God has entrusted is therefore carried within the life of a people who belong to Him. Shared stewardship is not simply an organizational preference. It keeps responsibility within the corporate life Christ has created while Christ remains the center. Leadership can remain real, authority can remain accountable, correction can remain possible, discernment can remain relational, and weight can be shared without turning the people into competing centers of their own.

This is where *Foundation Before Platform* brings us and where Life Made Visible must begin.

We will begin where the gospel begins, not with what we are called to produce but with what Christ has already accomplished. From there we will follow the life we have received into the Father's work of formation, the stewardship of what He entrusts, the people Christ has created around Himself, and the shared responsibility of carrying what belongs to Him together.

We need that ground beneath us before we speak about anything becoming visible through us. If we do not know what has been finished, we will try to finish it. If we do not know what has been received, we will try to acquire it. If we do not know who the Source is, we will eventually ask ourselves or someone else to become what only Christ can be.

So, we will not begin with what flows through the branches. We will begin with the gospel that joined the branches to the Source. We will begin with Christ, with His finished work, and with the life that has become ours in Him.

Before we ask what His life looks like when it becomes visible, we must begin with the life we have received.

The Life We Have Received

There is a tendency in the Christian life to begin with what comes next. We begin with growth, obedience, calling, maturity, purpose, service, or the life we hope will eventually become visible through us. We look at who we are becoming and what God may yet do, and without realizing it, we can begin our life with God in the unfinished places. But the gospel does not begin there. Before Scripture speaks to us about the life we are called to live, it directs our attention to something that has already been accomplished.

At the cross, Jesus spoke words that reach far beyond the final moments of His suffering: "It is finished" (John 19:30). He did not say that something had merely begun. He did not leave behind a work waiting for human faithfulness to bring it to completion. The life we have received begins with the finished work of Another.

Hebrews invites us to remain there long enough to see what those words mean. The writer looks back upon generations of priests standing continually before God, offering sacrifices that could never finally remove sin. “And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins” (Hebrews 10:11). The repetition itself told the story. Another sacrifice would come tomorrow because the sacrifice offered today could not bring the matter to completion. Then Christ appears, and everything changes. “But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God” (Hebrews 10:12). The priests stood. Christ sat down. Their sacrifices continued; His sacrifice was complete.

Earlier, Hebrews has already taken us into the sanctuary with Him. Christ entered “by means of His own blood,” and He entered “once for all,” having obtained “eternal redemption” (Hebrews 9:12). Redemption is not described as something He made possible if we can somehow finish what He began. He obtained it. The language is settled because the work is settled.

Hebrews returns to this again and again, almost as though it knows how difficult it will be for us to remain inside the completeness of what Christ has done. “But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Hebrews 9:26). He was “offered once to bear the sins of many” (Hebrews 9:28). “We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Hebrews 10:10). The sacrifice belongs to Christ from beginning to end.

And then we come to one of the most remarkable statements in the letter:

“For by a single offering He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified” (Hebrews 10:14).

The sentence holds together something we will need throughout everything that follows. There is a work that is complete, and there is a people in whom something is still being formed. Scripture does not confuse the two.

We are being sanctified. We are being transformed. There are places within us that have not yet learned to live in agreement with the life we have received. There will be obedience to learn, character to form, thinking to renew, desires to surrender, and ways of living that must increasingly come under the life and lordship of Christ. None of that means the work of Christ remains unfinished.

The unfinished places are in us, not in Him.

That distinction gives the Christian life somewhere to stand. We are not attempting to complete redemption through formation. We are not trying to make the sacrifice of Christ sufficient through obedience. We are not living faithfully enough to persuade God to finish what He began. We are being formed within a salvation Christ has already accomplished.

Paul looks at the same gospel and takes us to the resurrection. Jesus “was delivered up for our transgressions and raised for our justification” (Romans 4:25). The One who bore our sin has been

raised from the dead. The cross and resurrection belong together as God's declaration that the work upon which our life rests has been accomplished in His Son.

Everything changes when we begin from completion rather than deficiency. If we begin with ourselves, we will always find something unfinished. If we begin with our maturity, we will always find somewhere we have not arrived. If we begin with our obedience, we will always find another place that must be surrendered. But when we begin with Christ, we begin with the One who has already said, "It is finished."

The gospel then begins to tell us what His finished work has secured.

Paul writes, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). Peace with God is not held somewhere in the future waiting for the day when we have finally become mature enough to receive it. Paul speaks of something already established. Having been justified, we have peace with God.

And through Christ, "we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand" (Romans 5:2). Grace is not merely something God occasionally sends into our lives when we fail. Paul describes grace as the place in which we now stand. Christ has given us access into a reality we did not create and could never have entered through our own effort.

Ephesians tells the story through the language of distance. Paul asks us to remember what was once true: separated from Christ, strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world (Ephesians 2:12). Then two words change the entire landscape: "But now."

"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:13).

We were far away.

We have been brought near.

And the distance was not overcome by our movement toward God. We were brought near by the blood of Christ.

Paul does not tell us to spend our lives trying to become near enough for God to receive us. He tells us what the blood of Jesus has already accomplished. Nearness is not the reward of spiritual maturity. Nearness belongs to the finished work.

Christ Himself "is our peace" (Ephesians 2:14). Through the cross He reconciled us to God (Ephesians 2:16), and "through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father" (Ephesians 2:18). Peace, reconciliation, nearness, and access are gathered around Christ because Christ Himself has secured them.

The writer of Hebrews says the same thing from inside the imagery of the sanctuary. Because of the blood of Jesus, we have "confidence to enter the holy places" (Hebrews 10:19). The way has been

opened through Him. We are therefore invited to “draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith” (Hebrews 10:22).

Draw near.

Not because we have finally made ourselves worthy of nearness, but because the way has been opened.

Colossians carries us into the same reality. We were once “alienated and hostile in mind,” yet Christ “has now reconciled” us “in his body of flesh by his death” (Colossians 1:21–22). Alienation describes what was. Reconciliation describes what Christ has accomplished.

Second Corinthians reaches even further into the heart of God: “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them” (2 Corinthians 5:19). Reconciliation begins in God. God acts in Christ. God does not stand at a distance waiting for humanity to find a way back; He acts in His Son to reconcile.

We are not being formed so that one day God will reconcile us. We are being formed as those who have been reconciled. We are not learning obedience so that eventually we may have access to the Father. Through Christ we already have access. We are not pursuing maturity in the hope that maturity will bring us near. The blood of Jesus has brought us near.

The gospel establishes the ground before it speaks about the life that will be lived upon it. It does not merely announce what Christ has done for us while leaving us standing outside of Him, receiving the benefits of His work from a distance. As the New Testament continues to unfold what has happened, a phrase repeatedly begins appearing. It is so familiar that we can move past it without realizing how much it carries.

In Christ.

Paul does not merely tell us that Christ died. He tells us that we have been brought into His death. “all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death.” (Romans 6:3). We have been “buried therefore with him by baptism into death,” so that “just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:4).

The language continues. “We have been united with him in a death like his” (Romans 6:5). “Our old self was crucified with him.” (Romans 6:6). “We believe that we will also live with him” (Romans 6:8).

With Him.

With Him.

With Him.

The gospel has not merely changed our relationship to a set of facts. God has brought us into relationship with His Son.

Paul therefore tells the Romans to "consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." (Romans 6:11). He is not asking them to imagine themselves into a reality that does not yet exist. He is calling them to reckon as true what God has established in Christ.

Alive to God in Christ Jesus.

That position begins to appear throughout Paul's letters. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1). "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17). "You have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3).

Our life has been relocated.

We once understood ourselves according to a history that began and ended with us. Our failures belonged to us. Our successes belonged to us. Our worth rose and fell according to what we could see in ourselves. Even our relationship with God could become another place where we measured ourselves by our performance.

Then the gospel tells us that our life is hidden with Christ in God.

Paul can say something that would make very little sense apart from union: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). Paul has not ceased to exist. He immediately continues speaking of "the life which I now live in the flesh." A real human life remains, with real choices, real relationships, real obedience, and real responsibility. But Paul no longer understands that life as something existing independently from Christ.

Christ lives in me. This is where identity begins. Not with the question, *Who can I become?* Not even first with the question, *What am I called to do?* Identity begins with what God has done in placing our life in His Son.

Paul tells the Corinthians, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). New creation does not emerge at the end of a long process of self-improvement. It belongs to those who are in Christ.

Romans 8 begins with the same location: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Condemnation does not wait to disappear until our lives become impressive enough to prove that we have changed. Our standing is found in Christ.

Ephesians takes us even deeper into what has been given. God "has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Ephesians 1:3). He chose us in Him (Ephesians 1:4). "In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 1:5). Before Paul asks the Ephesians to live differently, he spends an extraordinary amount of time telling them what God has already done.

This is the order of grace. Belonging precedes becoming. Identity is received before it is expressed. We do not obey our way into sonship. We do not mature our way into belonging. We do not become useful enough to earn a place in the household of God. In Christ, God has already acted.

Paul tells the Galatians, “for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith” (Galatians 3:26). Romans says that those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God and that we have not received a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but “have received a spirit of adoption as sons by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Romans 8:14–15).

Then something profoundly relational appears. “The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Romans 8:16). Our identity is not simply a theological category written somewhere outside of us. The Spirit bears witness within us to the relationship into which we have been brought. Children. Sons and daughters. Beloved in Christ.

This is why identity cannot be built upon what we do for God. Calling can change. Assignments can change. Visibility can come and go. Capacity can increase, and seasons can close. What we carry can never safely answer the question of who we are because what we carry was never meant to become the source of our identity. Our life is hidden with Christ in God.

And the gospel goes further still. God has not merely given us a new standing before Him. He has not simply declared something concerning us and then left us to generate the life that should correspond to that declaration. The life we have received comes with the presence of God Himself.

Paul tells the Romans, “the Spirit of God dwells in you” (Romans 8:9). Then he speaks of “Christ in you” (Romans 8:10). A verse later he says, “the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you” (Romans 8:11).

The Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in us.

We can read those words so quickly that their wonder disappears beneath familiarity. The Christian life is not an attempt to reproduce the life of Jesus from memory. We have not been handed the story of Christ and then told to imitate it through sufficient determination. Resurrection life has come nearer than imitation could ever bring it. God has made His dwelling within His people.

The promise had been spoken long before. Through Ezekiel, God said, “I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you” (Ezekiel 36:26). Then He continued, “I will put my Spirit within you” (Ezekiel 36:27). The life God desired would not finally be produced by external demand. God Himself would act within His people.

Paul sees that promise alive in Christ. “The one who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him” (1 Cor. 6:17). And again: “Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God” (1 Cor. 6:19). The language of temple has moved startlingly close. God is not merely near us. God dwells within us.

Galatians brings sonship and indwelling together: “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Gal. 4:6). The Spirit within us does not merely empower activity. He bears the life and relationship of the Son. The cry of belonging arises from within because the Spirit of the Son has been sent into our hearts.

Now the shape of the life we have received begins to come into view. Christ has finished the work. Through His blood we have been reconciled and brought near. Through Him we have access to the Father. We have been joined to Christ in His death and resurrection. Our life is now hidden with Christ in God. Our identity is received in Him rather than achieved through ourselves. We are new creation. We have received the Spirit of adoption. The Spirit who raised Christ from the dead dwells within us. Nothing about this life begins with our attempt to produce it.

The Christian life is not the story of people attempting to become something God has withheld until they perform well enough to receive it. Nor can formation mean that we slowly acquire the life of Christ through sufficient discipline, obedience, knowledge, or maturity. The life precedes the formation. We have received before we have learned how to live from what we have received.

Perhaps that is why Hebrews 10:14 is able to hold completion and formation together without tension: "By a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified." What Christ has established does not wait for our formation to become true. And because it is true, formation no longer has to carry the impossible burden of making it true. There is freedom in that order.

We can be unfinished without returning to alienation. We can be corrected without losing belonging. We can discover immaturity without rebuilding our identity around our immaturity. We can grow because we are already rooted somewhere deeper than our growth. The life is received. And now that life will be formed.

The Spirit who dwells within us will not leave what Christ has established hidden from the lives we actually live. The Father who has brought us into His household will form sons and daughters who increasingly bear the likeness of the Son. What has been given will begin to shape how we think, how we love, how we respond, how we endure, how we obey, and eventually how we carry what God places into our hands.

But formation will never become the foundation. Christ is the foundation. His work is finished. Our life is in Him. And everything that follows begins there.

Formed to Carry What We Have Received

"By a single offering He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified" (Hebrews 10:14). Those two realities belong together. There is something Christ has perfected through His offering, and there is something still being worked within the people who belong to Him. Scripture does not resolve the tension by diminishing either truth. What Christ has accomplished is complete, and those who stand within that accomplished work are still being formed.

Formation begins there.

It is not the acquisition of a life we do not yet possess. It is the ongoing work of God within those who have received His life, bringing the person we are actually becoming into increasing agreement with what has already been established in Christ. The work is not moving us toward a different

source of life. It is bringing thought, desire, character, response, relationship, and obedience beneath the government of the life already given.

Paul describes this transformation when he tells the Romans, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2 NASB). Something must change in the way the believer thinks, perceives, responds, and discerns. The life has been received, but patterns formed elsewhere do not disappear merely because our location has changed. The mind must be renewed so that the life being lived increasingly agrees with the reality into which grace has brought us.

Paul speaks of the same work to the Corinthians: “We all, with unveiled faces, looking as in a mirror at the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:18 NASB). Transformation is occurring, but its Source remains the Lord. We do not transform ourselves into the image of Christ by the force of religious effort. The Spirit works within a people whose faces have been unveiled, forming in them what increasingly reflects the One upon whom they are looking.

This is why Christian formation cannot be reduced to behavior modification. Behavior can be restrained while the interior life remains untouched. External conformity can imitate the appearance of maturity without producing the character capable of carrying responsibility faithfully. God is not merely teaching us how to appear more like Christ; He is forming the actual person.

Paul tells the Philippians, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to desire and to work for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12–13 NASB). Our participation is real, but it takes place in response to God’s activity within us. We obey, surrender, choose, endure, repent, learn, and practice faithfulness, while God remains at work beneath and within our response.

The Spirit’s work reaches into the places where another way of living has become familiar. Paul contrasts the works of the flesh with “the fruit of the Spirit” and names love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:19–23). Fruit is not attached to a life from the outside. It grows as the nature of the life within becomes increasingly visible.

This formation reaches beyond what we do into the kind of people we are becoming while we do it. A person can possess extraordinary capacity and still lack the character necessary to carry the weight that capacity creates. Gift can open doors that character is not yet prepared to inhabit. Ability can produce influence long before the inner person has learned how to remain steady beneath influence.

The Father therefore does not merely develop capacity. He forms sons and daughters.

Hebrews places that formation within the relationship of a Father and His children. “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines

the one he loves" (Hebrews 12:5–6). Discipline is not presented as rejection. It belongs within sonship.

The writer continues, "It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons" (Hebrews 12:7). The Father is not standing at a distance evaluating whether we will eventually become worthy of relationship. He deals with us as those who belong to Him, and because we belong to Him, He refuses to leave untouched what cannot faithfully carry the life and responsibility He intends to entrust.

His discipline reaches places gifting cannot reach. It exposes motives beneath service, insecurity beneath ambition, control beneath responsibility, and self-protection beneath independence. It confronts what success can conceal and what visibility can amplify. The Father forms the person beneath the capacity because the person will eventually have to bear the pressure created by what has been entrusted.

Hebrews does not pretend that this process is pleasant. "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant." Yet pain is not its purpose. "But later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:11).

Trained by it.

Formation requires more than passing through difficult things. Difficulty by itself does not produce maturity. Pressure can soften or harden, expose or embitter, deepen trust or strengthen self-protection. The Father's discipline bears fruit in those who allow themselves to be trained by what He is doing.

James speaks similarly about testing: "Consider it all joy, my brothers and sisters, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance" (James 1:2–3 NASB). The trial is not itself the destination. Something is being produced through tested faith.

"And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:4 NASB). Endurance must be allowed to finish its work. There are things formed only by remaining faithful when immediate relief is unavailable, when obedience has not produced immediate reward, and when we cannot control the timing of what God is doing.

Paul traces the same formation through suffering: "Tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope" (Romans 5:3–4 NASB). Pressure reveals what has been formed and participates in forming what is still unstable. Perseverance becomes proven character because something has remained beneath pressure long enough to become tested.

This is where hiddenness can accomplish something visibility cannot.

Visibility reveals what is present, but hiddenness gives room for things to be formed before they must carry the additional pressure of being seen. In hidden places, faithfulness can be separated

from recognition. Obedience can become obedience without applause. Service can remain service when no identity is being supplied by the response of those watching.

What God forms in hiddenness does not become valuable only when it becomes visible. The hidden work is itself part of the stewardship of a life. Long before we carry responsibility before others, we are learning whether we can remain faithful before God when the only reward available is faithfulness itself.

Jesus repeatedly returns to this hidden place. Giving can occur where the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing. Prayer can happen behind a closed door. Fasting can remain unseen by those around us (Matthew 6:1–18). The Father who sees in secret forms a life that does not require visibility in order to remain real.

That formation becomes increasingly important when visibility does come.

What is visible places pressure upon identity. Recognition can begin supplying something we once received from God alone. Influence can create an appetite for being needed. Responsibility can slowly become difficult to distinguish from significance. What began as something entrusted can become something we cannot imagine ourselves without.

The Father forms us so that what He gives us to carry does not have to tell us who we are. This is steadiness before stewardship. Steadiness does not mean the absence of weakness, emotion, uncertainty, or need. It is not invulnerability. It is the growing capacity to remain rooted when responsibility exerts pressure upon the places where identity, ambition, fear, control, and approval once determined our responses.

A steady person can be entrusted without immediately possessing what has been entrusted. A steady person can carry something significant without requiring that significance to transfer to the self. A steady person can be corrected without experiencing correction as annihilation and can be overlooked without interpreting hiddenness as abandonment.

This kind of formation cannot be hurried simply because capacity is evident.

James warns, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” (James 3:1). Greater responsibility brings greater accountability. The presence of teaching capacity does not make the weight attached to teaching insignificant.

Jesus gives the same principle in another form: “The one who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much” (Luke 16:10). Faithfulness is formed before scale increases. The issue is not whether the smaller thing is impressive enough to matter. The smaller stewardship reveals how we carry what belongs to another before more is placed into our hands.

Jesus continues, “And if you have not been faithful in that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own?” (Luke 16:12). Stewardship begins with the recognition that what we are carrying belongs to another. Faithfulness therefore cannot be measured merely by what we

accomplish with it; it includes the way we carry something whose ownership never transferred to us.

Paul brings the same reality into ministry when he says, “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor. 4:1). Then he names the requirement: “Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful” (1 Cor. 4:2). The measure is faithfulness.

Paul immediately refuses comparison as the measure of that faithfulness. He will not allow the Corinthians to elevate one servant against another, and he finally asks the question that exposes the illusion beneath comparison: “What do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Cor. 4:7). Whatever distinguishes the steward arrived first as gift. That question changes the way responsibility is carried.

What do you have that you did not receive? Capacity was received. Grace was received. Opportunity was received. Access was received. The assignment itself was received. Even the formation that made us capable of carrying it was the work of grace. Receiving therefore precedes stewarding.

Peter uses precisely this order when he writes, “As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the multifaceted grace of God” (1 Peter 4:10 NASB). The gift is received before it is stewarded. The steward becomes responsible for something that originated outside the steward.

Peter carries the distinction even further. “Whoever speaks is to do so as one who is speaking actual words of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies” (1 Peter 4:11 NASB). What is spoken comes from God, and even the strength by which we serve is supplied by God. Stewardship does not gradually become independence from the One who entrusted it. Everything remains dependent upon grace.

This makes ownership fundamentally incompatible with faithful stewardship. Ownership says, This is mine because I carry it. Stewardship says, This has been entrusted to me, and because it belongs to Another, I am responsible for how I carry it.

The distinction reaches into the way we hold gifts, assignments, influence, opportunities, resources, and people. We can become possessive of things God never gave us permission to own. We can begin protecting an assignment as though its continuation were necessary to preserve our identity, or guarding a place of responsibility as though another person’s participation threatened what belongs to us. But the steward has nothing to defend as personal possession.

Jesus’ parable of the talents begins with a man preparing to travel who “called his servants and entrusted to them his property” (Matthew 25:14). What the servants receive is real, and their responsibility for it is real, but the possessions remain the master’s. The servants are accountable precisely because they have been entrusted with what belongs to someone else.

The master later returns and settles accounts with them (Matthew 25:19). The faithful servants are commended not because they transformed the master's possessions into personal kingdoms but because they were faithful with what had been placed into their hands. "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much" (Matthew 25:21). Faithfulness prepares the steward for greater entrustment, but greater entrustment never changes who owns what is entrusted.

The Father has been forming us for precisely this kind of responsibility. He forms character because capacity will eventually carry weight. He forms endurance because faithfulness must survive seasons in which immediate results cannot sustain it. He forms humility because what is received can never rightly become the ground for boasting. He forms teachability because entrusted people remain dependent people. He forms stability because responsibility must not be allowed to continually redefine the person carrying it.

And He forms sons and daughters who can release what He asks them to release. If what we carry belongs to Him, then He remains free to determine how long we carry it, where we carry it, and whether it eventually passes into another person's hands. Stewardship cannot require permanent possession without ceasing to be stewardship. The open hand that receives must eventually remain open enough to release.

This is where formation reveals whether stewardship has quietly become identity. We often discover what something has become to us when God begins touching our relationship to it. An assignment can be called stewardship while we are receiving affirmation from it and still function as possession when its place in our lives is threatened.

The Father is not merely forming us to receive more. He is forming us to remain His while carrying whatever He gives. Responsibility may increase, influence may widen, and what has been entrusted may become deeply consequential to other people, but none of it is permitted to become the source of the steward's life. The steward must remain rooted somewhere deeper than the stewardship. This is why formation comes before the weight of what follows.

The Father is forming people who can carry without possessing, serve without becoming the source, lead without requiring leadership to establish identity, and remain faithful when the shape of responsibility changes. He is forming people who know that what they carry matters deeply while knowing just as deeply that it remains His.

If what has been entrusted belongs to Christ, then we must eventually ask whether He ever intended what belongs to Him to be carried as the possession of isolated stewards. The person may be formed, the character may be steady, and the stewardship may be faithful, yet the life into which Christ has brought us is larger than any individual carrier.

The Father forms sons and daughters.

Christ is building a people.

A People Formed Around Christ

The Father does not form faithful stewards so that each of us can become the center of something entrusted to us. Everything we have received still belongs to Him, and everything we are being formed to carry remains beneath the lordship of Christ. Formation steadies us so that responsibility can increase without responsibility becoming identity, and stewardship teaches us to carry without possessing. But as we begin to look beyond the individual steward, another reality comes into view: Christ has not merely been forming individuals who can faithfully carry something for Him. Through His finished work, He has created a people who belong to Him together.

Paul confronts the importance of Christ remaining at the center when division appears among the believers in Corinth. Some were saying, "I am of Paul," others, "I of Apollos," and still others, "I of Cephas" (1 Corinthians 1:12 NASB). The people had begun identifying themselves around the servants through whom they had received, and Paul immediately exposes what has gone wrong. "Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he?" (1 Corinthians 1:13 NASB). His answer does not diminish the servants or deny the significance of what they carried. It restores everyone to the One around whom their shared life must remain ordered.

Paul returns to the same problem when he asks, "What then is Apollos? And what is Paul?" His answer is simple: "Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one" (1 Corinthians 3:5 NASB). Paul planted and Apollos watered, but "God was causing the growth" (1 Corinthians 3:6 NASB). The labor was real, the servants mattered, and their participation had consequences, but none of them was the Source of the life being produced.

Paul will not allow human participation to become confused with divine origin. "So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth" (1 Cor. 3:7 NASB). The servant can plant faithfully without becoming the source of what grows. Another can water faithfully without becoming the source of what grows. What has been entrusted to human hands remains dependent upon God for its life.

This is where Paul brings the Corinthians back to the foundation. "For no one can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11 NASB). The foundation is not the person through whom we first heard. It is not the person whose gift has strengthened us most deeply, nor the person carrying the greatest visible responsibility. The foundation has already been laid, and the foundation is Christ.

Colossians carries the centrality of Christ even further. "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Col. 1:15 NASB), and "all things have been created through Him and for Him" (Col. 1:16). Paul says that Christ "is before all things, and in Him all things hold together" (Col. 1:17). Then he turns directly toward the Ekklesia Assembly and declares, "He is also the head of the body, the Ekklesia" (Col. 1:18 NASB).

The Ekklesia already has a Head. The people of God are not waiting for someone among them to become the source of direction, cohesion, identity, or life. Christ stands before the body as the

One from whom its life proceeds, and He remains over the body as its Head. Paul says that in everything Christ is to "have first place" (Col. 1:18 NASB).

It is possible to say that Christ is central while, in practice, the life of His people begins to gather around someone or something else. We can confess that Christ is Lord while gradually allowing a personality, a gift, a voice, an assignment, or a visible work to occupy the functional center. The shift does not have to be deliberate. It can happen slowly whenever what Christ gives begins drawing attention away from the Christ who gave it.

The person carrying something significant can become difficult to distinguish from the thing being carried. The people receiving through that person can begin depending upon the carrier in ways that belong to Christ alone, while the carrier can begin drawing identity from being needed.

What began as stewardship can quietly redirect the life of the people toward the servant through whom it came. The gift remains from God, the calling may remain genuine, and the work may continue producing fruit, while the relational life around it begins organizing itself around a human source. Paul refuses that displacement.

Paul plants, Apollos waters, and God gives the growth. Christ remains the foundation. The servants can be honored without becoming the source, and their contribution can be received without allowing the people of God to become identified around them.

Jesus establishes the same order when He says, "I will build My Ekklesia[1]" (see Matthew 16:18). The Ekklesia Assembly belongs to Him before it belongs to anyone entrusted with responsibility within it. The building is His work before it becomes our participation. We may labor within what He is building, but our labor never transfers ownership of the house to the laborer.

This becomes especially important when we return to the finished work of Christ, because the cross has done more than reconcile individual people to God. The same blood that brought us near has created a people.

Paul tells the Ephesians, "But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Eph. 2:13 NASB). We have already received those words as the announcement of accomplished nearness. We were far off, and Christ brought us near. But Paul does not stop with the distance between the individual and God because the reconciliation accomplished through the cross reaches horizontally as well as vertically.

Christ "is our peace," and He "made both groups into one" (Eph. 2:14 NASB). Paul is speaking into the deep division between Jew and Gentile, a division carried through history, covenant identity, religious practice, culture, and hostility. Christ does not simply offer both groups independent

[1] Ekklesia (ἐκκλησία) is the Greek word used in Matthew 16:18, meaning an assembly or gathering. It is conventionally translated "church" in English versions. Since *ekklesia* is not the origin of the English word *church*, throughout this work I retain *Ekklesia* to emphasize the people Christ has called and gathered rather than the institutional meanings the English word *church* can carry.

access to God while leaving the dividing wall intact. In His flesh He breaks down the barrier and creates “in Himself one new man from the two, thus establishing peace” (Eph. 2:15 NASB).

Then Paul tells us what the cross has done: Christ reconciled them “both in one body to God through the cross” (Eph. 2:16 NASB). The same cross that reconciles us to God has reconciled us in one body. The gospel does not bring us near to God while leaving us untouched in our relationship to the people He has also brought near. We were not merely reconciled as individuals. We were reconciled in one body.

Paul continues, “Through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father” (Eph. 2:18 NASB). The access is through Christ, the Spirit is one, and the destination is the Father. Yet Paul deliberately says, “we both have our access.” What Christ has opened is personally received, but it is not privately possessed.

The gospel does not simply give me a relationship with God and then invite me to decide whether shared life with His people would be useful. The life into which I have been brought already has a corporate reality. The Christ to whom I have been joined is gathering a people to Himself, and the Spirit who dwells within me is the same Spirit through whom others have access to the same Father.

Paul therefore continues, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and are of God’s household” (Eph. 2:19 NASB). The former identity of separation has been replaced by a shared identity of belonging. We are fellow citizens. We are members of a household.

A household is more than a gathering of people who happen to occupy the same space. Belonging creates relationship. What affects one member touches the life of others, and what is carried within the household cannot be understood only through the interests of the individual. God has not simply brought us into proximity. He has brought us into a people.

Paul then changes the image again and describes this household as something being built. It has been “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone” (Eph. 2:20 NASB). Christ remains the determining center even as the image moves from family to structure. Everything being built takes its alignment from Him.

“In whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord” (Eph. 2:21 NASB). The building grows because living people are being fitted together. The work of God is not simply occurring within each person independently. Something is happening between them as Christ brings them into relationship with Himself and with one another.

Then Paul says, “in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit” (Eph. 2:22 NASB). The Spirit who dwells within us is building us together. The indwelling life we received personally has a corporate expression before we have said anything about gifts, functions, ministries, or assignments. God desires a dwelling, and the dwelling is being formed from a people joined together in Christ.

Peter gives us another image of the same reality. He begins with Christ, “a living stone which has been rejected by people, but is choice and precious in the sight of God” (1 Peter 2:4 NASB). Then he turns toward those who have come to Him: “you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:5 NASB). Christ is the living stone to whom we come, and those who receive life in Him become living stones being built together.

The stone does not give itself life. Its life is received through Christ. Yet the life it receives does not terminate in its own existence. Living stones are being built into something larger than themselves.

This keeps us from reducing salvation to a collection of individual experiences with God. The Father has indeed called us by name. Christ has indeed reconciled us personally. The Spirit dwells within the believer, and each of us must personally respond to the grace we have received. None of that disappears when Scripture reveals the corporate reality of redemption. But neither can the corporate reality disappear beneath the personal one. Christ has created a people.

Peter names them: “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession” (1 Peter 2:9 NASB). These are not merely descriptions of individual believers multiplied by a large number. They are corporate identities. God has taken those who once “were not a people” and made them “the people of God” (1 Peter 2:10 NASB). The language of possession is especially important. They are “a people for God’s own possession.” The people belong to God.

Paul gives us another way of seeing what Christ has created. “For just as the body is one and yet has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ” (1 Cor. 12:12 NASB). The many have not ceased to be many, yet Scripture speaks of a reality in which their life can no longer be understood only in isolation from one another. There is one body.

Paul then tells us how they have been brought into that reality: “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13 NASB). The body is not created by human agreement, organizational structure, shared preference, or the decision to cooperate. The Spirit has brought those who belong to Christ into one body, and the same Spirit has been given to them all.

This corporate life is received before it is practiced. We do not create the body by learning how to live together well. We learn how to live together because in Christ, by the Spirit, we have already been brought into one body. Our shared life is not an aspiration toward unity but a response to something God has established.

The distinctions among us have not disappeared. Paul names Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, people whose histories and places within the world were profoundly different. Yet those distinctions do not create separate sources of life. “We were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13 NASB). The life of the people proceeds from the same Spirit.

This brings us directly back to stewardship. If the people belong to God, no steward can rightly possess them. If Christ is the Head, no member can rightly function as though the body depends

upon him for its life. If Christ is the cornerstone, the structure cannot safely take its alignment from a personality. If Christ is building His Ekklesia, no servant can treat what is being built as the extension of himself. The people are His. The house is His. The work is His. The life is His.

Those truths do not diminish human responsibility. They establish its boundaries. We can carry genuine authority without becoming the owner of those we serve. We can bear significant responsibility without requiring the people to organize themselves around us. We can carry a responsibility that is genuinely significant without allowing our place in it to become the center upon which everything else depends.

This is one of the freedoms of living from the difference between stewardship and ownership. The steward can pour himself into what has been entrusted without needing to possess the outcome. He can love people deeply without needing them to belong to him. He can serve faithfully without turning their dependence upon Christ into dependence upon himself.

This becomes increasingly important as responsibility grows. The greater the influence of a gift, the easier it becomes for the gift to create a center around the person carrying it. People naturally gather where they are fed, strengthened, taught, encouraged, or helped. There is nothing inherently wrong with receiving from someone through whom Christ is giving grace. But receiving through a person must never quietly become living from that person.

Paul's question still stands: "What then is Apollos? And what is Paul?" (1 Cor. 3:5 NASB). They are servants through whom people believed. They matter deeply, but only as servants whose lives and labor depend upon the grace they have received. Their assignment is entrusted. Their labor participates in something whose Source remains God.

This is why Christ-centeredness has to become more than language we use when we speak about ministry. It needs to determine the actual shape of our relationships. If Christ is the center, people must be free to grow toward Him rather than increasingly dependent upon the person serving them. If Christ is the center, those carrying responsibility must be free to make room for what He gives through others. If Christ is the center, the health of what is being built cannot depend upon keeping one human personality indispensable.

The foundation before platform was never intended merely to produce better people for visible places. The foundation exposes the danger of allowing visible places to become organizing centers at all. Christ has already occupied the center. Everything else must find its place around Him.

This can also change the way we think about shared life. Shared life does not begin with a decision to create community. It begins with the reality that Christ has already made us a people. We do not manufacture the body through relational effort. We learn to live in agreement with the body Christ has created.

Ephesians does not tell us to become fellow citizens. It tells us that we are fellow citizens. It does not tell us to make ourselves God's household. It tells us that we are members of His household. It

does not ask us to invent a spiritual dwelling. It tells us that we are being built together into one. Once again, what is accomplished precedes what is expressed.

This is the same order we have followed from the beginning. Christ finishes before we participate. He reconciles before we learn to live reconciled. He gives identity before identity becomes visible in character. He gives life before formation brings that life into expression. Now we discover that He creates a people before those people learn how to live together as what He has made them. The corporate life of the Ekklesia therefore does not begin with organization. It begins with Christ.

Organization may eventually serve what Christ has created, but it cannot create it. Structure may help people carry responsibility faithfully, but structure cannot produce the shared life of the Spirit. Leadership may guard, equip, teach, and serve the people, but leadership cannot become the source of the life holding the people together. "In Him all things hold together" (Col. 1:17 NASB). That remains true here. Christ holds together what belongs to Christ.

This frees us from the impossible task of constructing unity around human sameness. We do not have to possess the same personality, background, capacity, experience, perspective, or assignment in order to belong to the same Christ. Our unity does not begin with our ability to agree on everything about one another. It begins with the One into whom we have been brought.

Paul tells the Ephesians to walk "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, being diligent to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:2–3 NASB). He does not tell them to create the unity of the Spirit. He tells them to keep it.

Then he names the reality already present: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you also were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (Eph. 4:4–6 NASB). One body. One Spirit. One Lord. One Father. The unity is rooted in God before it is practiced among us.

This means relational faithfulness is not an attempt to create something God has failed to provide. We learn patience because we belong to one body. We bear with one another in love because we share one Lord. We protect peace because the Spirit has already established a unity deeper than our differences.

The same received reality that freed us from striving in our individual relationship with God now frees us from striving to manufacture corporate life. We can begin from what Christ has established and learn to live faithfully within it.

Christ has already answered the question of the center. He is the Head. He is the cornerstone. He is the foundation. He is the Builder. He is the One in whom all things hold together, and the people belong to Him. Those realities establish the place from which every human responsibility must be carried. A teacher may teach, a leader may lead, and a steward may carry significant responsibility, but none of those responsibilities alters the relationship between Christ and the people He has made His own. What is given through a servant can be received without the servant becoming the source, because the life of the people remains centered in Christ.

If Christ has created a people rather than merely a collection of individuals, and if those people belong to Him rather than to those who serve them, stewardship can no longer remain merely individual. The Father has formed sons and daughters capable of carrying what He entrusts without possessing it, but He has brought those sons and daughters into a people whose life is shared in Christ. What belongs to Him is therefore carried within the life of those who belong to Him together.

We have not yet arrived at the question of how the life of Christ will be expressed through every member. That question belongs further ahead. We are not yet tracing the distribution of grace, the diversity of gifts, or the way every part supplies what the body needs. Before we can speak about distributed expression, we must first establish shared responsibility. The people must be able to carry together before we ask how the life moves through the many.

And that requires us to look carefully at stewardship again, this time no longer through the life of the individual steward but through the life of the people Christ has created. We will have to ask what happens when responsibility is genuinely shared, when leadership remains beneath the Headship of Christ, when humility keeps authority relational, when correction remains possible, and when no one person is asked to carry the weight that belongs within the life of the whole.

The foundation has brought us to a people formed around Christ. We have not created ourselves. We have been reconciled through His cross, brought near through His blood, given access through one Spirit, made members of God's household, and built together into His dwelling. Our life does not originate in the people who serve us, because Christ remains the Source from whom the life of His people proceeds.

Now we ask what it means to carry what belongs to Him together.

Carrying His Life Together

Christ has created a people around Himself. Through the cross, those who were far off have been brought near, those who were divided have been reconciled in one body, and those who were strangers have become members of God's household. The Spirit is building them together into a dwelling of God, and Christ remains the cornerstone, the Head, the foundation, and the One in whom the whole life is held together. Once that reality has been established, stewardship can no longer be understood only as the faithfulness of individual people carrying individual responsibilities.

What belongs to Christ has been entrusted within the life of a people who belong to Christ together. This does not erase individual responsibility or make every responsibility the same. It places what each person carries within something larger than the person carrying it. The steward remains responsible for what has been entrusted, but that stewardship takes place among a people whose life, belonging, and responsibility are held beneath the lordship of the same Christ.

Paul had already begun opening this reality when he spoke to the Corinthians about himself and Apollos. "I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth" (1 Corinthians 3:6 NASB). Different people carried different responsibilities within the same work, and neither responsibility

could be understood independently from the other. Paul planted what another would water, and Apollos watered what another had planted, while God remained the One giving the growth.

Paul continues, “Now the one who plants and the one who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor” (1 Cor. 3:8 NASB). Individual accountability remains. Paul is responsible for Paul’s labor, and Apollos is responsible for the labor entrusted to him. Yet their differing responsibilities exist within one work that belongs to God.

Then Paul names the relationship plainly: “For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building” (1 Cor. 3:9 NASB). The repeated possessive keeps everyone in the proper place. The workers are God’s. The field is God’s. The building is God’s. The work can be shared because no participant owns what is being built.

Shared stewardship begins here. It does not begin with the assumption that everyone should do everything, nor does it require the removal of distinctions in responsibility. It begins with the recognition that what Christ is building belongs to Christ, and therefore no individual steward carries it as personal possession. Different people may carry different measures of responsibility, but all of them remain stewards within something that belongs to Another.

The life of the early church/Ekklesia repeatedly reflects this shared responsibility. When Paul and Barnabas returned through the cities where they had preached, “they had appointed elders for them in every church” (Acts 14:23 NASB). Responsibility for the people was not simply attached to the missionary through whom the churches had begun. Elders were recognized among the people, and responsibility was entrusted within the local life of the church.

When Paul later called for the leaders of the Ekklesia in Ephesus, Luke tells us that he sent to Ephesus and called to himself the elders of the Ekklesia Assembly (see Acts 20:17). Paul speaks to them together and tells them, ‘Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers’ (see Acts 20:28). The Holy Spirit had placed responsibility among a plurality of people who were themselves accountable for how they carried it.

Even here, ownership remains with God. Paul tells them to shepherd “the Ekklesia of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28). The people entrusted to their care were never theirs. They had been purchased by Christ, and the price of their belonging had been His own blood. Leadership therefore existed as stewardship within a people who already belonged to Another.

Peter speaks to leadership in the same way. He addresses “the elders among you” as “your fellow elder” and tells them to “shepherd the flock of God among you” (1 Peter 5:1–2 NASB). The flock is God’s before any elder is asked to shepherd it. Peter does not place the shepherd between the people and Christ as though responsibility transferred possession; he places the shepherd within the flock as one entrusted to care for what belongs to God.

Peter then guards the manner in which that responsibility is carried. The elders are to serve “not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not with greed, but with eagerness; nor yet as domineering over those assigned to your care, but by proving to be examples

to the flock" (1 Peter 5:2–3 NASB). Authority is real, but it remains bounded by stewardship. Those entrusted with responsibility are not given ownership over the lives of those they serve.

Then Peter turns their attention toward the One under whom every human shepherd remains: "When the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory" (1 Peter 5:4 NASB). Christ remains the Chief Shepherd. Every other shepherd serves beneath His authority, among His people, caring for His flock.

Leadership therefore cannot become the place where the shared life of Christ is centralized. Leadership serves the life of the people without becoming the source of that life. Those who carry authority may protect, teach, guide, correct, equip, discern, and watch over what has been entrusted, but their responsibility does not make them the Head. Christ does not surrender His place when He entrusts responsibility to people.

Yet shared stewardship reaches further than shared leadership.

If Christ has created a people rather than an audience, then the life they share cannot be reduced to the responsibilities carried by those who lead them. The Ekklesia is not merely a gathering of individuals who occupy the same space, receive from the same teachers, and then return to largely separate spiritual lives. Scripture describes something far more joined than that: a people whose lives have been brought into relationship with Christ and, through Him, with one another.

An audience can remain anonymous. People can observe without being known, receive without participating, and leave without anyone knowing what they are carrying. But the life of a people cannot remain at that distance. A people begins to notice. A people becomes close enough for weakness to be seen, for burdens to become known, and for another person's need to call forth a response.

This is where shared stewardship becomes deeply relational. What Christ has entrusted to His people includes more than assignments, ministries, resources, decisions, and leadership responsibilities. We have also been entrusted to one another.

Paul tells the Galatians, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). The burden belongs to one person, yet Scripture refuses to leave that person carrying it alone. Another is called near enough to bear what has become heavy.

To the Romans Paul writes, "Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves" (Romans 15:1 NASB). Strength is not given merely for the preservation of the strong. There are moments when what God has formed in one person becomes part of the provision for another person who cannot presently carry the same weight.

This changes the way we measure maturity. Maturity cannot be evaluated by how independently we are able to manage our own lives. The strength God forms within His people creates capacity to move toward one another. The steady can help the unsteady. The strong can bear with the weak. The encouraged can encourage. The comforted can become present to those who need comfort.

Hebrews brings this into especially tender focus: “Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed” (Hebrews 12:12–13). Something is already weak. Something is already unstable. Something vulnerable can either be pushed further out of place or given room to heal. That command assumes proximity.

Weak hands cannot be strengthened if weakness must remain hidden. Weak knees cannot be steadied by people who never come near enough to know they are trembling. What is vulnerable cannot be carried carefully within a people whose lives remain too distant from one another for vulnerability to be seen. The life Scripture describes requires more than gathering. It requires enough shared life for people to become known to each other.

This was one of the questions that pressed itself into *Foundation Before Platform*: What kind of people must we become so that wounded believers can remain among us long enough for Christ to heal them? The question is far more reaching than how we respond in an isolated moment. It pushes into the kind of life being formed among us. It asks whether weakness can come into the light without belonging being called into question.

When our life together is still governed by performance, weakness will eventually become something people learn they have to hide. They may remain present while withdrawing from being truly known. They may learn what can safely be shared and what must be carried privately. Outward stability can hide the quiet weight people are carrying alone.

But the finished work has given us another foundation. Belonging is not secured by appearing whole. Access to God is not maintained by presenting ourselves as though nothing remains unfinished. The people Christ has reconciled to God are free to become a place where what is still being healed can be brought into the light without the fear that weakness will remove someone from belonging.

Healing can then unfold within relationship rather than behind the protection of isolation. This does not mean every weakness becomes public or every struggle belongs to everyone. Shared life does not abolish wisdom, boundaries, privacy, or appropriate responsibility. It means weakness does not automatically result in distance, and the person carrying it does not have to become the sole bearer of its weight.

Healing often requires time. What has been wounded over years may not be restored in a moment, and what God is doing within a person may not follow the pace others would prefer. A people formed to carry one another must therefore learn how to remain present when something is still unresolved. Patience becomes part of shared stewardship. So does steadiness.

A person who is unsettled by another person’s unfinished process will often feel pressure to resolve what cannot yet be resolved. A person who needs immediate clarity may withdraw when the path becomes difficult to understand. A person who cannot remain near weakness without becoming threatened by it may unintentionally require others to appear whole before healing has actually occurred.

The Father forms His people differently. He forms people capable of remaining. He forms people secure enough not to require another person's immediate restoration in order to stay near them, patient enough to allow process, and steady enough not to confuse what is unfinished with what is hopeless.

This is not a lowering of truth. It is the creation of a life in which truth can be carried without driving wounded people further into hiding.

Paul tells the Ephesians that we are to be "speaking the truth in love" as we "grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Eph. 4:15). Truth and love are not competing obligations. They belong together within the growth of a body whose Head remains Christ.

Truth can expose what must change. It can bring clarity where confusion has taken hold and call what has drifted back into alignment. But truth is not entrusted to us so that accuracy can become a weapon. It is carried within the life of a people who desire one another's growth into Christ.

The way truth is carried therefore matters. Something can be accurate and still be delivered without the patience, gentleness, or restraint appropriate to the person receiving it. When honesty becomes associated with humiliation, pressure, or relational distance, people do not stop needing truth. They often stop bringing into the light the places where truth is needed.

Paul gives a different picture when he addresses restoration directly: "Brothers and sisters, even if a person is caught in any wrongdoing, you who are spiritual are to restore such a person in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you are not tempted as well" (Gal. 6:1 NASB). Restoration requires truth, but truth arrives through gentleness. The person bringing correction remains aware of his own vulnerability even while helping another.

Then Paul immediately says, "Bear one another's burdens" (Gal. 6:2). Correction and burden-bearing belong beside one another. The one who needs restoration is not merely confronted and then left alone to manage what has been exposed. Shared life remains present.

This places authority itself inside relationship. Authority does not become more faithful by becoming heavier. It becomes faithful as it remains aligned with Christ and serves what He is forming within His people. Leadership does not replace the shared care of the body. It protects it.

When care is treated mainly as the leaders' responsibility, something meant for the whole people can gradually settle onto only a few. Leaders begin carrying awareness of needs, responsibility for presence, the weight of care, and the expectation of response while the rest of the body gradually learns to stand at a distance. No one may have intended that arrangement, yet the life of the people begins narrowing around those who lead.

The result places weight in the wrong places. Leaders begin carrying what was never meant to rest entirely upon them, while members of the body become less practiced in carrying one another. The few become increasingly necessary to the functioning of the whole, and the many can begin relating to the life of the people more as recipients than participants.

Leadership within shared stewardship serves another purpose. It guards the center without becoming the center. It equips the people without replacing their participation. It helps protect the life Christ is forming so that care remains shared, truth remains grounded, weakness is not neglected, and the life of the body is not quietly transferred into the hands of a few willing people.

Paul describes the work of those Christ gives to the Ekklesia as "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:12). The saints are equipped for the work. Ministry is not gathered away from the body and concentrated permanently in those who equip it.

The passage continues until Paul reaches the body itself: "Joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly" (Eph. 4:16). We will eventually need to return to the fullness of that picture, because it begins opening questions that belong to *Life Made Visible*. For now, it is enough to see that leadership does not exhaust the life of the body. Christ is forming a people in whom responsibility does not remain concentrated in a few.

This also means healing cannot be assigned to leaders as though they are its source.

Christ heals.

The people of God can make room for His healing. They can remain present, bear burdens, strengthen what is weak, refuse to shame what is unfinished, speak truth with love, and walk with someone through a process that takes longer than expected. But they cannot produce wholeness in another human being. Maintaining this distinction protects everyone involved.

The wounded person is not made dependent upon another human being for what only Christ can give. The person offering care is not required to carry the impossible weight of becoming someone else's healer. The Ekklesia participates in what Christ is doing without taking Christ's place within it.

Christ remains the Healer, and His people learn how not to resist His healing through absence, impatience, shame, control, or the demand for premature restoration. They become a people among whom someone can remain present while Christ continues His work.

This is shared stewardship at the level of life itself.

We carry responsibility for the environment our shared life creates. We carry responsibility for whether weakness is driven underground or given room to be known. We carry responsibility for whether strength becomes self-protection or provision for another. We carry responsibility for whether truth opens a way toward restoration or becomes something people learn to fear.

None of this means we become responsible for another person's choices or outcomes. Shared stewardship does not erase personal responsibility. Paul can say, "Bear one another's burdens" and only a few verses later say, "For each one will bear his own load" (Gal. 6:2, 5).

Scripture is capable of holding personal responsibility and shared burden-bearing together. So must we. We do not carry for another what God has given them to carry. We do not remove

responsibility in the name of care. But neither do we use personal responsibility as permission to leave people alone beneath burdens they were never meant to bear without the presence of others.

This kind of shared life requires humility. A person who still needs to be right in order to remain secure will struggle to discern with others. A person who experiences another voice as a threat will struggle to share responsibility. A person whose identity has become entangled with authority may defend a position long after faithfulness requires listening.

Paul tells the Philippians, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility consider one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others" (Phil. 2:3–4 NASB). He then places Christ before them, the One who did not exploit His position but "emptied Himself by taking the form of a bond-servant" and "humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:7–8 NASB). The life of Christ Himself establishes the posture within which His people learn to carry responsibility together.

Humility does not require us to deny what God has entrusted. It allows us to carry what has been entrusted without needing what we carry to elevate us above another person. It makes room for the grace of God in someone else because another person's contribution does not diminish our own. It also allows us to be corrected.

Even those entrusted with significant authority in the New Testament remained capable of correction. Paul recounts that when Peter came to Antioch, "I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned" (Gal. 2:11). Peter's earlier role among the apostles did not place his conduct beyond examination. When his behavior ceased to agree with "the truth of the gospel," Paul confronted what had become misaligned (Gal. 2:14).

The possibility of correction does not weaken faithful authority. It protects authority from becoming ownership. A steward who cannot be questioned is slowly being placed somewhere Scripture never placed him, and a steward who cannot receive correction is being asked to carry a weight no human being was meant to carry.

Received identity makes another way possible. Correction does not have to threaten belonging. The person being corrected can remain a son or daughter while something in the stewardship is brought back into alignment.

Shared discernment grows from the same ground.

In Acts 15, a serious dispute concerning circumcision and the Gentile believers could not be treated as a private matter. Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem "to the apostles and elders concerning this issue" (Acts 15:2). The question touched the gospel, the identity of the people, and the terms upon which Gentiles would be received, and the discernment required more than the conviction of a single person.

Luke tells us that "the apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter" (Acts 15:6). There was "much debate" before Peter spoke, and later Barnabas and Paul testified concerning

what God had done among the Gentiles (Acts 15:7, 12 NASB). James then brought the testimony into conversation with Scripture before offering his judgment (Acts 15:13–19 NASB). Testimony, disagreement, apostolic witness, Scripture, and discernment remained present together.

The resulting letter later declares, "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28 NASB). Human discernment had not become equal to the Spirit. A people had sought to discern together beneath the activity and authority of the Spirit.

Shared discernment requires enough security to listen when another person sees something we have not seen. It requires enough humility to distinguish conviction from infallibility. It requires enough trust in the Spirit to believe that His activity is not limited to what He has shown one person.

Paul tells the Romans 'not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.' (Romans 12:3). He immediately places that sober self-understanding within the reality of a body with many members (Romans 12:4–5). No one person is the measure of the whole.

We can carry something genuinely important and still know that what we carry is partial. We can speak with conviction and still remain able to listen. We can hold responsibility without requiring our perspective to become the only perspective through which the people can discern.

This is one of the ways shared stewardship protects the people from confusing a steward with the Source. When responsibility remains relational, another voice can be heard. When discernment remains shared, one person's limitation does not have to become the limitation of the whole. When authority remains accountable, strength can serve without becoming untouchable. What is shared must remain shared, and what is centered must remain Christ.

This does not mean responsibility is distributed merely to prevent anyone from becoming too influential. Shared stewardship is not suspicion disguised as structure. It grows from confidence that Christ is capable of entrusting responsibility throughout His people without losing His place as Head.

There is freedom in that confidence. A person can release something into another person's hands because the work does not cease to belong to Christ when the carrier changes. A leader can make room for another voice because Christ is not diminished when another person speaks. A steward can recognize another steward because grace has never been a scarce possession that must be protected from someone else.

The weight can be shared because the life does not depend upon one carrier.

Shared stewardship therefore does not ask us to diminish responsibility. It asks us to carry responsibility without converting it into possession. It allows leadership to remain real without making leadership the source of the people's life, authority to remain meaningful without becoming untouchable, and discernment to remain consequential without requiring one person to become the measure of the whole. What Christ entrusts can move through many hands because every hand remains beneath the same Head.

This is the kind of people Foundation Before Platform has been preparing us to become. A people who can receive without possessing, lead without becoming the center, speak without becoming the only voice, correct without condemning, listen without being threatened, strengthen weakness without becoming the healer, and carry one another without taking responsibility for what belongs to Christ alone. Shared stewardship reaches into leadership and discernment, but it also reaches into the ordinary faithfulness by which a people remain present to one another.

What is shared must remain shared, and what is centered must remain Christ. The work belongs to Him. The people belong to Him. The responsibility we carry toward one another exists beneath His lordship, and every steward remains accountable to the One from whom the stewardship came. No one person is asked to become the source that everyone else lacks, and no one person is given possession of what Christ has entrusted to His people.

Because the life belongs to Christ, responsibility can be shared without Christ surrendering His place as Head. Another person can carry what we cannot carry. Another voice can speak what we have not seen. Another steward can receive responsibility that once rested in our hands. None of this diminishes what God genuinely entrusts to an individual; it places individual stewardship where it has always belonged, within the life of a people who together belong to Christ.

And that brings us to one final reality beneath everything we have said about carrying His life together. If the work belongs to Christ, the people belong to Christ, and every stewardship remains beneath His lordship, then the security of what He is building cannot finally rest upon the strength of the people carrying it. We are participants in something we did not establish and stewards within something we do not own.

What Christ has entrusted to His people exists within a kingdom that none of us created.

A Kingdom That Cannot Be Shaken

What Christ has entrusted to His people exists within a kingdom that none of us created. Everything we have considered about stewardship, shared responsibility, leadership, care, correction, discernment, and carrying one another rests within a reality larger than the people who participate in it. We did not establish the kingdom into which we have been brought, and its continuation does not depend upon our ability to sustain it. The kingdom belongs to the King.

Hebrews brings us to Sinai, with its fire, darkness, tempest, and trembling, and then turns our attention toward where we have now come. “You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” (Heb. 12:22). The language is already settled. We are not attempting to build our way toward Zion or create through our faithfulness the reality Scripture describes. In Christ, we have come.

The writer continues, “and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect” (Heb. 12:22–23). We have come “to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant” (Heb. 12:24). What Christ has brought us into cannot be reduced to the structures we build, the ministries we steward, the communities we form, or the

responsibilities we carry. The life into which we have been brought was already established before any of us found our place within it.

Then Hebrews speaks of a shaking. God promises, 'Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heavens,' and the writer explains, 'This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain' (Heb. 12:26–27). Shaking reveals what has been carrying weight that it was never strong enough to carry. What is created can be moved; what rests in the eternal purpose and reign of God remains.

The conclusion follows: "Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let's show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe" (Heb. 12:28 NASB). The kingdom is received before service is offered. We do not serve in order to make the kingdom secure. We serve because we have received a kingdom whose security does not originate in us.

That order has been present from the beginning. Christ acts before we respond. Grace gives before we steward. God establishes before we participate. What has been accomplished in Christ becomes the ground from which our participation proceeds.

The kingdom does not become unshakable because His people steward it well. His people can steward faithfully because the kingdom they have received rests upon something stronger than themselves. Our faithfulness matters deeply, but our faithfulness is not what makes Christ King.

This releases stewardship from a weight it was never meant to carry. We are responsible to be faithful, but we are not responsible to make the kingdom exist. We are responsible to serve, but we are not responsible to make Christ Lord. We are responsible for what He places into our hands, but we are not responsible to become the power that keeps His purposes alive.

The kingdom belongs to the King.

This becomes especially important when responsibility grows. The more deeply we care about what God has entrusted, the easier it can become to carry responsibility as though the future of what belongs to Him rests upon us. Faithfulness can slowly become anxiety, vigilance can become control, and stewardship can begin carrying the pressure of sovereignty. But sovereignty was never entrusted to us.

We are stewards precisely because Another remains Lord over what we carry. We can obey without knowing every outcome. We can act faithfully without controlling what follows. We can carry genuine responsibility while leaving with Christ what only Christ can carry.

This is where rest enters stewardship without removing responsibility.

Hebrews speaks earlier of a Sabbath rest that remains for the people of God: "for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his" (Heb. 4:10). Yet the writer

immediately says, “Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest” (Heb. 4:11 NASB). Rest and diligence are not presented as opposites.

There is a way of laboring that proceeds from rest because the work does not begin with us. There is a way of carrying responsibility without carrying sovereignty because what we serve already belongs to Christ. There is a way of giving ourselves fully without quietly believing that everything depends upon our ability to hold everything together.

We can labor without becoming the source of the fruit. We can lead without becoming the Head. We can build without becoming the foundation. We can carry responsibility without carrying sovereignty. We can steward without possessing the outcome.

This kind of rest does not produce carelessness. It frees faithfulness from the pressure of self-importance. We can take what has been entrusted seriously without imagining ourselves to be the reason it survives. We can also release what belongs in another person’s hands.

If the kingdom belongs to Christ, then responsibility can move without threatening the kingdom. Someone else can carry what we once carried. Another voice can speak where ours once carried greater weight. Another generation can receive responsibility for something into which we poured years of our lives. Christ remains Lord when the steward changes.

This is one of the places where shared stewardship and received kingdom become inseparable. We can make room for one another because none of us is preserving a kingdom that belongs to us. We can share weight because the life of what Christ is building does not depend upon one carrier. We can acknowledge our limitations because His kingdom is not threatened by them.

Human limitation no longer has to be treated as failure. The strongest among us remain limited. The wisest still know in part. The most faithful still become tired. Leaders can reach the end of their capacity, circumstances can change what someone is able to carry, and seasons can close even when the stewardship within them was genuinely given by God. None of that changes who reigns. The kingdom remains unshaken even when the people receiving it experience shaking.

Structures can change. Expectations can fail. Relationships can require repair. Leaders can discover limitations they did not know were there. Something that appeared permanent can end, and something upon which we depended can suddenly no longer be available to us.

People can experience shaking too. Weakness can surface in places that once appeared strong. Wounds can be exposed that require more time to heal than anyone expected. Someone who once carried others may enter a season in which they need to be carried.

The shaking does not make Christ less faithful.

It reveals what can and cannot bear the weight we have placed upon it.

There are things we can unknowingly ask human beings to carry that belong only to Christ. We can ask leaders to provide a security only Christ can provide. We can ask structures to guarantee what

only His faithfulness can guarantee. We can ask relationships to remain unchanged because change threatens the stability we have attached to them.

Shaking exposes those attachments.

What remains is not the illusion that nothing will ever change. What remains is Christ and the kingdom we have received in Him. Stability therefore cannot finally mean preserving every visible form, maintaining every arrangement, or keeping every person in the same place.

Stability is found somewhere deeper.

Paul tells the Colossians, "Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith" (Col. 2:6–7). The life continues from the same place where it began. We received Christ, and we continue in Christ.

Rootedness is not immobility. A rooted person can move when obedience requires movement and remain when faithfulness requires remaining. Responsibility can change without identity collapsing because responsibility was never the root.

Rooted people can remain when visibility changes because visibility was never the foundation. They can remain when responsibility changes because responsibility was never identity. They can remain when another person carries what they once carried because ownership was never theirs. They can remain when correction comes because belonging has already been received.

They can also remain when another person is weak.

Shared stewardship requires this kind of stability because carrying one another will not always be efficient. Healing does not always move at the pace we would choose. Relationships do not always resolve quickly. People do not always become whole according to the timetable that would make their process easier for everyone around them.

Sometimes faithfulness looks like remaining.

Remaining does not mean controlling another person's process or making ourselves responsible for an outcome that belongs to Christ. It means we do not require immediate resolution in order to stay present. We can strengthen weak hands without demanding that they immediately become strong, and we can steady feeble knees without pretending that we are the One who heals.

A rooted people can make room for process because their own stability does not depend upon everyone around them appearing stable. This kind of remaining requires endurance.

Hebrews tells the believers, "Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance" (Heb. 10:35–36). Endurance is needed because faithfulness unfolds over time. There are seasons when what God has established must be trusted while what we can presently see appears uncertain.

Endurance does not deny weakness. It does not require us to call something stable when it is shaking or healed when it remains wounded. Endurance remains rooted in what God has

established while what is still being formed is allowed to be formed. That endurance is not imagined only as an individual believer holding on alone.

The writer of Hebrews says, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful” (Heb. 10:23). The ground of their confidence is the faithfulness of the One who promised. Then the writer immediately turns their attention toward one another: “let’s consider how to encourage one another in love and good deeds, not abandoning our own meeting together” (Heb. 10:24–25 NASB).

The faithfulness of God creates a people capable of strengthening one another while they wait. They do not become one another’s foundation. They help one another remain upon the foundation that has already been laid. They do not become one another’s source. They remind, encourage, strengthen, carry, and remain present while Christ continues to be the Source from whom the life of the whole people proceeds.

This gives shared stewardship a depth that organizational language alone cannot carry. We are not merely learning how to distribute responsibility more effectively. We are learning how to live as people who know that what Christ is building belongs to Him, that the people around us belong to Him, and that our responsibility toward one another takes place beneath His continuing lordship.

No one person carries all discernment, all responsibility, all strength, or all care. No leader can become the source of life for the people. No person who is presently strong possesses enough strength to guarantee that he or she will never need to be carried.

The roles can change because the Source does not.

The person strengthening weak hands today may need another person to strengthen theirs tomorrow. The one carrying weight in this season may need to release it in another. The person whose discernment helps bring clarity now may eventually need the clarity another person can see.

Shared stewardship makes room for that humanity without treating it as a threat.

Christ is enough to remain the Source among a people whose capacities are limited.

Because He is enough, responsibility can be shared without becoming fragmented. The answer to unhealthy centralization is not the creation of many smaller centers, each possessing a portion of what once belonged to one. Shared stewardship is not the multiplication of ownership.

It is the surrender of ownership altogether.

The work belongs to Christ. The people belong to Christ. The gifts belong to Christ. The kingdom belongs to Christ.

And because everything remains His, the people are free to carry what He entrusts without needing to possess it.

This is the rest beneath faithful stewardship. We do not have to become indispensable in order to matter. We do not have to control what happens next in order to be faithful now. We do not have to preserve our place in order to honor what God entrusted while we occupied it.

We can serve with reverence because the kingdom is His. We can endure with confidence because He who promised is faithful. We can release responsibility because Christ remains Lord when responsibility moves. We can remain with one another through weakness because no one's unfinished process has the power to make His kingdom unstable.

What can be shaken may shake.

What belongs to Christ remains.

And within that unshakable reality, His people can learn to carry responsibility with open hands, to receive and release without losing themselves, to remain through seasons of weakness, and to strengthen one another without becoming one another's source. The stability of the people does not finally rest in their ability to hold everything together. It rests in the King whose kingdom they have received.

Christ remains the center while responsibility is shared around Him.

The kingdom belongs to the King.

Finished Before the Foundation

Still, there is one more place beneath the foundation we have established, and Scripture takes us there with language that reaches beyond the cross, beyond the history of redemption, and beyond creation itself. Paul tells us that God chose us in Christ "before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). Peter says that Christ was "foreknown before the foundation of the world" and then "was made manifest in the last times" for our sake (1 Peter 1:20). Before anything had yet been created, before human history had begun, and before the work of redemption unfolded within time, the purpose of God was already centered in Christ.

This takes us somewhere deeper than simply saying that God knew what He would eventually do. Scripture repeatedly speaks of a purpose that precedes our participation in it. Paul writes of God's "own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began" and then says that this purpose was revealed through the appearing of Christ (2 Tim. 1:9–10). What appeared within history had its origin before history. What became visible in time proceeded from what had already been purposed in God. Redemption was not the beginning of God's thought concerning Christ and His people. Christ was not introduced into the story as God's response to something creation had unexpectedly become. Before the foundation of the world, the purpose was already in Him.

That gives even greater depth to everything we have said about the finished work of Christ. When Jesus declared, "It is finished" (John 19:30), something was accomplished within history that had its origin beyond history. The cross took place at a particular moment in time, but the purpose

being accomplished there did not originate at Golgotha. The Lamb who was manifested in time had been foreknown before the foundation of the world. The grace that appeared in Christ had been given according to an eternal purpose. What Christ finished in history reveals the faithfulness of God to a purpose that preceded the world in which that purpose would be accomplished.

And that means the foundation beneath our lives reaches further back than we can even imagine. Before our formation, before our stewardship, before our calling, before our participation, there is Christ. Before there was a people learning how to carry what belongs to Him, there was the eternal purpose of God in Him. Before anything could become visible through us, its Source was already present in Him. We have spent these pages tracing our life back beneath identity, responsibility, gifting, visibility, and stewardship to the finished work of Christ. Scripture now allows us to look beneath even the unfolding of that finished work in time and recognize that its origin rests in the eternal purpose of God.

Perhaps this is the deepest ground from which we can enter *Life Made Visible*. We are not about to ask how human beings can produce something worthy of being called the life of Christ. We are following a life that originates in Him. What was purposed before the foundation of the world, accomplished through Christ within history, and given to us by grace has now become life within a people. What was hidden in the eternal purpose of God, revealed and accomplished in Christ, and received by those who have been brought into Him is now ready to be traced into expression. We are about to ask what that life looks like when it becomes visible.

FROM FOUNDATION TO LIFE MADE VISIBLE

We have come as far as the foundation needs to take us. Christ has finished the work, and what He accomplished has established the ground beneath everything that follows. We have been reconciled and brought near, our life has been joined to Him, our identity has been received in Him, and the Spirit of the risen Christ now dwells within us. The Father forms those who already belong to Him, preparing sons and daughters to carry what He entrusts without allowing what they carry to become their identity, their possession, or their center.

We have also seen that what Christ has accomplished does not end with the individual. The same cross that brought us near reconciled us in one body to God, and the same Spirit through whom we have access to the Father is building us together into His dwelling. Christ has created a people around Himself, and what He entrusts is carried within the life of that people. The stewardship is shared because the life belongs to Christ, the people belong to Christ, and the kingdom itself has been received from Christ.

But shared stewardship is not yet shared expression. To establish that what belongs to Christ is carried by a people together is not yet to explore how grace is distributed through those people, how every member participates, how every part supplies, or how the one life of Christ becomes visible through many different expressions.

That is where the question begins to change. If Christ has brought us into Himself, if His Spirit dwells within us, and if the life we possess is a life we have received rather than produced, what happens when that life becomes visible?

Before we answer that question together, perhaps there is one more place we need to look.

THE FACE IN THE MIRROR

Perhaps the question of a life made visible comes closer to home than we expect.

We have spent considerable time establishing where this life originates. Christ is the Source. Our identity is received in Him. What has been entrusted to us remains His. Even the life we now carry is not something we produced, but something we received. Yet if His life has truly become our own, then the question of what becomes visible cannot remain merely theological. Eventually, it reaches the ordinary places where a life is actually lived.

It reaches the faces, conversations, and moments that fill our days. It reaches our gifts, our stories, our struggles, and even our weaknesses. None of them were ever intended to find their home in either self-glory or self-condemnation. They belong within a life that points beyond itself to the One from whom it came.

And nowhere does that come closer to home than when the witness is the face looking back at us in the mirror.

There is something about our own reflection that quietly invites an assessment. We may not even realize we are doing it. We look and almost instinctively begin taking inventory. What has changed? What has aged? What have I accomplished? What have I failed to become? The mirror becomes far more than glass. It becomes a place where silent verdicts are often rendered.

Often the assessment reaches deeper than appearance. We see the person we imagined we would be by now, standing beside the person we actually are. We remember opportunities missed, words we wish we could take back, prayers that still seem unanswered, and places where we continue to struggle. Without anyone saying a word, the mirror somehow becomes a courtroom, and we find ourselves both the defendant and the judge.

Perhaps that is why it can be so difficult to simply look at ourselves. We have spent so many years evaluating that we hardly know how to behold. We measure. We compare. We calculate. We ask whether we have done enough, become enough, or somehow deserve what has been entrusted to us. Even when no one else is keeping score, we continue keeping score ourselves.

The strange thing is that none of us were ever taught to do this. Somewhere along the way we simply learned that our value could be measured. Since then, every reflection has carried the quiet temptation to determine our worth by what we see staring back at us.

Yet a mirror can only reflect what stands before it. It was never created to tell us who we are. It can reveal surface features. It cannot reveal identity. It can show us the outward person, but it has never possessed the ability to reveal the life within.

What if the mirror was never the place to look for that answer? What if the answer doesn't come from self-evaluation?

There is a different kind of seeing that doesn't begin with us. It begins with being seen. Long before we learned to evaluate ourselves, we were known—not in the way a judge knows a case, but in the way a father knows the face of his beloved child. Every feature catalogued, every sorrow registered, every quiet failing and unspoken longing already held. Not to render a verdict, but because the one who looks does so with love that has no intention of turning away.

Everything changes when we realize we are no longer looking for our worth in the mirror but receiving it from the One who has always known us.

When we are truly beheld—not assessed, not measured, but known—the posture of the heart shifts. The courtroom empties. We are not acquitted by the evidence; we are simply no longer on trial. The One who knows us is most definitely not keeping score. He is keeping watch.

Only then does something begin to change in how we see ourselves. Not because the mirror now lies to us and tells us what we want to hear. But because we have stood in another light. We've been seen through eyes that can only assess through love. We have been looked at with eyes that see through the surface—past the accumulation of failures and the calculation of missed opportunity—and what those eyes see, they do not despise.

Here is the quiet wonder of it. When we have been truly seen—when we have stood in that light and found ourselves neither condemned nor flattered but simply and completely known—something shifts in the way we move through the world.

We stop performing for the mirror. We no longer wake each morning needing to prove that yesterday's failures have been overcome or that today's successes have somehow increased our worth. The quiet pressure to become someone worthy of love begins to loosen its grip. We discover that we were loved long before we ever thought of improving ourselves. That changes the way we stand before the mirror. We are no longer searching for evidence that we matter. We are learning to recognize the One whose life has become our own. Almost without realizing it, we become windows through which His life can be seen.

This is not a role we take on. It is more like a reorientation. Having been beheld, we begin to behold. Having received a love that did not require us to earn it, we find ourselves quietly, almost involuntarily, extending it. Not because we have mastered something, but because we have been inhabited by Someone.

What becomes visible in a life like this is not a polished version of ourselves. It is not the person we finally managed to become after sufficient effort. It is something older and deeper—the life of Christ, finding expression through the particular texture of our days. We hear things differently. What we notice is no longer what gets in the way, but what looks like Him coming to the surface. We begin to recognize Him in patience we did not manufacture and gentleness we could not have produced on our own. Then we begin to see others not by who they are outwardly, but through eyes that see His life made visible within them.

This is love made tangible. Not an idea held in the mind but a presence carried in a body, in a life, in the unremarkable moments that turn out to be anything but unremarkable. The same love that spoke us into being now moves through us into a world that is desperately hungry for something it cannot name but would recognize the moment it felt it.

We begin to understand, slowly, that we were never meant to find our identity in the mirror's surface. We were meant to find it in His face. The reflection was never the source. He is.

We are not the source of any of this. But we are not incidental to it either. He has chosen—in a mystery that ought to leave us awestruck—to make His nature visible through people like us. Through imperfect hands and ordinary days and stories that still have unresolved chapters. Through the face in the mirror, now seen differently, now carrying something it was always meant to carry.

Not a verdict. A witness.

Not a courtroom. A dwelling place.

Life Made Visible

A Love Made Tangible

Grace Taking Form Through a Spirit-Formed Assembly

Jesus gives us an image whose simplicity can sometimes keep us from recognizing the depth of what He is revealing. In John chapter fifteen He says, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser” (John 15:1). He is not simply giving a lesson regarding dependence, nor is He merely offering guidance concerning devotional practice. He is showing us something about the nature of life itself as it exists in Him.

When Jesus identifies Himself as the vine and His followers as branches, He describes a relationship that cannot exist apart from shared life. A branch possesses no independent life within itself. It does not create nourishment, generate vitality, or sustain itself through its own resources. Everything that eventually appears upon the branch exists because life is flowing into it from the source to which it is joined.

That relationship does not change as the branch matures. The branch never outgrows the vine. Growth does not lessen participation; it deepens it. Maturity does not mean becoming less dependent upon Christ. It means learning to live more fully from the life that is found in Him.

This is why Jesus repeatedly uses the language of abiding.

“Abide in Me, and I in you” (John 15:4).

Abiding is more than an occasional connection we make with Christ when we need strength, direction, or renewal. It is the continuing participation of the believer within the life already given. It is neither anxious striving nor passive distance. It is life remaining in living union with its source.

Jesus then connects that abiding directly to what eventually becomes visible: “Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

The order matters, but perhaps not because we need another principle to remember. We can simply look at the branch. Fruit appears there, but life did not begin there. The branch truly bears the fruit, yet it never becomes the source of the life producing it. What becomes visible upon the branch reveals something that has been flowing through it all along.

There is tremendous freedom in that.

The branch is not responsible for manufacturing fruit. It is not straining to prove that it is alive. It does not have to establish its worth by what eventually appears upon it. Its fruitfulness comes from remaining where life is supplied.

The same is true of us. Prayer does not create life. Ministry does not create life. Gifts do not create life. Activity does not create life. These can all become genuine expressions of the life of Christ, but none of them is its source. The life comes first. Expression follows.

When that distinction is lost, even good things can begin carrying a weight they were never meant to carry. Fruit becomes something to pursue as an achievement. Ministry becomes a measure of

usefulness. Gifting becomes attached to identity. Visible activity becomes evidence by which we decide whether our spiritual lives matter. Before long, we can find ourselves looking at what is appearing on the branch to determine whether life is present rather than resting in the life of the Vine.

Jesus keeps bringing us back to one word.

Abide.

And then He takes us deeper into what that abiding actually contains: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love” (John 15:9).

Love is not a separate subject Jesus introduces after talking about vines, branches, and fruit. Love belongs to the life being shared. The life flowing from Christ carries His nature. To abide in Him is to remain within a life that cannot be separated from the love through which that life moves.

This begins to change how we understand fruitfulness. We are not merely asking whether something is being produced. We are beginning to ask what kind of life is becoming visible through what is produced. If the life comes from Christ, what emerges from that life will increasingly carry the character of Christ.

Jesus speaks of fruit that remains. Human effort can create movement for a season. Personality can gather attention. Determination can sustain visible activity for a time. Yet everything originating primarily from human resources eventually reaches the limits of those resources. Jesus is describing something different. He is describing life expressing the nature of its source.

The Source is eternal. What comes from Christ carries the character of Christ. What truly flows from His life therefore possesses a quality that human effort cannot manufacture and human strength cannot sustain.

Paul approaches spiritual expression from the same direction when he writes, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone” (1 Cor. 12:4–6).

There is variety everywhere in that passage—different gifts, different service, different activity—but beneath all of that diversity Paul keeps returning us to one Source. The Spirit is the same. The Lord is the same. God is the One empowering them all. Before we ever encounter the many expressions, there is already one life from which they proceed.

Paul had already written to the Corinthians:

Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God’s wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; but just as it is written: “Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, And which

have not entered the human heart, All that God has prepared for those who love Him." For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among people knows the thoughts of a person except the spirit of the person that is in him? So also the thoughts of God no one knows, except the Spirit of God. Now we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God. We also speak these things, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. But a natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:6–14 NASB).

Paul is describing a life that originates somewhere other than the resources available to the natural person. We have received "the Spirit who is from God." What becomes known, spoken, given, and eventually expressed among us proceeds from what has first been received from Him.

This is why diversity does not require independent spiritual sources. The many expressions do not originate in many separate lives operating on their own. One Spirit, one Lord, and one God stand beneath what is being expressed. Diversity emerges because the one life of Christ is capable of taking expression through many different people.

Paul makes this even more personal in Colossians when he writes, "For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God … Christ who is your life" (Col. 3:3–4).

Christ does not merely give us life and then send us away to do something with it. Paul says Christ is our life. He is not assistance added to an otherwise independent spiritual existence. He is the source, center, and sustaining reality of the life we now possess.

There is something deeply restful about a life that is "hidden with Christ in God." Hidden life is not lesser life. It does not have to become visible in order to become real. It is already secured somewhere deeper than appearance, performance, usefulness, or recognition. Before anything is expressed through us, our life is already held in Him.

That changes the way we can participate.

We can serve without needing service to tell us who we are. We can speak without needing our voice to prove our importance. We can participate without asking participation to establish our worth. We can bear fruit without continually looking at the fruit to determine whether we possess life.

Fruitfulness and rest can belong together.

Rest in Christ is not inactivity. A branch resting in the vine is not idle. Life is moving through it. Something is happening within it. Fruit is forming. But none of that requires the branch to become its own source. Its activity proceeds from participation. Its fruit comes from remaining where life is supplied.

This is where striving begins to give way to something much more alive. We are not being invited into passivity. We are being invited into participation that grows out of union rather than effort to establish ourselves. What emerges from us can be genuine, active, fruitful, and deeply personal without ever having to originate in us.

And perhaps this is where the image of the vine begins to expand beyond our individual lives.

The Christ who is my life is also your life.

The same life flowing into one branch is flowing into another. The branches are distinct, but their life does not originate independently. Each receives from the same Source. Each bears fruit through the life it receives. Each becomes a place where something of the Vine can become visible.

Suddenly the image is larger than one believer learning how to abide.

A people begins to come into view.

What Christ forms in each of us personally belongs to a life we are receiving together. Growth in Christ therefore does not only shape individuals who learn to live from Him. It begins forming people who can recognize His life in one another. The expression may differ. The fruit may appear in different places and in different ways. But beneath the difference there is one shared life.

This releases expression from the pressure of competition. If Christ is the Source, I do not need what appears through me to establish my significance beside you. Your expression does not diminish mine, and mine does not need to compete with yours. Neither of us is the source of what we carry. Diversity can become beautiful because it reveals how richly one life can be expressed through many people.

That is where spiritual expression begins to find its proper place. Gifts matter. Service matters. Participation matters. Fruit matters. What becomes visible matters. But these things become life-giving when they are allowed to remain what they were always meant to be: expressions of a life already being supplied.

Many of us have carried pressures we could never quite put into words. We have wondered whether we were doing enough, producing enough, serving enough, or becoming useful enough. We may have looked at visible fruit to decide whether our lives mattered, or looked at someone else's fruit and wondered why ours did not look the same.

The branch offers another way of seeing.

It is not asked to find life in itself. It is not asked to define itself by the fruit it can see. It is not expected to produce what only the Vine can supply.

It is invited to remain.

"Abide in Me, and I in you" (John 15:4).

Perhaps that is where LIFE MADE *Visible* truly begins. Not with the pressure to make something visible, but with the wonder that His life is already present. We remain in Him, His life moves within us, and what has been received begins taking form. Fruit emerges. Love becomes tangible. Grace finds expression. And what appears through ordinary people begins carrying the character of a life that did not originate in them.

The fruit is real. The participation is real. The expression is real.

But the Source is Christ.

And if the same Christ has become life within all of us, the question before us begins to widen.

What happens when one shared life begins becoming visible through many people?

The Ekklesia Assembly is formed through shared participation in the life of Christ, where His life becomes the source from which all spiritual life exists.

This section establishes the theological foundation of the entire series by moving beneath visible expression and activity itself to reveal Christ as the source of life being shared among His people. Before Scripture speaks about gifts, ministry, participation, visible expression or the great commission, it first brings us to the source from which everything else flows. Our life in Christ does not begin with function. It does not begin with expression. It begins with union and participation in the life Christ has already given.

The Ekklesia Assembly is not built around gifted individuals, spiritual personalities, or visible activity, but around a people who share one life together in Christ. Through this shared life, interdependence, mutual participation, and distributed grace emerge, and the expression of Christ among His people is made visible. This is participatory theology. My goal is to reveal the nature of the life we share together in Christ.

If visible expression becomes our focal point, we will naturally interpret spiritual life through gifting, ministry identity, performance, or platform culture. Throughout LIFE MADE *Visible* we intentionally search deeper beneath visibly apparent manifestations to tap into the source from which authentic expression emerges. Our shared life comes before visible expression, and our participation comes before function. Christ Himself is the life shared among us.

LIFE BEFORE EXPRESSION

> *The life of Christ within us is the source from which all true spiritual expression flows, producing fruit that emerges from abiding union rather than striving activity.*

Being human, we all naturally understand life through what we can see. We see movement and assume life is present. We observe activity and assume growth is occurring. We decide that something meaningful is taking place when we see visible outcomes. Interpreting the world through sight conditions us to think in these terms because visible realities are easier to assess than hidden ones.

> *"Someone living at the merely human level doesn't accept the things of God's spirit. They are foolishness to such people, you see, and they can't understand them because they need to be discerned spiritually" 1 Corinthians 2:14 (NTE).*

Because of this, spiritual life can gradually become interpreted through the same assumptions. And naturally, questions concerning purpose, gifting, ministry, and participation arise. We naturally

want to know where we fit, what we should be doing, and how our lives should eventually be expressed. The natural mind wants to know.

Our attention can slowly become fixed on outward activity because, let's face it, activity is measurable. Eventually that way of assessing begins to shape our spiritual perspective without our even realizing it. However, spiritual things begin somewhere deeper, beneath the surface. And Scripture testifies to that.

Visible realities do not originate within themselves. They emerge from a source already present beneath them. Much of God's work occurs beneath visible surfaces. God consistently establishes hidden realities before visible realities emerge. Rivers shape landscapes long before their presence becomes visible. Foundations are established before structures stand. Roots extend downward before fruit appears above the ground. Life exists before expression becomes possible. What eventually becomes visible is always revealed as emerging from a source already at work beneath it.

In the same way, the life of Christ often forms us in hidden places before anything outward begins to appear. We tend to focus upon what can be seen while Christ is nourishing realities that are developing beneath the surface. The visible tends to get all the attention, while it's the hidden that determines what eventually becomes visible. Fruit is the visible evidence of life within, but visible expression only becomes rightly understood when the source of that life is first established.

Before we look at the significance of functioning together, distributed grace, love governing our spiritual life, spiritual gifts, participation, or visible witness, we must dive beneath these visible realities and ask a deeper question: *Where does spiritual life originate?*

If spiritual life is interpreted through expression, then expression itself eventually becomes misunderstood. When visible expression becomes treated as the source of spiritual life, spirituality gradually becomes centered around activity, usefulness, visibility, and performance.

But when the source of this life is established first, expression can then be seen for what it truly is: the visible manifestation of life present within. To find that source we look where Jesus begins. He begins with life.

Life From the Source

In John chapter fifteen Jesus introduces one of the most significant images in all of Scripture when He says*, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser"* (John 15:1). Sometimes our familiarity with this verse can prevent us from recognizing the depth of what Jesus is revealing. He is not simply giving a lesson regarding dependence, nor is He merely offering guidance concerning devotional practice. Jesus is uncovering the hidden structure of life as it exists within His kingdom.

When Jesus identifies Himself as the vine and His followers as branches, He establishes a relationship that cannot exist apart from shared life. A branch possesses no independent life within itself. It does not create nourishment, generate vitality, or sustain itself through its own resources.

Everything eventually appearing upon the branch exists because life is flowing into it from the source it is connected to. The branch only exists through joined participation.

Jesus is not presenting dependence as a temporary stage of development. He is revealing dependence as the permanent structure of life in Him. The life we share in Christ does not begin through dependence and eventually mature into independence. The branch never outgrows the vine. Growth does not lessen participation; it deepens it. Maturity does not mean becoming less dependent upon Christ. As we mature, we continually live more fully from the life that is found in Him.

Jesus repeatedly uses the language of abiding because He is describing the continuing reality of life shared with Him.

"Abide in Me, and I in you" (John 15:4).

Throughout the conversation Jesus uses this language repetitively. He is describing something more profound than occasional intermittent connection. Abiding is the continuing participation of the believer within the life already given to them. It is neither anxious striving, nor passive distance. It is life remaining in living union with its source.

Jesus specifically states that fruitfulness naturally emerges from abiding when He says*, "Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).* Jesus does not begin with fruit and then move backward toward life. He begins with life and then points toward the fruit. We can look at nature and understand that fruit is evidence that life is flowing, not evidence that effort has succeeded.

Life Is Not Produced at the Branch

The assumption can be that fruit begins where fruit appears, on the branch. Because fruit becomes visible upon the branch, it is easy to conclude that the branch itself is producing what can be seen. Yet the branch does not manufacture fruit. The branch reveals life already flowing through it.

A similar confusion can appear spiritually. Prayer does not create life. Ministry does not create life. Gifts do not create life. Activity does not create life. These realities become expressions of life already being supplied through Christ Himself.

When we talk about spiritual fruit separate from the true source, it can gradually get treated as a goal to pursue, an achievement to measure, or evidence by which spiritual life is evaluated. Yet Jesus consistently removes fruit from the realm of self-production. The responsibility of the branch is not manufacturing fruit. The only responsibility of the branch is remaining where life already exists. Abide.

Jesus then says, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love" (John 15:9). He is not introducing love as a separate subject disconnected from everything He just said. Love is what flows through the shared life. The life that produces fruit does so as it abides in love. The participation that produces nourishment does so through communion.

Love is the governing reality through which spiritual life and spiritual expression are interpreted. Jesus establishes that love itself is not self-generated. Love flows through connection to His life.

Then Jesus speaks of fruit that remains. With that statement, He moves the discussion beyond the temporal into the realm of the eternal. That can shift our perspective of bearing fruit.

Human effort can generate activity for a season. Personality can gather attention. Determination can sustain visible activity for a time. Yet things originating primarily from human resources eventually reach the limits of those resources because those resources are confined to this world.

Jesus is describing something different. He describes life expressing the nature of its source. This source is eternal by nature. What comes from Christ carries the character of Christ. Because the source is eternal, it remains. What flows from His life bears the character of its eternal Source and therefore endures.

Paul reinforces this reality in 1 Corinthians 12 when he writes, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone" (1 Cor. 12:4–6).

Paul preceded his discussion of spiritual gifts with this foundational reality:

> *"Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; but just as it is written:* ***"Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, And which have not entered the human heart, All that God has prepared for those who love Him."*** *For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among people knows the thoughts of a person except the spirit of the person that is in him? So also the thoughts of God no one knows, except the Spirit of God.* ***Now we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God.*** *We also speak these things, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words.* ***But a natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned"*** *(1 Cor 2:6–14 NASB).*

So, when he begins discussing spiritual gifts as the visible expressions of the Spirit, Paul establishes source. Before diversity appears, unity already exists. Before manifestations become visible, one Spirit, one Lord, and one God stand beneath everything being expressed. Diversity does

not emerge from independent lives functioning separately. It emerges from one shared source expressing Himself through many people.

Paul makes one of the deepest identity statements in the New Testament when he writes in Colossians, *"For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God . . . Christ who is your life"* (Col. 3:3–4). Paul does not merely say Christ gives life. He says Christ *is* life. Christ is not being described as assistance added to independent existence. He Himself becomes the source, center, and sustaining reality of spiritual life.

Spiritual expression does not create life. Spiritual expression flows from life. Fruit does not originate in the branch. Diversity does not originate in separate spiritual sources. The life of the people of God is hidden with Christ in God, and Christ Himself is the life being shared.

Living From the Source

In the same way that Christ's finished work shapes everything in our lives, Christ Himself is the source of all true spiritual expression.

Our growth in Christ is not mainly about trying to become something through effort, but about the life already within us taking shape and finding expression. It does not happen through striving, self-improvement, or spiritual activity itself. It emerges from participation in Christ's own life. We are not producing life; we are learning to abide in and live from the One who is our life. That is the way Christ's life takes shape in us. Our growth in Christ does not begin with the question of what a person should produce, perform, or express. It begins with learning to live from the life of Christ already present within us.

Jesus' words in John 15 reshape our posture and repositions us. A branch that understands its life comes from the vine does not live under the illusion that fruitfulness initiates in itself alone. It learns to receive, remain, and draw from the life already present in the vine. In the same way, the people of God are formed as they learn to live from Christ rather than striving toward an identity they are trying to establish.

The way some of us have learned to identify maturity is by associating it with visible usefulness, increased activity, greater influence, or more obvious spiritual expression. Yet John 15 reveals maturity as deepened participation. The mature branch is not the branch that has somehow learned to live independently of the vine. Its maturity is revealed in its continued dependence, remaining in the vine and drawing its life from what the vine supplies.

Spiritual maturity does not mean needing Christ less but learning to live our lives more deeply from His life. In Colossians 3:3–4 Paul strengthens this when he locates the believer's life *in Christ* rather than in visible activity. *"Your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3).* Hidden life is not lesser life. It is secured life. It is life established in a place deeper than appearance, performance, or external measurement.

Paul then says it clearly: *"Christ who is your life" (Col. 3:4).*

This points to formation beginning from union with Christ, not from self-improvement. The believer is not trying to create spiritual life as if it is something to obtain but is learning to live from the life already given in Christ.

This might reshape how we view the modern Ekklesia Assembly. If Christ Himself is life, then spiritual existence cannot ultimately be understood as isolated individuals maintaining separate spiritual experiences while gathering around common beliefs.

Our life in Christ is certainly personal, but it was never intended to remain exclusively private. The life received in Christ possesses a nature that continually moves beyond self-containment because the source of that life is not us. Our life is hidden with Christ in God, held in living union with the One who is our life. Yet as His life takes shape in us, the life we share with Him finds visible expression through us.

As we learn to live from Christ Himself as life, we gradually begin recognizing that what we have received is not something we possess only for ourselves. The Christ who is my life is the same Christ who is your life. Our participation in Him is deeply personal, but the life in which we participate is shared.

He is not simply forming individual believers who happen to exist alongside one another. He is forming a people whose lives originate in the same source. Whatever distinctions eventually become visible among us, they emerge from the one life we share in Christ.

Growth is both personal and shared. As Christ takes shape within us, we begin not only to recognize His life at work in ourselves, but to see that same life in one another. What will eventually appear through many different expressions has its beginning in the same Christ.

When Life Becomes Visible

Once we see life as the source, expression can be seen as the visible evidence of what is already present. Jesus speaks of fruit, and Paul speaks of gifts, ways of serving, and forms of activity. Each gives visible form to a life that finds its source in Christ.

John 15 does not present a life without fruit. It presents fruit that emerges from abiding. The branch does not produce the life from which its fruit comes; it receives that life from the vine. In the same way, spiritual expression flows from the life we have received in Christ. Activity may occur, words may be spoken, gifts may be expressed, and ministry may take shape, but none of these are the source of the life they reveal.

Expression does not create identity, establish worth, or become the measure of spiritual life. It makes visible something already present. The branch bears fruit because it shares in the life of the vine. The fruit is visible, but the life producing it is received.

In 1 Corinthians 12:4–7, Paul begins to widen this picture. What appeared in John 15 as fruit emerging from the life of the vine now begins to appear through a people in remarkable variety. There are different gifts, but the same Spirit; different ways of serving, but the same Lord; different

activities, but the same God at work in them all. The expressions differ, but they all emerge from a shared source.

This variety does not diminish the life we share; it gives that life many different ways of becoming visible. What appears through one person will not necessarily look like what appears through another, yet neither expression originates in the individual. Christ remains the source, while His life takes shape through the diversity of His people. Expression becomes participation in something much greater than ourselves.

Fruitfulness and rest belong together. Rest is not inactivity. The branch can bear fruit without carrying the burden of producing the life necessary to sustain it. It remains in the vine, receiving what the vine supplies, and fruit emerges from that life. In Christ, participation can grow from the same place of rest—not from trying to make life happen, but from living from the life already given.

As this becomes more deeply established in us, spiritual activity begins to look different. We can serve without needing service to define us. We can speak without needing our voice to establish our importance. We can participate without needing participation to establish our worth. We can bear fruit without continually measuring our lives by what we produce. What becomes visible is no longer being asked to tell us who we are; it is simply giving expression to the life we have received.

Jesus speaks of fruit that remains. What grows from His life carries something that striving could never produce. Lasting fruit emerges from abiding in Him.

Free to Bear Fruit

As the life we have in Christ becomes more deeply established in us, some burdens begin to lose their weight. Growth becomes less anxious. The pressure to prove ourselves spiritually begins to fade, along with the need to make visible activity the evidence that something meaningful is happening in us. Fruitfulness no longer has to be produced or displayed as proof of life. It can emerge from abiding in the One who is our life.

This begins to form a different kind of people. We do not have to be desperate to be seen because our life is hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3). We do not have to establish our worth through what we do because Christ Himself is our life. We can participate freely because expression no longer has to tell us who we are; it can simply give visible form to the life we have received.

Many of us have carried pressures we could not always put into words. We may have learned to measure the significance of our lives by visible usefulness, or to understand ourselves through gifting, ministry, calling, or role. When the fruit we expected does not appear, we may even begin to wonder what that absence says about us. But none of these things were ever capable of establishing the life we have already received in Christ.

John 15 draws us again to the vine. The branch does not find life in itself, nor does it look to its fruit to discover whether it has life. Its life comes from the vine. The fruit may eventually become visible,

but it never becomes the source of what the branch possesses. The branch lives and bears fruit from the life it receives.

Colossians 3:3–4 takes us even deeper: “Your life is hidden with Christ in God.” Our hidden life is not an absent or inactive life. It is a life held in Christ, joined to the One Paul then names as “your life.” Before anything becomes visible through us, the deepest reality of who we are is already established in Him.

There is a steadiness here that expression could never give us. We do not have to chase visibility in order to know that we possess life. Ministry does not have to supply significance. Gifting does not have to become identity. What we do can flow from who Christ already is within us rather than carrying the burden of telling us who we are.

That same freedom begins to shape expression among us. Paul’s language in First Corinthians 12 brings us again to the same Spirit, the same Lord, and the same God beneath the many gifts, forms of service, and activities. What differs among us no longer has to become the basis for comparison or superiority. A gift does not have to carry our identity, and expression does not have to prove our worth. The life we share in Christ is free to become visible through us in many different ways.

Life comes before expression. Union comes before function. Abiding comes before fruitfulness. And because Christ Himself is our life, everything that eventually becomes visible can begin there.

Jesus reveals Himself as the true vine. Paul shows us that the varieties of expression emerge from the same Spirit, the same Lord, and the same God. And Colossians anchors our life in Christ Himself. Beneath every visible expression is a life that does not originate in us.

Expression is not the source of life. Life is the source of expression.

The Ekklesia Assembly does not originate its life within itself. Its life is not established by activity, sustained by visibility, or proven by gifting. Its life is Christ Himself.

And if the same Christ is our life, then the life we have received is more than something each of us possesses for ourselves. One life is being shared among His people.

How, then, does one shared life become visible through many?

ONE BODY, MANY MEMBERS

> *Christ makes Himself visible through a many-membered body in which every believer shares, supplies, and participates in the life we hold together in Him.*

The life we share in Christ becomes visible through a people.

What has been established in Christ is deeply personal, but it is not exclusively private. Many of us have learned to think about spiritual life primarily within the boundaries of our own experience—

our growth, our relationship with Christ, our calling, our participation. Yet the life we have received is the same life being shared by others who belong to Him.

This begins to enlarge the way we see ourselves and one another. Christ is not only taking shape within individual lives. His life is becoming visible through a people who share that life together.

Christ does not simply dwell within us. He gathers us into a shared life through which He makes Himself visible. He did not merely come to dwell within a people. He came to become visible through one.

One Life Through Many

Paul opens this reality in 1 Corinthians 12:12 when he writes, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ."

These words are familiar, and their familiarity can sometimes keep us from hearing what Paul is actually saying. The body is more than an image for people gathered around a common faith. Paul is describing a living reality in which many members share one life in Christ.

Paul begins with one body. The members are many, and their differences are real, but beneath those differences is a life they already share. The many do not create the one. Their life together begins in Christ.

As Paul continues, the members do not all have the same function. Difference is woven into the life of the body. Christ does not become visible through duplication, but through many members participating in the same life in different ways.

This becomes even clearer when Paul writes, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you'" (1 Cor. 12:21). Human ways of thinking can easily associate strength with self-sufficiency and maturity with needing less from others. But the body Paul describes reveals something very different. The eye remains an eye, the hand remains a hand, and neither possesses within itself everything the body needs.

Within the life we share in Christ, maturity does not move us beyond our need for one another. As we grow, we begin to recognize more fully the life of Christ present in others and to receive what becomes available through their participation. Our differences do not have to threaten the life we share; they allow that shared life to become visible in ways no single member could express alone.

Paul then draws attention to members that might otherwise receive less notice, saying that greater honor is given to those that appear weaker (1 Cor. 12:22–24). What is prominent or visible does not tell the whole story of the body. Its life is present and active in places that may never draw attention.

Less visible members are not less necessary. The body does not live only through what can easily be seen or recognized. Life moves throughout the whole.

Romans 12:5 adds another dimension when Paul says that we are "individually members one of another." We are not merely individuals who belong to the same gathering. Our belonging in Christ also brings us into relationship with one another.

This is more than association around something we hold in common. The life we share in Christ draws us into a mutual belonging in which our participation reaches beyond ourselves. We remain distinct, but we do not live as though those distinctions make us self-contained.

Paul carries this living picture into Ephesians 4:16, where the body is "joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped." The language remains organic. The body is joined together, supplied through its various parts, and grows as each part participates in the life of the whole.

Life is not merely present within individual members. It moves throughout the whole body.

Learning to Need One Another

If Christ makes Himself visible through a many-membered body, spiritual formation cannot remain confined to an individual experience. The life we share in Christ forms us not only as we receive from Him, but as we begin to recognize and receive His life through one another.

This requires a humility that self-sufficiency does not. Independence can allow us to remain protected within ourselves, measuring strength by personal capability and what we possess within our own lives. But the body Paul describes gives us another picture of maturity.

"The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you'" (1 Cor. 12:21). Those words reach beyond the simple necessity of different body parts. "I have no need of you" cannot describe the life of a body whose members have been joined to one another in Christ. The eye's need for the hand does not diminish the eye. It reveals something about the life they share.

What we receive personally in Christ was never intended to terminate within ourselves. Christ is not divided among His people. The same Christ who is our life is present and at work throughout His body. As we begin to recognize His life in one another, other believers are no longer simply people alongside us having their own spiritual experiences. They are members of the same body, participating in the same life.

This also changes what we notice. Human attention easily gathers around what is visible, prominent, or readily recognized. Yet Paul draws our attention toward members that might otherwise receive less notice and speaks of the greater honor given to those that appear weaker.

We begin to discover value in places we might once have overlooked. What supplies the body is not always what attracts attention. Members whose lives remain largely unseen can carry something deeply necessary to the life of others. Visibility does not determine significance within a body in which every member shares in the life of Christ.

Maturity, then, does not move us toward needing one another less. As our recognition of shared life deepens, we become increasingly able to receive what Christ supplies through others.

Dependence upon one another does not have to be understood as weakness. It is part of what it means to belong to a body in which His life is shared.

Christ has joined us in a way that continually draws us beyond self-sufficiency and into participation, humility, and shared life.

Life Moving Through the Body

The life we share in Christ becomes visible as the members of His body participate in that life together. What we receive in Him is deeply personal, but it does not end with us. Life moves. Life supplies. Life finds expression as what is present in Christ becomes visible through His people.

Paul gives us an organic picture of this in Ephesians 4 when he describes the body as "joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped" (Eph. 4:16). His language draws our attention beyond individual members to the life of the whole. Each part remains distinct, yet no part exists only for itself. What is present within the body moves through the participation of its members.

This allows us to see spiritual participation as more than individual activity occurring within the same gathering. We receive, but we also supply. What Christ forms and expresses through one member can strengthen another, while that member also receives what Christ is making available through others. The movement is not simply from a few toward the many. Life moves throughout the body.

No member carries the whole, and no member contains within themselves everything the body needs. Yet every member belongs to the whole and can participate in what Christ is expressing through His body. What appears through one may differ from what appears through another, but each expression draws from the same life.

This begins to change what visibility looks like among us. Christ's life is not made visible only through those whose expressions are most easily seen or heard. He becomes visible through the participation of His people, including members whose contribution may attract little attention. What may appear individually small can still become part of what supplies the whole.

As we begin to recognize this, our attention can move beyond who is most visible to the life of Christ becoming visible among us. We begin to notice His life in what is received, what is given, and what passes between members as they participate together.

The body becomes visible as a body when Christ's life is expressed through the participation of its many members. What is shared in Him becomes visible through us.

The Freedom of Belonging

As the reality of one body settles more deeply within us, some of the burdens we have carried begin to lose their weight. Spiritual life no longer has to feel like something we sustain largely on our own. Many of us have learned to understand growth primarily through personal effort, personal

experience, and personal responsibility. Without realizing it, we can begin carrying spiritual life as though its weight rests almost entirely upon ourselves.

But the body gives us another picture. We have been joined to a life that is larger than any one of us, and that life is present throughout the body. Our need for one another does not diminish what we have received in Christ. It allows us to receive what Christ is expressing through someone other than ourselves.

This frees us from the pressure of self-sufficiency. The eye does not have to become the hand in order to possess what the hand supplies. Nor does the hand have to contain within itself everything necessary for the body. Each belongs, each participates, and each can receive what comes through the participation of another.

The same freedom reaches into the way we understand significance. Visibility can easily draw our attention because what can be seen is easier to recognize and celebrate. Yet Paul draws our attention toward those whose lives and participation may receive less notice. What they bring to the life of the body is no less meaningful simply because it is less visible.

Much of what Christ expresses through us may never occupy a prominent place. What someone brings to the life we share can strengthen others deeply without ever receiving much attention. What is most visible tells only part of the story of how Christ is making Himself known among His people.

Participation also begins to look different from within this shared life. We each belong to one another in Christ, and what He expresses through us becomes part of what we share together. We receive from one another, and we give from what we have received. In this way, the life of Christ continues moving among us.

We do not have to become self-sufficient in order to become mature. We do not have to become visible in order to become significant. And we do not have to carry spiritual life as though everything depends upon what we can sustain within ourselves. We belong to one another because we belong to Christ.

Christ has not merely given His people life. He has given His people one another.

The Ekklesia Assembly is a living body sharing one life. We belong to Christ, and in Him we belong to one another. What He expresses through one of us can strengthen another, and what we receive from one another becomes part of the life we share together.

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you.” We were never meant to find everything we need within ourselves. Christ has given us one another, and through our life together, something of Him becomes visible that none of us could express alone.

Christ does not merely gather us around Himself. He joins us to one another in a body through which His life becomes visible.

If Christ is expressing His life through many, how does what He gives become available to others throughout the body?

GRACE DISTRIBUTED THROUGH THE WHOLE BODY

> *The Spirit distributes grace throughout the body of Christ so that every member contributes to the strengthening, nourishment, and visible expression of shared life.*

The life we share in Christ does not remain without expression. What Christ gives becomes visible among us in ways that strengthen, encourage, serve, and supply others. Scripture gives us language for understanding this movement through grace.

Grace may be most familiar to us in connection with salvation, forgiveness, and mercy. Yet throughout the New Testament, we also encounter grace as something given and received within the life of God's people. Paul speaks of grace given to him and to others. Peter speaks of grace received and then stewarded for one another. What we receive from God is not always given for ourselves alone.

This begins to open another dimension of the life we share. Christ has not placed everything He desires to express within the hands of a few. His provision is present throughout His people, becoming available through different lives in different ways. What one receives can strengthen another. What is given through another can become nourishment, encouragement, or help to us.

Grace moves through a people.

What Christ gives is received, shared, and made visible among us.

To Each Is Given

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:7, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." Before anything becomes visible through the life of the body, something has been given.

"To each is given." Those few words place us first in the posture of reception. What becomes visible through us does not originate in us. We receive from God before anything is expressed through our lives.

This pattern reaches throughout the life we share in Christ. Life is received. Grace is received. Love is received. What originates in God comes to us as gift, and what is received can then become visible through us. The body does not create its own spiritual supply. Christ remains its source.

But Paul does not say simply that something is given. He says, "to each." His words widen our view beyond a few particularly visible people and allow us to see the Spirit at work throughout the body. What God desires to make available for the good of His people is not confined to one life or one kind of expression.

This does not make us all the same. The life we share in Christ finds expression through people who remain wonderfully distinct. One may encourage. Another may serve in ways few people ever notice. Someone may teach, while someone else expresses mercy, generosity, hospitality, wisdom, or comfort. What becomes visible through one life may look very different from what becomes visible through another, yet the source remains the same.

No one of us contains the complete visible expression of Christ's life. We need one another precisely because what He expresses through us is not identical. As His life becomes visible through many, we begin to encounter something together that none of us could express alone.

Paul then gives us the direction of what has been given: "for the common good." What we receive does not have to end with us. What God gives can become encouragement, strength, nourishment, service, wisdom, or comfort to someone else. What has been received personally becomes part of His provision for a people.

Christ remains the source. Yet His provision becomes visible throughout His body as what is received from Him becomes available to one another.

What Is Given Becomes Shared

As this reality settles more deeply into the life of the Ekklesia Assembly, it begins shaping the way we understand ourselves and one another within the body of Christ. If Christ distributes His provision throughout His people, then participation within the body is no longer viewed primarily through the lens of prominence, visibility, or position. Participation becomes rooted in the life we share together.

Scripture consistently presents the body as a living reality rather than a collection of independent individuals gathered within the same space. Life moves through the body. Supply moves through the body. Strengthening moves through the body. Nourishment moves through the body. What Christ gives to one member was never intended to remain isolated within that member. His provision exists within a larger movement of mutual participation and shared life.

This gradually shapes the atmosphere of our relationships with one another. We are no longer simply individuals pursuing separate spiritual experiences while occasionally gathering together. We participate within something shared. The life we have received from Christ immediately places us into relationship with one another because the same Christ who gives life to each of us also forms us together into one body.

Within this shared life, difference no longer becomes a reason for distance or comparison. Diversity begins functioning differently because each member carries something that contributes to the strengthening of the whole. One member may bring encouragement during a season when another needs strengthening. Another may quietly serve in ways that create support and stability for others. One may carry wisdom, another compassion, another generosity, another hospitality. Some expressions become highly visible while others remain largely unseen, yet the life moving through each remains the same life proceeding from Christ Himself.

Over time this also begins shaping the way we as believers look at one another. We are no longer simply faces occupying the same room or individuals walking separate spiritual journeys beside one another. There is a growing awareness that Christ has distributed His provision among His people and that the life we share together carries something meaningful for one another. Ordinary conversations, encouragement, acts of service, wisdom, comfort, and faithfulness begin carrying a different kind of weight because Christ often makes His care known through one another.

The questions that often govern spiritual life also begin shifting quietly. Rather than continually looking inward with uncertainty or outward with comparison, our attention gradually returns to Christ's provision already present within His body. The focus becomes less centered upon what we may appear to possess or lack and more centered upon the life Christ Himself is sharing among His people.

Formation often unfolds quietly in places such as this. We become more attentive to one another. Hidden expressions become valued. Ordinary acts of faithfulness begin carrying greater significance. We become less concerned with occupying visible places and increasingly aware that Christ continually supplies His body through many members sharing together in one life.

The body becomes not merely a place where we gather around spiritual life. It becomes a people learning to recognize, receive, and participate in the life Christ is continually sharing among us.

Recognizing What Christ Gives Through One Another

As this reality settles more deeply among us, it begins to change the way we see one another. If what God gives is "for the common good," then what He is expressing through another person may carry something for us. And what we have received from Him may become part of His care for someone else.

This gives our relationships with one another a different significance. The same Christ who is our life is at work throughout His body, and His provision can meet us through people whose lives and expressions may be very different from our own. We begin to recognize that receiving from Christ does not always mean receiving apart from one another.

Difference, then, does not have to lead us toward comparison. Someone may bring encouragement when another needs strengthening. Someone else may quietly serve in ways that bring support and stability. Wisdom may come through one person, compassion through another, generosity or hospitality through someone else. Some of these expressions may be easily noticed while others remain largely unseen, but each can become a way Christ makes His care available among us.

This begins to change the weight we give to what might otherwise seem ordinary. A conversation can carry encouragement we did not know we needed. An act of service can become tangible care. Wisdom offered quietly can bring clarity. The faithfulness of another person can strengthen us in a difficult season. What appears ordinary can become deeply significant when we begin to recognize Christ at work through one another.

We also become less preoccupied with measuring what we ourselves appear to possess or lack. Our attention can return instead to Christ, whose provision is not confined to what He has placed within our own lives. We can receive what He gives through others without diminishing what He has given us, and we can give from what we have received without needing our participation to become prominent.

In this shared life, we become more attentive to one another. We begin to value what may once have escaped our notice and to recognize Christ's care in expressions that carry little visibility. What He gives does not have to be spectacular to strengthen His people.

The Ekklesia Assembly becomes a people learning to recognize and receive what Christ is making available through one another.

Stewards of What We Receive

Peter writes in 1 Peter 4:10, "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace." Again, receiving comes before expression. Something has been given, but Peter now shows us that what has been received carries a relationship to someone beyond ourselves: "use it to serve one another."

He calls us stewards of God's varied grace. What we receive remains connected to the One from whom it came. It does not become something we possess independently or something whose significance begins and ends with us. It is received with gratitude, carried with care, and given in service to one another.

Peter's word "varied" also gives us room for the differences we have already begun to recognize. Grace does not have to look the same as it becomes visible through different lives. It may be expressed through encouragement, wisdom, hospitality, generosity, compassion, mercy, strength, or comfort. What Christ makes available through one person may look very different from what He makes available through another.

Yet what we receive never becomes disconnected from Christ Himself. We are not the source of what we have been given. We receive from Him, and what He entrusts to us can become part of His care for someone else.

Paul gives us a beautiful picture of this when he calls God "the Father of mercies and God of all comfort" (2 Cor. 1:3).

God comforts us in our affliction so that we are able to comfort others with the comfort we ourselves have received from Him. The comfort begins in God. It reaches us personally and becomes deeply ours in the place where we need it. Yet what we have received can later become a way His comfort reaches someone else.

This is what shared grace can look like among us. We are comforted, and we comfort. We are encouraged, and encouragement becomes something we can give. We receive mercy, and mercy

finds expression through the way we respond to another person. What God has made real within our own lives can become part of how He cares for others.

Much of this happens in ways that appear ordinary. A conversation can bring encouragement at precisely the right moment. A quiet act of service can strengthen someone without drawing attention to the person who offered it. Wisdom spoken simply can bring clarity. Compassion can make the care of Christ tangible in a difficult place. These moments may seem small, but what Christ makes available through them does not depend upon their visibility for its significance.

The life we share in Christ is not only something we receive. What we receive from Him can be entrusted to us for one another. His varied grace becomes visible as we faithfully share what He has given.

The Fullness We See Together

The varied grace of God among us reveals something larger than the ways we strengthen and care for one another. Through many different lives and expressions, something of Christ Himself is becoming visible.

No one of us carries the whole picture. We were never meant to. What Christ expresses through one life may reveal something of His compassion, while another makes His generosity tangible. His wisdom may become evident through someone whose words bring clarity. His faithfulness may become visible through someone who quietly remains present. His comfort, mercy, encouragement, and care become recognizable among us through countless expressions that may look very different from one another.

Paul gives us a beautiful picture of this in Ephesians when he describes the whole body as joined and held together, growing as each part participates. The strength of the body does not rest upon one person containing everything the others need. Christ remains the source, and throughout His body we encounter what He is making available through one another.

This gives even the quietest expressions a different significance. An act of faithfulness that few people notice can still carry something of Christ to another person. Compassion offered privately can make His care tangible. Encouragement spoken in an ordinary conversation can strengthen someone at precisely the place where strength is needed. What appears small does not have to be insignificant when it becomes an expression of what Christ has given.

We begin, then, to look for Christ not only in what is prominent, but throughout the people He has joined to Himself and to one another. His varied grace teaches us to recognize that what He desires to make known cannot be contained within a single life or expression. We need one another not because Christ is insufficient, but because the fullness we share is found in Him and expressed through a people.

What we receive from Him is received with gratitude, carried with care, and given in service to one another. Grace becomes tangible as His comfort reaches someone through us, His wisdom is

shared, His compassion is expressed, His generosity becomes visible, and His strength meets another person in a place of need.

No one of us carries the whole picture. Together, we make visible more of the Christ whose life we share. What Christ gives throughout His body does more than strengthen the people who receive it. As His grace takes visible form through us, Christ Himself is being made known.

How does a people sharing one life become a visible expression of Christ?

CHRIST MADE VISIBLE THROUGH A PEOPLE

> *The Ekklesia Assembly becomes the visible expression of Christ in the earth as His life is embodied through a people formed together in love, presence, and shared participation.*

The life of Christ becomes visible through a people.

What begins in Him as source is shared among us as one life, and finds varied expression through grace does not remain a collection of separate experiences. Something larger is becoming visible. Christ is making Himself known through a people who share His life together.

Throughout Scripture, we encounter God drawing a people into His life and presence. In Christ, that people becomes a living body, joined to Him and to one another. His life is shared among us. His grace takes varied form through us. What He expresses through one becomes part of His care for another, and together our lives begin to bear witness to the One whose life we share.

This is the Ekklesia Assembly: a people in whom the life of Christ is becoming visible.

Christ made visible through a people.

The Life That Can Be Seen

The book of Acts introduces us to a life taking visible form among a people. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). As Luke continues, we see them together again and again—in fellowship, around tables, in prayer, responding to needs, receiving with gladness, and sharing what they have.

Something can be seen among them. The life they have received in Christ is taking form in the way they live with one another. Their shared life is not merely an inward spiritual reality or something they hold in common as belief. It has become tangible.

Awe comes upon them. They hold things in common. Needs are met. They receive favor among the people, and the Lord adds to their number day by day. One reality after another gives visible expression to what is happening among them. The life of Christ is becoming recognizable through the life of a people.

Jesus had already spoken of something like this when He told His disciples, “Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another” (John 13:34). He then connected that love with something others would be able to recognize: “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

The love they had received from Him was to become visible in the way they loved one another. What Jesus had made known to them personally would take relational form among them. His love would be embodied in patience, care, faithfulness, generosity, forgiveness, service, and the countless ways they learned to live toward one another from what they had first received from Him.

This is part of what we begin to see in Acts. The life of Christ is not only confessed; it becomes tangible among His people. What has been received from Him begins shaping the way they hold their lives in relationship to one another.

Acts 4 carries the picture further: “Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul” (Acts 4:32). A few verses later Luke tells us that “great grace was upon them all” (Acts 4:33). Between those words we see a people whose shared life has become tangible in the way they care for one another. Possessions are shared. Needs are met. What belongs to one becomes available for the good of another.

Grace is no longer only something we can speak about. Love is no longer only something we can affirm. Among a people sharing the life of Christ, they can take form in ways that can be encountered.

Christ makes Himself known through a people whose shared life bears the imprint of His own.

The Reordering of Sight

The longer we remain within Acts 2, the more difficult it becomes to see what God is doing in individual lives apart from the life taking shape among them. Teaching, prayer, fellowship, meals, possessions, and needs all enter the life they are learning to share. What Christ is doing within them is becoming visible in the way they live toward one another.

There is something beautiful here that can easily pass unnoticed if we move too quickly through the passage. They aren’t just living in proximity. They are living their lives together. What belongs to one life is no longer held without regard for another. Needs can be seen. Possessions can be shared. Prayer can carry what concerns another. Their life in Christ is taking relational form among them.

And no single person carries the complete expression of what Christ is making known. What He gives to one can strengthen another. Joy present in one life can encourage someone who is weary. Wisdom can bring clarity to someone who needs direction. Comfort received from Christ can become comfort offered to another. His care becomes tangible through people who are learning both to receive and to give.

We can easily look for Christ primarily in what appears overtly spiritual, particularly gifted, or highly visible. Acts invites us to notice Him in the life taking shape between people—in the table that is

opened, the need that is noticed, the prayer that is shared, the possession freely offered, and the presence of one person with another.

Jesus had already given His disciples language for this: “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Recognition is connected to something that can be encountered among them. The love of Christ does not remain an inward conviction. It takes form in patience, care, generosity, faithfulness, presence, and lives increasingly opened toward one another.

Acts 4 widens the picture further: “And great grace was upon them all” (Acts 4:33). That grace becomes tangible among them. Needs are met. Hands are opened. What one possesses can become provision for someone else. The grace resting upon them can be seen in the character of the life they share.

Teaching is not only something we receive; truth begins taking form in the way we live. Grace is not only something we experience; it becomes tangible in the way we care for one another. Love is not only something we affirm; it becomes recognizable in the life taking shape among us.

Christ becomes visible through a people sharing His life together.

When Life Takes Visible Form

As the life they share fills the ordinary spaces of their lives, something becomes recognizable beyond the people who are sharing it. Luke tells us that they had “favor with all the people” and that “the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). What is happening among them has become visible to those around them.

What can be seen is more than collective unity or people learning to live well together. Their life carries the imprint of the One whose life they share. His love has taken form in the way they make room for one another. His generosity can be seen in opened hands. His care becomes tangible as needs are noticed and met. The life among them bears witness to Christ because it bears something of His character.

Jesus had already said, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). Love would make their relationship to Him recognizable. Not love as sentiment or appearance, but the love they had first encountered in Him now embodied in the way they lived toward one another.

Acts 4 gives us another glimpse of this when Luke tells us that “great grace was upon them all” (Acts 4:33). That grace can be encountered in what follows. Hands are opened. Needs are met. What someone possesses becomes available for the care of another. The grace of Christ is becoming tangible within the shared life of His people.

Yet what is becoming visible among them cannot finally be reduced to generosity, affection, or human community. The One who healed the sick, touched lepers, restored the broken, revealed

the Father, and carried resurrection life into the grave now lives in His people. The life they share is His.

This is more than the continuation of His teaching or the preservation of the values He left behind. Christ Himself is present among a people who share His life.

The life that touched the leper is present among them. The life that spoke peace to the storm is present among them. The life that called Lazarus from the grave is present among them. The life through which the kingdom of God became tangible wherever Jesus went is now the life they share.

His love becomes recognizable.

His grace becomes tangible.

His kingdom becomes visible.

Christ is making Himself known through a people.

Recovering What Was Reduced

When Christ's life takes visible form among His people, realities that may have become smaller in our understanding begin recovering their true dimensions. Gathering is more than meeting. Spiritual life reaches beyond private experience. Witness is more than words spoken about Jesus. The kingdom is not only truth we understand; it is the reality of God becoming tangible among us.

Acts 2 places before us a people made alive by Christ Himself. What has happened among them cannot be explained as spiritual activity added to otherwise ordinary lives. Resurrection life has entered the human story and now dwells within a people. Christ lives in them, among them, and through them.

Luke brings us immediately into the ordinary places where that extraordinary life becomes visible: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). Teaching, fellowship, meals, prayer, generosity, care, and shared presence are not fragments of religious life arranged into a schedule. They have become places where the life of Christ takes tangible form among His people.

We are not simply people attempting to live differently because Jesus showed us a better way to live. We have been joined to the living Christ. His resurrection life is our life, and what is true in Him is taking form in a people who belong to Him and to one another.

Jesus said, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). Witness is already present in the life He describes. His love received by us becomes recognizable in the way we live toward one another. Something of Christ can be encountered before anyone has attempted to construct an image of Him for others to see.

Luke tells us that they had “favor with all the people,” and that “the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). Their shared life was not the means by which they manufactured a witness. It was itself bearing witness to the Christ whose life they shared.

The world is not only hearing about Christ. It is encountering something of His life through a people.

Acts 4 deepens the picture: “And great grace was upon them all” (Acts 4:33). Then Luke tells us, “There was not a needy person among them” (Acts 4:34). Grace has become tangible. Open hands reveal generosity. Needs are met through shared provision. Care takes visible form between people. What Christ has given is becoming part of the way they live toward one another.

The Ekklesia Assembly now comes into view as a living body made alive by Christ Himself. His life is shared among us. His varied grace becomes tangible through us. His love takes relational form between us. And through the life we share, something of Christ becomes recognizable in the earth.

Christ as life.

One body sharing His life.

Grace given for one another.

Christ made visible through a people.

The earth has not been left with memory alone. Jesus has not merely left behind teachings to preserve or values to embody. The One who healed the sick, restored the broken, touched lepers, revealed the Father, and made the kingdom tangible wherever He went is the living Christ to whom we have been joined.

His life is our life.

And as that life takes form among us, the earth is not left without a witness to the living Christ.

Christ made visible through a people.

Yet what becomes visible matters. Not everything that appears spiritual, powerful, or effective bears the character of Christ.

If His life is being expressed through a people, what governs that expression?

The life we share does not come to us empty of character. It is the life of Christ. And because it is His life, what takes form among us cannot finally be understood by what appears impressive, powerful, or even genuinely spiritual. The deeper question is whether what is becoming visible bears the nature of the One whose life we share.

This brings us somewhere more searching than the reality of participation alone. Gifts may be given. Grace may be moving. Spiritual realities may be genuinely present. Yet the life of Christ carries within itself the character of Christ, and Scripture continually brings us back to the place where that character becomes recognizable.

We are not only asking whether Christ is being expressed through His people. We are asking what Christ looks like when His life takes form among us.

LOVE IS THE MEASURE OF SPIRITUALITY

> *Love reveals whether the life of Christ carried within and among His people is truly expressing His character, nature, and presence.*

A Still More Excellent Way

As Paul turns toward the Corinthians' questions concerning spiritual realities, he is not speaking to people standing outside spiritual life looking in. Gifts were already functioning among them. Manifestations of the Spirit were present. They were participating in realities they genuinely wanted to understand more deeply. Their questions did not arise because nothing was happening among them. Something was happening.

Yet wherever spiritual realities become visible, what can be seen can easily become what we begin to measure. Certain expressions attract attention. Some gifts appear more impressive than others. Some people become more visible. And almost imperceptibly, questions about participation can become questions about significance. Which gift is greater? Which expression carries more weight? Who is more spiritual? Who is more necessary?

This impulse did not begin in Corinth. Even the disciples found themselves discussing who was greatest among them. Something deeply human reaches for comparison when greatness comes into view. What has been received as grace can become a measure of status. What was given for the strengthening of others can begin gathering attention around the person through whom it appears.

Paul does not respond by diminishing spiritual realities. He does not treat prophecy as unimportant or dismiss tongues, manifestations, gifts, or spiritual participation as unnecessary distractions.

These things are genuinely of the Spirit. But their reality does not make them sufficient measures of spiritual life.

Paul does not turn away from spiritual expression. He draws their attention to the nature of the life being expressed.

Many of us arrive at 1 Corinthians 13 already knowing its language. Love is patient. Love is kind. Love does not envy. Love does not boast. Love keeps no record of wrongs. We can easily begin hearing these words as behaviors we should somehow manage to reproduce, until the beauty of the passage becomes an impossible standard standing over us. Or we can soften it into sentiment, removing it from Paul's larger argument and admiring its beauty without encountering its force.

But Paul is not placing an unreachable ideal of human affection upon their shoulders. Just as the gifts did not originate within them, neither does the love he is about to describe. He is taking them deeper into the life from which every genuine spiritual expression must come.

There are dimensions of God's life that can remain hidden even among people experiencing genuine manifestations. Not everything that appears spiritual reveals Christ Himself. Something can be genuinely impressive and still fail to reveal His nature.

The Corinthians already knew something of spiritual power. They had experienced manifestations of the Spirit. They knew prophecy, tongues, knowledge, and spiritual gifts. Yet experience with spiritual realities had not necessarily brought them into the deepest reality of the life in which they were participating.

And the man speaking to them knew that world well. Paul was not standing at a distance describing realities he had never encountered. He knew revelation. He knew visions. He speaks of being caught up beyond ordinary experience and hearing things he could not repeat. He could tell the Corinthians that he spoke in tongues more than all of them. When necessary, he could speak from a depth of spiritual experience that few among them could rival.

Yet perhaps the most striking thing is not how much Paul had experienced. It is where all that experience had brought him. The man who had known extraordinary spiritual realities does not point the Corinthians toward something more spectacular. He does not answer their hunger for spiritual understanding by giving them another experience to pursue. He takes them deeper into the life already present beneath everything they have received.

"And I will show you a still more excellent way" (1 Cor. 12:31). More excellent does not mean more visible. It does not mean more spectacular or more impressive. Paul is about to bring them face to face with something that reaches into the nature of God Himself.

The power of God cannot be measured by tongues, prophecy, miracles, knowledge, or visible demonstrations alone. There is something deeper that gives character to every expression of spiritual life, so that what becomes visible does not merely demonstrate power but bears the likeness of Christ.

Scripture does not merely say that God has love. God is love (1 John 4:8). Love is not merely something He carries. Love belongs to who He is. And if the life we share is His life, then what becomes visible through us must bear the nature of the One whose life we share.

Love does not interrupt the discussion.

Love interprets it.

The River Beneath the Ground

There are moments in our life in Christ when the questions rising within us are not born from emptiness but from growth itself. Something within us begins reaching past the places that once sustained us. Not because those waters were false. Not because they did not nourish us. Not because what we first received was insufficient for the season in which we received it. But because growth itself creates a deeper reach. As life matures, roots stretch outward and downward, reaching for waters capable of sustaining what is now growing above the surface.

Roots do not go deeper because they want a bigger tree. Roots go deeper because the tree is growing. A sapling can live from shallow water in a way a mature tree cannot. What is visible above the ground quietly depends upon what has been reached beneath it. Branches may spread, leaves may open, fruit may appear, but the tree's ability to remain and bear depends upon the waters its roots have found.

Something similar happens in the life we share in Christ. Early encounters with God may have awakened us. Early revelation may have nourished us. Early participation in spiritual realities may have carried deep meaning and genuine life. Yet as Christ continues forming us, something within us begins reaching for deeper waters. We are no longer content merely to experience what He does. We want to know Him more deeply within the very realities where we have already encountered Him.

This is not a departure from what God has already given. It is the life we have received drawing us more deeply into Christ Himself.

The Corinthians appear to be standing somewhere within this tension. Gifts were functioning among them. Manifestations were present. They already knew something of the Spirit's activity among them. Yet their questions were carrying them toward realities deeper than the manifestations themselves. Their roots were reaching.

Paul could hear something within their questions that perhaps they could not yet name. Questions concerning manifestations were reaching toward the life from which manifestations proceed. Questions concerning participation were reaching toward the nature of the life they shared. Questions concerning what appears powerful were about to bring them face to face with what gives spiritual power the character of Christ.

There are moments when we recognize this kind of depth in another person. We may be with someone who has walked with God for many years, someone whose life carries something

unmistakable, and realize that what they know is not merely more information. They may use words we have heard before. They may speak of truths we already believe. They may describe spiritual realities we have also experienced in some measure. Yet something in them bears witness to depth. They have not merely visited the waters they are speaking about. They have learned to live from them.

That kind of depth is different from spiritual excitement. It is different from charisma. It is different from the ability to speak well, know much, or carry visible manifestations. It is the difference between touching a reality and being formed by it. It is the difference between knowing about deep waters and having roots that have learned to draw from them.

Paul carried that kind of depth. The striking thing is not simply how much he had experienced, but where all that experience had led him. The man whose spiritual experiences exceeded theirs does not draw them toward something more spectacular, visible, or impressive. He takes them deeper into the life already present within everything they have received.

“And I will show you a still more excellent way” (1 Cor. 12:31). Paul does not say, “I will show you a greater gift.” He does not say, “I will show you a greater manifestation.” He does not say, “I will show you greater power.” He says, “a way.” He is not introducing another spiritual ability alongside the others. He is unveiling something about the nature of the life being expressed through them.

Manifestations reveal expressions of life. Love reveals the nature of the life being expressed. This is why 1 Corinthians 13 does not begin where many of us remember it beginning. Before Paul tells us that love is patient and kind, he brings love alongside the spiritual realities the Corinthians already valued. “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor. 13:1). If he has prophetic powers, understands mysteries, possesses knowledge, and has faith strong enough to move mountains, but does not have love, he is nothing. If he gives away all he has and even surrenders his body, but does not have love, he gains nothing.

Paul reaches directly into realities we might naturally consider spiritually impressive. Tongues. Prophecy. Mysteries. Knowledge. Faith. Generosity. Sacrifice. These are not small things, and Paul does not dismiss them. He places them beside something by which their expression can be known. Love.

Even genuine spiritual realities do not, by their existence alone, reveal the character of Christ. Something may demonstrate spiritual power without yet showing us what that power looks like when it bears His nature.

The more excellent way is not love as sentiment, affection, or human devotion raised to its highest form. Nor is it a moral standard we are expected to produce through our own effort. The love Paul is unveiling does not originate in the Corinthians any more than the gifts originate in them. Its source is God Himself.

Love is the river beneath the ground. Love reaches us before it finds expression through us. Mercy reaches us before we extend mercy to another. We are loved before we love. We are received

before we learn to receive one another. We are forgiven before forgiveness becomes something we can extend. What takes visible form among us has its source in what we have first received from Him.

Love is the deeper water from which the life we share takes its recognizable character.

Without love, even treasured spiritual realities can become expression without substance, activity without revelation, sacrifice without gain, and brilliance without Christ. We may speak in tongues. We may prophesy. We may possess extraordinary knowledge and faith. We may give with remarkable generosity. Yet none of these, by themselves, can reveal the nature of the life being expressed.

Paul refuses to allow any of these, by themselves, to become the measure of spiritual life. They may reveal the activity of the Spirit among us. Love reveals the nature of the God whose Spirit is at work.

And if the life we share is His life, then love is not something added to that life after everything else is in place. Love reveals the nature of the life itself.

When the Measures Fail

Wherever spiritual life becomes visible, something deeply human can attach itself to what we see. We gather around what appears powerful. We assign significance to what appears impressive. And what gathers attention can quietly become the measure by which everything else is interpreted.

It is easy to begin assuming that greater gifting reveals greater maturity. Greater revelation reveals greater depth. Greater visibility reveals greater significance. Greater power reveals greater nearness to God. What someone carries can slowly become confused with who that person is. Paul dismantles every one of these measures.

He does not diminish the gifts. He does not dismiss prophecy or reduce revelation, knowledge, faith, generosity, or sacrifice to meaningless realities. He reaches into the very things we might naturally use to measure spiritual life and refuses to allow them to bear a weight they were never meant to carry.

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love…” (1 Cor. 13:1)

“If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge…” (1 Cor. 13:2)

“If I have all faith, so as to remove mountains…” (1 Cor. 13:2)

“If I give away all I have…” (1 Cor. 13:3)

“If I deliver up my body…” (1 Cor. 13:3)

These are not small things. Tongues, prophecy, mysteries, knowledge, mountain-moving faith, extraordinary generosity, even the surrender of one’s own body—these are the very things we might easily look to as evidence of spiritual depth and maturity.

Then Paul says something almost unsettling.

Without love, I am nothing (1 Cor. 13:2).

Paul is not saying these realities have no value. He is revealing that none of them, by themselves, can tell us what we most need to know. Something can appear powerful without revealing the character of Christ. Something can gather admiration without revealing the character of Christ. Something can appear spiritually significant without revealing the character of Christ.

Paul looks beyond everything that can be seen to the river feeding what becomes visible.

Love gives what becomes visible its recognizable character. It gives prophecy the character of Christ, knowledge humility, faith His heart, generosity His care, and sacrifice His self-giving nature. What matters is no longer simply what is being expressed, but whether what is being expressed bears the nature of the One from whom it came.

Love is the river beneath the ground, but its source is not within us. The love Paul is unveiling does not originate within us any more than the gifts themselves originate within us. Paul is not replacing one form of spiritual achievement with another. He is not relieving any pressure we might feel to be impressive in gifting only to replace it with the greater pressure of becoming impressive in love.

Love has a source.

In Titus 3:4–7, Paul takes us to that source: “But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy” (Titus 3:4–5). What appears first is not our love for God but His loving kindness toward us. Mercy originates in Him. Renewal is the work of the Holy Spirit. What eventually becomes visible through us begins with what has first come to us from God.

We are loved before we love. We receive mercy before we extend mercy. We are renewed before renewal becomes visible in the way we live toward one another. Love does not begin with our determination to become more loving. It begins in God Himself.

Love is not being placed alongside tongues, prophecy, knowledge, faith, generosity, and sacrifice as the greatest achievement of them all. Love reveals the nature of the life from which every expression of Christ must come.

Manifestations can reveal the activity of the Spirit. Love reveals the nature of the God whose Spirit is at work.

Love does not merely regulate spiritual expression. Love reveals whether what becomes visible among us bears the character of Christ Himself.

This is the more excellent way.

The Nature That Becomes Visible

There is a life we share in Christ that has never needed our explanation to become real. It was established before we arrived at it. It was already true before we understood it. We did not build it, and we cannot improve it. We were brought into it.

The life of Christ is already ours. What stands before us is the wonder of that life taking visible form through us toward one another and toward the world.

Paul has brought us to love, but love cannot remain merely a word. If love reveals the nature of the life being expressed, then we need to see what that nature actually looks like.

Paul writes, "When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared…" (Titus 3:4). He does not say God became merciful. His goodness and loving kindness appeared. What had always been true of God became visible in human history. God did not reveal mercy primarily by giving us a definition. He revealed mercy by giving us Himself.

When Messiah touched lepers, mercy became visible. When He sat with sinners, mercy became visible. When He restored failures, mercy became visible. When He looked upon crowds who were harassed and helpless, mercy became visible. And when He prayed, "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34), mercy became visible on a scale humanity had never witnessed.

We are not looking at isolated acts of kindness. We are seeing the nature of God embodied in Christ. In Him, love is no longer merely something we name as an attribute of God. We see what the nature of God looks like when it takes visible form.

This is what makes Paul's words to the Corinthians so penetrating. His concern in chapters 12 through 14 reaches beyond the proper use of gifts to the nature becoming visible through their expression. Tongues may be genuine. Prophecy may be genuine. Knowledge, faith, generosity, and sacrifice may all be present. But what do they reveal about the One from whom they came?

The Old Testament gives us a word that helps us enter more deeply into this reality. It is chesed. English translations render it in several ways—steadfast love, lovingkindness, mercy, faithfulness—because no single English word easily carries everything expressed through it.

Chesed repeatedly brings us into the steadfast character of God toward His people. It is not love produced by covenant as though God entered an agreement and therefore became faithful. His covenant faithfulness proceeds from who He is. God does not become steadfast because covenant obligates Him. Covenant gives historical and relational expression to the steadfast love already present in His nature.

God loved.

Therefore, God gave Himself.

Therefore, God remained faithful.

Israel failed repeatedly. Yet God remained. David failed. Yet God remained. Exile came, and still God remained faithful to His purposes and promises. The prophets cried out through generations of waiting, and the character of God did not change.

Then John writes, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory” (John 1:14 NKJV).

What had been revealed throughout Israel’s story now stood before humanity in a person. The steadfast love of God had a face. Jesus sat at tables with sinners, touched the untouchable, restored the broken, and extended mercy where condemnation might have been expected. The nature of God was no longer encountered only through promise, covenant, or the testimony of His dealings with Israel. The Word had become flesh.

And at the cross, love continued to reveal its nature even in the presence of rejection. “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34 NKJV). Love did not wait for humanity to become worthy of mercy. Love acted according to the nature of the God from whom it came.

Paul’s “still more excellent way” is not an interruption in his discussion of spiritual gifts. He has not paused to remind the Corinthians simply to be nicer to one another. Love is not a pastoral softener inserted between chapters 12 and 14. Paul is showing them the nature that must become recognizable through the life they are expressing.

He has taken their gifts seriously. He wants prophecy to function. He values tongues. He recognizes manifestations of the Spirit as genuine gifts given for the common good. But the presence of a gift cannot, by itself, tell us everything about the nature becoming visible through the person who carries it.

So Paul shows them a way. A way is not another gift added to the list. It is not another spiritual possession. It describes how the life we have received takes form as we live toward one another.

And then Paul describes love. Love is patient. Love is kind. Love does not envy or boast. It does not insist on its own way. It is not resentful. It bears, believes, hopes, and endures (1 Cor. 13:4–7).

These are not categories of spiritual achievement. They reveal what love looks like when it encounters another person. Patience remains present when impatience would be easier. Kindness reaches toward another without demanding its own advantage. Love does not need to elevate itself, keep score, or insist upon its own way. It bears and hopes and endures.

This is the character of the river we have been tracing to its source. Love belongs to who God is. And when Paul says that without love even extraordinary manifestations profit us nothing, he is identifying the difference between spiritual expression and the revelation of God’s nature.

Manifestations reveal expressions of life. Love reveals the nature of the life being expressed.

Power can impress. Power can gather attention. Power can make something appear spiritually significant. But power alone cannot tell us whether what has become visible bears the character of Christ. Love can.

Paul then carries us even farther. “Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away with; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away with” (1 Corinthians 13:8 NASB). He is not diminishing gifts when he calls them partial. Partial does not mean false. Partial does not mean useless. Prophecy is still prophecy. Knowledge is still knowledge. These gifts belong to the life of the body now, and Paul has already affirmed their value.

But they do not belong to what remains forever. Prophecy will be done away with. Tongues will cease. Knowledge, as we now possess it, is partial. “But now faith, hope, and love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13 NASB). And among what remains, love is greatest.

That deserves more than our passing glance. Love is not greatest because Paul has decided it is the most admirable Christian virtue or the most effective way to maintain healthy relationships. Love is greatest because love belongs to the nature of God Himself. What is true of His nature does not belong to the partial. Love is not something God expresses only when conditions are right. Love belongs to who He is.

Prophecy reveals something from God. Knowledge can reveal something about God. Tongues can reveal something of the Spirit’s activity. Love reveals what God is like.

Then Paul writes, “now I know in part, but then I will know fully, just as I also have been fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12 NASB).

Fully known. That phrase has a face in the story.

Jesus knew Peter before the denial. He knew Peter through the denial. And after the resurrection, He prepared breakfast on a beach for the man who had denied Him three times. He knew Saul as Saul breathed threats and carried authority to imprison those who belonged to Jesus, and He met him on the road. He looked from the cross upon those crucifying Him and prayed, “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34).

We are not loved because God has failed to see us completely. We are fully known by the One whose nature is love. This is the love Paul places at the center of spiritual expression. Not sentiment. Not affection produced by human effort. Not another measure by which we can compare ourselves with one another. The steadfast love we encounter in God becomes the nature from which we learn to live toward one another.

And now the body we have been tracing throughout these chapters can be seen in another light. If Christ is our life, and His life finds expression through many, then what becomes visible through us is not merely the variety of gifts He has given. His nature is meant to become recognizable among us.

The gifts and love are not in competition. They never were. Gifts are real. They are given by the Spirit for the common good, and Paul wants them to function. But gifts by themselves cannot answer the deepest question.

In the book of Acts, the life received from Christ begins taking relational form. Pentecost had already happened. Tongues had already been heard. Yet Luke continues the story by showing us people sharing what they possessed, remaining together, breaking bread in their homes, responding to needs, praying, and continuing steadfastly together.

What had been received from God was becoming recognizable in the way they lived toward one another. The steadfast love they had encountered in Christ was taking form among a people.

Paul's image of the "noisy gong or a clanging cymbal[1]" reaches beyond something merely loud or unpleasant. The sound may be unmistakable, but it does not clearly reveal the nature of Christ. Once we have encountered His steadfast love, we begin to recognize what bears His voice and His character.

Once we have encountered the steadfast love of God in Christ, our ears begin to recognize His voice. We know something of the mercy that reaches us while fully knowing us, the patience that remains, the kindness that does not seek its own, the love that bears, believes, hopes, and endures. Spiritual expression that does not carry that nature may still attract attention, but it no longer speaks clearly of the Christ we have come to know.

Paul's words about maturity reach into this same distinction. "When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things" (1 Cor. 13:11 NASB). Maturity is not revealed simply by possessing greater spiritual expression. Paul has already removed tongues, prophecy, knowledge, and extraordinary faith from that position. What we call maturity must reach deeper than the manifestations we carry.

As our roots find deeper water, we do not become less receptive to spiritual expression. We become more attentive to what that expression reveals. Power without love no longer seems complete simply because it is powerful. Knowledge without love no longer appears mature simply because it is profound. What once might have impressed us by its brilliance alone is now heard alongside another voice—the voice of the Christ whose nature we have come to recognize.

Once our roots have tasted that deeper water, spiritual expression does not become less important. But manifestation alone can no longer satisfy our understanding of what it means for Christ to be visible. We have heard another voice. We have encountered the nature from which every expression of His life receives its meaning.

Paul knew this from inside his own story. Saul knew Scripture. Saul knew law. Saul knew zeal. What Saul had not yet encountered was the risen Christ meeting him in the very place where his zeal had set him against the One he believed he was serving.

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[1] 1 Cor. 13:11 NASB

Mercy arrived with a face.

And mercy made love visible.

The Room We Already Live In

Christ did not withdraw from human weakness.

He touched lepers. He sat with those the religious world had categorized and dismissed. He restored Peter after three denials. He remained present with failures, doubters, outsiders, and enemies. Nothing He encountered in them changed who He was toward them.

Jesus knew the Father and lived in unbroken fellowship with Him. He did not need anything from the people He encountered to secure His identity, establish His place, or confirm His standing. He was free to love, free to extend mercy, free to remain present in the face of weakness and failure. What flowed from Him revealed the nature of the God He knew and made visible.

And in Christ, we have been brought into a settled reality of our own. His finished work did not merely secure forgiveness, though it secured forgiveness. It established the ground upon which we now stand. We have been brought into a relationship with God that does not fluctuate with our performance. Grace is not simply the doorway through which we entered. Grace is the room in which we now live.

Mercy is the atmosphere of that room. It is not merely what God extended to get us through the threshold. We live surrounded by mercy. We breathe it here. We are not straining toward it from a distance.

We are not moving toward God trying to secure acceptance.
We are moving from acceptance.

We are not trying to establish nearness.
We are living from nearness.

We are not striving for sonship.
We are living from sonship.

Insecurity cannot sustain mercy. Fear cannot sustain mercy. Performance cannot sustain mercy. Scarcity cannot sustain mercy. Each of these eventually turns inward to protect itself. Each one eventually calculates.

Does this person deserve this?
Will this cost me too much?
What if they fail again?
What if I appear weak?

But people who live from a settled place—people who have ceased striving to secure what has already been given—are free to remain present where insecurity would pull away. Weakness does

not threaten them. Another person's failure does not require defensiveness or distance. They can remain with people who are still in the middle of their undoing.

Mercy is what security looks like in the presence of another person's weakness.

The finished work is not only the foundation of our standing before God. It becomes the settled ground from which we are free to love one another without protecting our position. We do not have to preserve what Christ has already secured or distance ourselves from another person's weakness in order to remain secure ourselves. We are free to extend the mercy we have already received.

As the Ekklesia Assembly lives from this reality together, the body is no longer a gathering of people managing their image, protecting their position, or maintaining an appearance of spiritual health. It becomes a people carrying toward one another the same mercy they themselves have received from God.

Correction takes on a different character. Failure is no longer met from a distance. Weakness does not require withdrawal. Restoration becomes possible because mercy does not stand at a distance evaluating worthiness before deciding whether to approach. Mercy moves toward people. It has always moved toward people. That is its nature.

We are not being called to produce something we do not already have.

Paul is not asking the Corinthians to manufacture love or to earn their way into a more excellent spiritual experience. The life from which love proceeds has already been given to them in Christ. The love we extend to another does not begin with our determination to become more loving. It begins with what we have received from God.

We live from acceptance rather than striving for it. We live from nearness rather than at a distance. We live from a love that was settled before we arrived at it. As we become increasingly at rest in what has already been given, that same love begins to characterize the way we live with one another.

Correction can happen without condemnation. Failure can be met with restoration rather than withdrawal. Weakness can be received rather than avoided. Those who are strong can remain alongside those who are struggling without needing their strength to become a source of distinction. This steadfast love takes shape among a people who are themselves continually receiving mercy.

Formation does not emerge from pressure here.

It emerges from prolonged exposure to a reality.

As we remain in the love already given to us, that love increasingly governs the way we live toward one another.

Chesed bears witness to the steadfast love of God toward humanity. In Christ, that love took visible form. The mercy Israel encountered through generations of God's faithfulness stood before humanity in Jesus Christ. He touched the untouchable, received those others rejected, restored those who failed, and extended mercy even in the presence of rejection.

And now that same steadfast love takes relational form among a people who share His life.

We are not being asked to manufacture it. We are learning to live from what we have already received. Mercy reaches weakness. Patience remains. Kindness does not seek its own. Love bears, believes, hopes, and endures.

This is what the "still more excellent way" looks like when it becomes tangible among us. Spiritual expression does not disappear. Gifts do not become unnecessary. Power does not become suspect. But through all of them, and through the ordinary ways we live toward one another, the nature of the One whose life we share becomes recognizable.

Christ becomes visible. Not as an individual standing in Galilee, but through a body sharing His life together—His patience, His kindness, His mercy, His steadfast love.

Never failing.

GOD RECEIVED

> *The revelation of God as He truly is—the God who is love, revealed in Christ—imparts more than information. Received as a living deposit, revelation carries within it the presence, life, and nature of Christ Himself, unfolding within those who receive Him until His life becomes visible through them.*

When the Story Has a Face

There are moments in Scripture that seem capable of stopping us in our tracks if we allow them to linger long enough.

Paul spent his life studying the Scriptures. He knew the Torah. He knew the prophets. He knew the promises. He knew the traditions. He knew the arguments.

He knew the story.

And we do too.

Yet Paul spent his life studying the Scriptures and still did not recognize the One in whom the Word had become flesh.

That reality deserves our attention.

Is it possible to know the story and still miss the Person?

For many of us, this question feels uncomfortable because we have been taught to think of knowledge and revelation as though they are interchangeable. Scripture is precious. Doctrine matters. Truth matters. Yet the testimony of Paul confronts us with something we cannot easily ignore. Knowing about God and encountering Him are not always the same thing.

When Paul later reflected upon his own life, he did not describe his transformation primarily as the result of better reasoning, stronger arguments, or greater understanding. He spoke of revelation. He described mysteries hidden and later revealed. He described wisdom that could not be discovered through natural means. He spoke of Christ being revealed in him. Again and again, his language points beyond information toward something deeper.

The invisible God becomes visible in Christ. Revelation is received. Something is formed in the person who receives it. And out of that formation comes a visible witness—a life through which the nature of God can be seen again in the world.

But there is a hidden middle we need to name. What actually happens inside a person between the moment God is revealed and the moment His life becomes visible through them? Something must bridge those two realities, or witness becomes nothing more than a program—copying the behavior of Jesus from the outside while the heart underneath remains unchanged.

Revelation does not only change what we know about God. It changes how we see. And how we see governs how we love.

The love described in 1 Corinthians 13 is not merely a virtue to be practiced. It is a revelation of God's own nature. The steadfast mercy revealed throughout Scripture ultimately took visible form in Jesus Christ. The love of God became visible in a human life.

If this is true, another question naturally emerges. How does that revelation become ours? How does the nature of God move beyond words on a page and become a living reality within us? How does the God who is love become known?

The answer Paul continually points us toward is revelation.

Not revelation as the communication of information, but revelation as the unveiling of a Person.

The God We Did Not Expect

When Philip asked Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father" (John 14:8), he gave voice to a question humanity had been asking from the beginning. What is God truly like? What fills His heart toward humanity? What moves Him? What does He desire? What does He see when He looks upon us? Jesus answered in a way that forever altered the conversation. "Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). In that moment, the discussion moved beyond descriptions, doctrines, and theological conclusions. The Father was no longer being explained. The Father was being revealed.

This is what makes Jesus unique within the witness of Scripture. The prophets revealed aspects of God's dealings with humanity. The Law revealed aspects of His righteousness. The covenants

revealed aspects of His faithfulness. The Scriptures themselves bear witness to His purposes and character. Yet all of these ultimately point beyond themselves. They point toward a Person. Jesus did not merely come carrying information about God. He came as the visible revelation of the invisible God. To see Him was to see the Father. To hear Him was to hear the Father. To encounter Him was to encounter the Father.

The steadfast love of God revealed throughout the Scriptures was revealing something fundamental concerning His nature. The mercy that continued pursuing humanity through failure, rebellion, exile, restoration, covenant, promise, and redemption was revealing the heart of God Himself. Yet what was seen in part throughout the Scriptures became fully visible in Jesus Christ.

The mercy of God took bodily form.

The compassion of God took bodily form.

The kindness of God took bodily form.

The steadfast love of God took bodily form.

The God who is love stood among humanity.

This is why the Gospels carry such unique weight within the biblical witness. We are not merely observing the ministry of Jesus. We are watching the Father reveal Himself. Every interaction becomes revelatory. Every act of mercy becomes revelatory. Every act of forgiveness becomes revelatory. Every moment of compassion becomes revelatory. The Father is being made known through the Son.

When Jesus touched those that others avoided, the Father was being revealed. When Jesus welcomed those that others rejected, the Father was being revealed. When Jesus forgave those who failed Him, the Father was being revealed. When Jesus wept beside the grave of Lazarus, the Father was being revealed. When Jesus stretched out His hands upon the cross and prayed for those crucifying Him, the Father was being revealed.

The God who is love became visible.

This is the Christ Paul encountered on the road to Damascus.

But before we talk about Paul, let's start with what revelation actually does. We tend to treat it as the delivery of information—facts about God we did not previously possess. But revelation can reach much deeper than the arrival of new facts. In the light of God as He truly is, our perceptions can begin to collapse in on themselves, giving way to the dawning recognition of the One who has been there all along.

This is where the word truly begins to matter. Revelation is of God as He truly is. As He makes Himself known, what we have believed about Him is brought into the light of who He reveals Himself to be. Revelation does not merely add to our knowledge. It brings us face to face with the One who has been there all along.

And the God who comes into view in Christ is the God who is love. Not a God who has love among His attributes, kept in balance against other, sterner things, but a God whose very nature is love the whole way down. This is the God revealed in Christ. And He may not be the God we expected.

And there is no clearer place to see what can happen when our perceptions are encountered by God as He truly is than on a road outside Damascus.

The man named Saul is traveling to Damascus with authority to arrest followers of Jesus. He is zealous, certain, theologically equipped, convinced he is defending the honor of God. From within everything he knows and believes, he is serving the right cause.

The significance of his encounter, however, reaches far beyond a conversion story. We often remember the light, the voice, the blindness, and the dramatic reversal that followed. Yet beneath all of those details stands something even more profound. The One who confronted him on that road was not merely the risen Christ. He was the visible revelation of the Father Himself.

Before Paul ever fell to the ground on the road to Damascus, the Father had already made Himself known in His Son. Jesus had already stood among humanity as the visible image of the invisible God. He had already declared, “Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). He had already revealed that the Father was not distant from the mercy expressed through His hands, the compassion heard in His voice, the forgiveness extended even through His wounds, or the love given to those who had no power to make themselves whole. The Father was not being represented at a distance. The Father was being revealed in Him.

Paul did not meet an idea on that road. He did not meet a doctrine. He did not meet a better interpretation of the passages he had spent his life studying. He encountered the living Christ. The One he had rejected was not merely alive. The One he had rejected was the revelation of the Father Himself. The God Paul had devoted his life to serving stood before him in the Son he had failed to recognize.

There is something that can feel almost unbearable in that moment if we allow it to linger. Paul had given himself to the Scriptures. He had guarded what he believed was holy. He had defended what he believed was true. He had zeal, discipline, history, tradition, and conviction. Yet the Father had made Himself visible in Jesus Christ, and Paul had not seen Him. The Word had become flesh, and Paul had opposed Him. The mercy of God had walked among men, and Paul had resisted the people who carried His name. The God who is love had been revealed in the Son, and Paul had mistaken that revelation for a threat.

Then came the road.

A light from heaven surrounded him. The movement stopped. The certainty stopped. The strength that had carried him toward Damascus could carry him no farther. He fell to the ground and heard a voice calling him by name: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4). The question did not merely expose Paul's activity. It exposed what Paul had not understood. He had believed he

was opposing a dangerous movement. He was actually touching the living Christ. He had believed he was defending God. He was actually resisting the One in whom God had made Himself known.

“Who are You, Lord?” (Acts 9:5).

He genuinely does not know. Everything hangs on the answer.

That question holds open the doorway to revelation.

Paul did not ask for a doctrine. He did not ask for an explanation of prophecy. He did not ask for a corrected theological system. He asked the question every human heart must ask when the living God draws near in a way our previous understanding cannot contain. Who are You?

What he is about to discover is not merely that Jesus is alive—though that alone would undo him. The One Saul believed he was serving has been standing in solidarity with the very people Saul has been destroying. The God he thought he knew sees differently than Saul sees. The God he thought he knew moves toward the very people Saul has been moving against.

In a single sentence, Saul’s entire framework for who God is comes apart.

For Paul, this is happening in real time. This was not the arrival of a new fact, but the collapse of a false perspective of God and the unbearable, liberating dawning of the true one.

That revelation came through the One he had persecuted.

“I am Jesus” (Acts 9:5).

With those words, everything Paul had known was gathered into a Person. The Scriptures he had studied, the promises he had defended, the covenant history he had inherited, the righteousness he had pursued, the God he had sought to honor—all of it now stood before him in Jesus Christ. This was the living reality that the Father was revealed in the Son. The God Paul thought he knew had made Himself known in the One Paul had not recognized—until now.

This was not revelation as information. This was revelation as encounter. The living Christ did not merely appear before Paul; He confronted Paul with the truth of Himself. He did that by revealing Himself. The revelation itself carried presence. It carried authority. It carried mercy. It carried the love of the God who had not come to destroy Paul in his blindness, but to reveal Himself to him in the very place where Paul’s zeal had become resistance.

That is mercy that cannot be rushed past.

The risen Christ met Paul while Paul was still breathing threats. He met him before Paul understood. He met him before Paul repented with clarity. He met him before Paul could reinterpret his past, defend his future, or repair the damage he had done. The God who is love did not wait for Paul to become safe before revealing Himself. He revealed Himself while Paul was still wrong, still blind, still moving in the wrong direction, still carrying authority to wound those who belonged to Jesus.

That is the nature of the Father revealed through the Son.

The same mercy that touched lepers now stopped a persecutor in the road. The same compassion that restored the broken now interrupted a man whose understanding had become violent. The same love that prayed from the cross, "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34),now spoke clearly to one who had been opposing Him. The Damascus road was not only a revelation of Christ's glory. It was a living experience of God's heart.

Paul would later describe this moment with language that stretches beneath the surface of the event. He did not merely say that Christ was revealed to him. He wrote that God was pleased "to reveal His Son in me" (Gal. 1:16 NASB). That phrase carries the real depth of what happened on that road. Revelation did not remain outside of Paul as something he observed. The Son was revealed in him. The One who appeared to him also began a work within him. The Christ Paul encountered became the Christ who would dwell, form, and speak through him.

This is why Paul's life could never return to what it had been. He had not simply changed his mind about Jesus. He had encountered the Father revealed in the Son, and that revelation entered him as life. The God who is love had made Himself known, and the man who once opposed that revelation became one of its clearest witnesses.

The Damascus road is not merely a dramatic conversion story, but a living witness to the nature of revelation itself.

Paul knew the story, but Christ revealed the Person.

Paul knew the Scriptures, but Christ revealed the Father.

Paul knew the promises, but Christ revealed the God whose mercy had been moving through them all along.

The God who is love became visible in Jesus Christ.

On the road to Damascus, Paul not only encountered Him; he received Him as a living deposit.

Receiving What Revelation Imparts

To grasp something of what has just happened to Saul, we have to go back centuries, to the way Isaiah described this Messiah long before He came.

Isaiah does not begin by telling us only what Messiah will do. He tells us something about how Messiah will perceive. The Spirit of the Lord rests upon Him—the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord—and then Isaiah tells us this: "He shall not judge by what his eyes see, nor decide disputes by what his ears hear" (Isaiah 11:3). His perception is not confined to what natural sight and hearing can tell Him. He sees by the Spirit. He sees according to the Father's heart.

Now hold that beside Saul.

In many ways, Saul had become the very opposite of the Messiah Isaiah described. He judged according to what he believed he could see. He interpreted what stood before him through inherited paradigms he trusted completely. He identified enemies where Christ identified people so completely with Himself that He would ask, "Why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4). Saul was moving against the very people the Spirit-anointed One had bound Himself to.

So the Damascus encounter is not merely a collision between unbelief and belief. It is a collision between two ways of seeing. Saul's perception meets Christ's perception, and everything Saul thought he understood is brought into the light of the One standing before him. What he had been certain he could see could no longer remain unchanged in the presence of what Christ revealed.

Paul's description of what happened to him on the Damascus road contains a phrase that deserves careful attention. Looking back upon the encounter, he does not simply say that God revealed His Son to him. He writes that God was pleased "to reveal His Son in Me" (Gal. 1:16 NASB). At first glance the difference may appear subtle. Yet Paul seems to be reaching for language capable of describing something deeper than an external encounter.

The Christ who confronted him on the Damascus road was certainly before him. The light surrounded him. The voice spoke to him. The revelation unfolded outside of him. Yet when Paul later reflects upon the experience, he points beyond what happened around him and speaks of something taking place within him.

This pattern appears repeatedly throughout Scripture. God's dealings with His people often reach beyond the transfer of information and into the realm of revelation. Moses encounters God at the burning bush and leaves carrying far more than an answer to a question. Isaiah stands before the Lord and emerges marked by what he has seen. Ezekiel receives visions that continue unfolding throughout his prophetic ministry. Daniel receives revelation that exceeds his immediate understanding. John encounters the risen Christ and spends the remainder of Revelation attempting to describe what was unveiled before him. Scripture presents revelation as something received rather than merely observed.

Isaiah 61 continues this prophetic witness concerning Messiah: "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me" (Is. 61:1). These are not merely concepts to be studied. They are revelations concerning a living reality resting upon the One to come. When Jesus stands in the synagogue in Nazareth and reads from Isaiah 61, something remarkable occurs. The prophecy is no longer words upon a scroll. The revelation stands before them in living form.

"Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

The same words are heard by everyone present. The same Christ stands before everyone present. Yet not everyone receives what is being revealed. Some hear. Some marvel. Some question. Some reject. The revelation is present before them all, yet reception is not the same for everyone.

Jesus returns to this reality repeatedly throughout His ministry. "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Matt. 11:15). The statement reaches beyond the act of listening. Many heard His words.

Many witnessed His works. Many stood in the same crowds. Yet something deeper than natural hearing was taking place. The issue was never merely whether words had been spoken. The issue was whether what was being revealed had been received.

This is why Jesus turns to the imagery of seed. The seed remains unchanged. The question concerns the soil receiving it. Some hear without receiving. Some receive only superficially. Some receive but allow competing realities to choke what has been given. Yet some receive in a way that allows the seed to enter and remain. The distinction is vital because revelation, like seed, carries within itself more than information. Everything that will eventually emerge already exists within it, though hidden from view.

Nothing is added to the seed later. The unfolding reveals what was present from the beginning. In much the same way, revelation often arrives complete while understanding unfolds over time. What God imparts may take years, even decades, to unfold within the life receiving it. The revelation is not growing. Our participation in it is.

The same pattern appears throughout the biblical witness. Revelation is not presented as the acquisition of information alone. Revelation involves reception. Spirit receives what Spirit reveals. What God unveils is received in the depths of a person in a way that exceeds natural reasoning, study, or deduction. This does not diminish the value of study or understanding. Rather, it acknowledges that some realities must be revealed before they can be understood.

Perhaps this is why Paul speaks the way he does. Christ was not merely revealed to him.

Christ was revealed in him.

The revelation entered deeper than observation. Something had been received. Something had been imparted. The encounter carried within itself more than information concerning Christ.

It carried the reality of the One being revealed.

This is where revelation reaches deeper than a change in understanding. Revelation is not merely the communication of truth. The One being revealed is also the One being received. What is received through revelation is not information alone, but participation in the life of the One who has made Himself known.

Paul received more than a new understanding of Christ. The revelation brought him into living participation in the One who had revealed Himself.

This may help explain why revelation throughout Scripture so often continues unfolding long after the moment it is received. What God imparts frequently exceeds our immediate ability to comprehend it. Moses did not leave the burning bush understanding everything that had been entrusted to him. Daniel received revelations that left him searching for their meaning. John spent the remainder of Revelation describing what had been shown to him. Paul himself would spend the rest of his life proclaiming, teaching, writing, praying, and laboring within the reality first revealed on the Damascus road.

The revelation was not incomplete. The revelation had been received. Yet the depths of what had been received would continue unfolding throughout the years that followed. What God reveals can be received as a living deposit carrying within itself more than can be immediately understood. The understanding unfolds. The implications unfold. Participation unfolds.

What is received in a moment may require a lifetime to explore.

Received as a Living Deposit

It is tempting to say that the revelation *became* something inside Saul—that the encounter *produced* a deposit of life. But that is not quite it. The revelation did not manufacture life upon arrival. It *carried* life in itself, because it came from the living God. What is revealed by the living One is never inert information. It bears His presence, His life, His nature. It comes in seed form. To receive the revelation is to receive that seed.

This is why we say: The revelation of God as He truly is—the God who is love, revealed in Christ—transforms those who receive Him, because revelation imparts more than information: it carries within it the presence, life, and nature of Christ Himself in seed form. Received as a living deposit, this revelation opens the eyes of the heart to see as He sees. As His perception takes form within us, His expression takes form through us—so that the visible witness of Christ is not the imitation of His actions but the manifestation of His own way of seeing and loving.

Revelation is "received as a living deposit." The life was never ours to generate. It was carried in the revelation itself, and reception is simply the soil agreeing to hold the seed.

Watch how literally Saul's body seems to act this out. He loses his sight. For three days he sits in darkness—the old way of seeing interrupted before a new way of seeing has begun to take form. Then, through Ananias, something like scales falls from his eyes and he sees again. Yet the man who opens his eyes cannot simply return to the sight with which he entered Damascus. He has encountered Christ. His blindness gives physical expression to what is happening within him. One way of seeing is giving way to another. Saul lost one way of seeing and began receiving another. His conversion was not the addition of beliefs to an unchanged man. Something far deeper had begun.

Later in Paul's life his words to the Galatians would be easy to pass over, but this is what gives them their weight. Looking upon a people he loves, a people for whom he has prayed, labored, suffered, and travailed, he writes, "My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you" (Gal. 4:19 NKJV). Of all the things he could have longed for, this is the one. It's not until truth is formed in you. Not until righteousness is formed in you. Not even until maturity is formed in you. But until Christ is formed in you.

The language reaches back to the Damascus road. Paul had not encountered doctrine that day. He didn't suddenly develop a better reading of the Scriptures. He had not merely discovered something he had previously misunderstood. He encountered the living Christ, and the revelation carried within it the presence, the life, and the nature of the One being revealed. What entered

Paul's life was more than new understanding. The revelation carried the living reality of the One who had made Himself known.

To the Romans he speaks of being conformed to the image of God's Son. To the Corinthians, of being transformed into that same image, from glory to glory. Even Peter speaks of becoming partakers of the divine nature.

We may hold these as separate themes, gathered from separate letters, but they are all circling one reality. Christ formed within. His image. His nature. Different words. One mystery—and it is the mystery we are living inside.

The mystery opens through the seed Jesus described in the parable of the soils. A seed carries within itself everything that will one day emerge from it. The roots are hidden within the life of the seed. The branches are hidden within the life of the seed. The fruit is hidden within the life of the seed. What will later become visible is already present within the life itself. Nothing is added later that was absent at the beginning. The life carries within itself its own nature and its own unfolding.

> *"The entrance and unfolding of Your words give light; their unfolding gives understanding (discernment and comprehension) to the simple" (Psalm 119:130 AMP).*

Stay here long enough and Paul's words begin to open.

The revelation received carried the life of Christ. The life received carries His nature. And a life unfolds according to the nature it already holds. We recognize this principle everywhere else in creation. An apple seed does not spend its life striving to become an apple tree. The life within it already carries the nature of the tree it will become. The roots emerge according to that nature. The branches emerge according to that nature. The fruit emerges according to that nature. Every stage of its unfolding bears witness to the life already present within it.

Paul is speaking of something far more profound. The revelation received carries within it the life of Christ Himself. The life received carries His image, His nature, His likeness. What unfolds is not the gradual construction of something absent. What unfolds is the gradual revealing of what was present from the beginning. The life continues expressing the nature it carries. Christ formed within us is not one more season of spiritual growth laid on top of the others. It is the life we received through revelation coming forth according to what it has always carried.

Let's linger here for a minute. A seed does its first work in the dark. Long before anything is visible above the ground, the life is moving downward, into soil, into hiddenness, sending roots into places no eye will ever see. The season that looks like nothing is often the season the life is most at work. We are tempted to measure the forming of Christ by what has become visible, and to grow uneasy when little seems to show. Yet beneath the surface the roots are reaching deeper. The life is establishing itself in ways that cannot yet be seen.

What later appears above the ground is the visible evidence of a work that had been unfolding in hiddenness for far longer than we realized. We are not waiting on a process we must strive to produce. We are being carried by a life that knows how to grow.

And while the roots reach downward into hidden places, what emerges from the seed reaches toward the light. This is the word the Corinthians passage holds that we so often pass by: we are transformed into the same image as we behold Him. There is a profound difference between beholding Christ and striving to become Christlike. One keeps our attention fixed upon ourselves. The other keeps our attention fixed upon Him. One constantly measures progress. The other remains captivated by the One being revealed.

The forming is not the result of our laboring upon ourselves. It is the life within us responding to the One upon whom our attention is fixed. Paul does not say we are transformed by analyzing ourselves. He does not say we are transformed by becoming preoccupied with our shortcomings. He says we are transformed as we behold Him. The life within us responds to the Christ before us. Revelation continues feeding formation. Each unveiling of Christ furthers the forming of Christ. Damascus was not the end of revelation but the beginning of it. The same Christ who was first revealed keeps being revealed, and the life keeps coming forth to meet Him. We are not staring at ourselves, anxious over our progress. We are beholding Him and becoming what we behold.

This is why conformity to His image is spoken of as something we are brought into rather than something we manufacture. This is why transformation moves from glory to glory. This is why Peter can call it participation in the divine nature. None of it describes us straining to become what we are not. It describes a life already given coming into view. The image becoming visible is the image carried within the life. The nature becoming recognizable is the nature carried within the life.

And the word Paul spoke was never spoken to one of us alone. "Until Christ is formed in you"[1]—the you is many. He is not only longing for Christ to be formed within a single heart but among a people, within the shared life they hold together. There is a fullness of the image that no one of us can carry by ourselves. The patience of Christ becomes visible in one life, the tenderness of Christ in another, the steadfastness of Christ in another, until what becomes visible among us is larger than any single life could hold. The seed received in each of us carries the same life, the same nature, the same image. When it comes forth, it comes forth as one image becoming visible among His people.

The Christ revealed in us becomes the Christ formed within us.

The life unfolds.

The nature emerges.

The image becomes recognizable.

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[1] Galatians 4:19 NKJV

And the One who was first received in seed form keeps coming forth—in us and among us—until He becomes increasingly visible within the life, and the lives, that have carried Him all along.

The Testimony Made Visible

Once perception changes, expression changes. The way we see another person shapes the way we live with them. Change the seeing, and the loving cannot remain the same.

This is where Isaiah's second portrait completes the first. If Isaiah 11 shows us how Messiah sees, Isaiah 61 shows us how Messiah loves. The Spirit-anointed One comes to the poor, the brokenhearted, the captive, the wounded, the overlooked. This is more than a description of what He will do. Who receives His attention reveals something of the heart of the God He has come to make known.

And when Jesus stands in the synagogue, reads those very words from Isaiah 61, and says, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21), what Isaiah saw is now standing before them in living form. The seeing of Isaiah 11 and the loving of Isaiah 61 are embodied in one life. The nature of God has become visible in human form.

Now bring this back to Saul. Watch what happens after the scales fall. He does not retreat into private study. Luke tells us that at once he began proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues—the very rooms where his old authority lived—declaring Jesus to be the Son of God (Acts 9:20). The man who came to silence the name now cannot stop announcing it. And across the years that follow, something of the nature revealed in Isaiah 61 becomes recognizable in him: the former persecutor spends himself strengthening, restoring, comforting, and laying down his life for the very people he once hunted.

There is something especially meaningful about that prayer coming from Paul. The man whose own sight had been interrupted on the Damascus road now prays for the eyes of their hearts to be enlightened. Not another road to Damascus, but another opening of the eyes. Paul knew in his own life that truth could be present long before we had eyes to see what was being revealed. Those who begin to see as Christ sees will, in time, begin to love as Christ loves.

In the beginning God made humanity in His own image, after His own likeness—not to know about Him from a distance, but to bear His likeness upon the earth, to carry the resemblance of the Father the way a child carries the face of the one who gave him life. This was the first witness. God made visible in a creature. The earth was meant to learn what He is like by looking at the ones who had come from Him.

That likeness was marred. Not erased—the image remained in humanity—but fractured and clouded, no longer showing clearly the One it was made to reveal. The creature who was meant to make God visible could no longer see Him clearly enough to faithfully bear His likeness. And the earth was left with a witness it could no longer clearly read.

From that loss comes a longing that runs deep within humanity—the ache beneath our search for God, the ancient cry: Show us the Father. We were made to see Him, and we lost His face.

Into that loss, One came who was Himself the image. The image of the invisible God, the exact likeness of the Father, standing upon the earth in a human life. So when Philip said, "Show us the Father,"[1] he gave voice to an ancient longing without knowing that the answer was already standing in front of him.

"Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father."[2]

The revelation was not merely spoken.

The revelation became visible.

For three years the disciples watched the Father revealed in a human life. They watched mercy reach the broken. They watched compassion touch those that others avoided. They watched forgiveness extended to those who they deemed did not deserve it. They watched love refuse to retreat in the face of rejection, betrayal, suffering, and death. The invisible God became visible in Jesus Christ.

Yet the revelation did not end there.

The Christ who revealed the Father did not come merely to stand before humanity. He came to dwell within humanity. The same Christ who revealed Himself to Paul on the Damascus road would come to dwell within Paul. The same Christ who revealed Himself to the apostles would come to dwell within the apostles. The same Christ who revealed Himself throughout the early Ekklesia Assembly would come to dwell within His people.

The image was never meant to remain in just one. From the beginning it was intended to fill the earth.

This is where testimony begins to emerge.

The revelation carried the life. The life carried the nature. The nature unfolded according to the life received. What was first revealed in Christ now begins appearing again through those carrying His life.

This is not merely the story of the apostles. Neither is the story limited to the early Ekklesia Assembly. This is our story as well. The same Christ who revealed Himself then continues revealing Himself now. The same life continues being received. The same nature continues unfolding. The same image continues becoming recognizable.

This is why the New Testament can speak so plainly of Christ dwelling within His people. The apostles never presented themselves as the place where the story arrived and stopped. They bore

[1] John 14:8
[2] John 14:9

witness to a life that would continue in those who received Christ. The life they carried is the same life we carry. The Christ formed within them is the same Christ being formed within us.

Perhaps this is why recognition matters so much in the words of Jesus.

He did not say the world would know His disciples by the precision of their arguments or the sophistication of their understanding. He did not say they would be known by the soundness of their doctrine. Not the reach of their influence. Not even the power of their works. He said, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

Love. Love for one another. The recognition does not come from something the disciples produce; it comes from the living seed received becoming visible. This love is not a discipline they have mastered. It is the nature of the One within them, appearing in the space between them.

Where Christ is formed among a people, His love becomes the very air they share—and the world, watching, sees Him. It's not just that something becomes discernible or something becomes recognizable. Someone becomes recognizable. The life of Christ begins appearing among a people.

The place where this love shows most clearly is not the place we would expect. We watched the Father revealed in the Son across three years of mercy and compassion—but the deepest revelation came last, and it came in the shape of a cross. The clearest picture of what God is like was a love that would not retreat when it cost everything. God so loved that He gave. The witness reached its fullness not in power, but in a love that stayed.

And so the love that becomes recognizable among His people is most visible in the same place. Not in the seasons that cost nothing, but where love does not withdraw—where it keeps loving through rejection, through betrayal, through being misunderstood, through suffering it did not earn. This is the love that makes Christ unmistakable, because it is His own love, taking the shape it took in Him.

Paul knew this from the inside. "I have been crucified with Christ," he said, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2: 20). Paul was not describing a self he had finally overcome. He was describing what happens when Christ becomes increasingly visible. The self that once seemed so large slowly gives way to Someone greater. It simply has less and less room—the way shadow has less room as light fills a space. "He must increase," said another witness, "but I must decrease," (John 3:30) and he said it not with grief but with the gladness of a friend who has heard the bridegroom's voice. This is the quiet, receding side of the forming of Christ. Not striving. Not self-erasure. Only Christ filling the room until He is the one most easily seen.

This is what we find when we look at the early Ekklesia Assembly in the book of Acts. We see generosity, unity, compassion, shared life, prayer, worship, mutual care. It is tempting to stop there, at the expressions, and to wonder how we might reproduce them. But beneath every one of them stands something deeper. The believers were not creating a healthier community. The life of Christ received within them was becoming visible among them.

The same mercy that had walked through Galilee now moved among His people.

The same compassion that had touched lepers now moved among His people.

The same love that had forgiven enemies now moved among His people.

The same life was expressing the same nature.

The testimony had become visible.

This is why the testimony of Jesus stands at the heart of all of this. Revelation is not an end in itself. Formation is not an end in itself. Even spiritual growth is not an end in itself. Everything moves toward witness. Everything moves toward visibility. Everything moves toward the unveiling of Christ.

The Father revealed Himself in the Son.

The Son revealed Himself in His people.

The life was received.

The nature unfolded.

The testimony became visible.

And through a people carrying His life together, the God who is love continues revealing Himself to the earth. The face humanity lost is being given back to the world—and the witness that fell silent in a garden is finding its voice again, not in one Man only, but in a people learning to carry His life together.

The question Philip asked has never truly disappeared.

Humanity is still asking it.

What is God like?

And whenever the life of Christ becomes visible among His people, the answer is seen once again.

Not pointed to.

Seen.

The Damascus road did not end for Paul when he rose from the ground. The revelation continued unfolding throughout the remainder of his life. The Christ who revealed Himself to Paul continued revealing Himself within Paul. The life continued unfolding. The nature continued emerging. The image continued becoming recognizable. What had been received through revelation continued finding expression throughout his life.

This is why Paul could speak of Christ being formed within. The revelation he received was never intended to remain a fond memory. The life carried within that revelation continued unfolding according to the nature it contained. What began as encounter became formation. What began as revelation became likeness. The Christ revealed in him became the Christ formed within him.

Paul did not spend the remainder of his life searching for a greater revelation. He spent the remainder of his life exploring the depths of the One already revealed. The revelation had been received; the reality it unveiled was inexhaustible.

The Christ who revealed Himself to Paul on that road was not gradually becoming more real. Paul was gradually discovering the depths of the reality he had already received. What had entered his life through revelation continued opening, deepening, and expressing itself through the years that followed. The revelation was received in a moment. Its unfolding would occupy a lifetime.

This is why Paul's letters read the way they do. They are not the writings of a man searching for Christ. They are the writings of a man living within a revelation already received, continually discovering the depths of the One who had made Himself known.

The God who is love has not merely made Himself known through Jesus Christ. He continues revealing Himself through the life He imparts to those who receive Him. The revelation carries more than information. It carries life. The life carries His nature. And the nature unfolds according to the life received.

Perhaps this is why Paul spent the remainder of his life speaking so often of Christ Himself. Everything returned to Him.

Christ revealed.
Christ received.
Christ formed within.

Between revelation and visible witness stands a pair of new eyes.

The revelation of the God who is love is received, not as information, but as a living seed. That seed opens the eyes of the heart to see as Christ sees. And what is seen through His eyes is, in time, loved through His hands—until the life of God finds expression through an ordinary person toward the broken, the captive, the overlooked, the enemy.

The invisible God became visible in Christ. Now the life of Christ becomes visible through His people. The God who is love becomes known.

What happens when people being formed by this same revelation begin sharing life together?

CHRIST FORMED WITHIN

> *The life received through revelation continues unfolding within us until the nature of Christ becomes recognizable through those who share His life.*

The Marks of Shared Life

There is a difference between Christ revealed and Christ formed, though the two can never be separated. One belongs to encounter. The other belongs to habitation. One changes everything in a moment. The other unfolds over a lifetime. Paul knew both realities. The Christ revealed in him became the Christ formed within him. What entered by way of revelation did not remain confined to that first encounter. The life received continued unfolding until the nature of the One received became visible through the life now sharing Him. In time, every shared life leaves its mark.

Some things only become recognizable through shared life.

We spot them everywhere. Friends who have walked together for decades begin to see the world through a common eye. A husband and wife who have shared a long life finish one another's sentences, carry the same instincts, soften in the same places. Children carry—in their voices and their hands and the way they hold silence—the unmistakable impress of the home that formed them. None of this can be manufactured. No one plans for this to happen. It gathers the way a riverbed takes the shape of the water that has run through it long enough.

And the longer the life is shared, the deeper the marks become.

If this happens within the limitations of two human lives that only ever overlap at the edges, what happens when the Life being shared is Christ Himself?

But the comparison only carries us as far as the threshold. When two people share a life, the marking is mutual and partial; each leaves its mark on the other, yet neither is remade altogether. But the Life that came to us in revelation did not come to stand beside us and exchange influences. He came to indwell. What entered was not the example of Christ but the Person of Christ—not a pattern to be admired from across a distance, but a Life given to be shared from within.

Much of the language handed down to us has taught us to think of our life in Christ as becoming like Him. There is truth in that, and we will return to it. But for now, it is enough to notice how easily the language can turn us in the wrong direction—back toward ourselves, toward our effort, toward the task of copying a Life that, by its very nature, can only be received.

The witness of Scripture moves in the other direction. Paul does not speak of a Christ who remains outside us as a model to imitate. He speaks of Christ dwelling within, Christ revealed within, Christ living within, Christ being formed within. The Christ who was revealed does not remain confined to the moment of revelation. Received within His people, He continues unfolding His own life. And the life He shares does not remain hidden. In time, it leaves its mark.

Until Christ Is Formed in You

The language Paul reaches for in Galatians is more than that of a teacher. “My little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you” (Gal. 4:19). He does not write as a man arranging doctrine. He sounds like a woman in labor—and not for the first time. “Again,” he says. He had travailed once to bring them to birth, and now he travails a second time,

for something further, something still unfinished in them. His words carry an ache he does not try to hide. Something has begun in these believers and has not yet come to term. The revelation they received was real, but it was never meant to end with seeing. The Christ who revealed Himself also gave Himself. What entered through revelation did not come as a memory to be preserved, but as a Life to be shared. And wherever life is truly shared, it leaves its mark. What is shared in time becomes visible. Paul's gaze has moved beyond their conversion, beyond the joy of their first encounter, and come to rest on something still taking shape in the dark.

The initial revelation did not merely tell them who Christ was. It brought them into the life of the One being revealed. This is why Paul's anguish reaches beyond their first encounter with the gospel. He is not laboring for the preservation of an idea, or the correction of a doctrine alone, but for the full inward consequence of receiving Christ Himself. What came to them through revelation was not information about a distant Lord. The Revealed One had entered, and because He had entered, something holy was still taking form within them.

Notice what his burden is not. It is not that they would know more, or become more disciplined, more impressive, more useful. His burden has a name, and the name is Christ—the same Christ who was revealed to them, the same Christ they received, the same Christ now dwelling within them. Paul has seen what we are slow to see: the Christ who enters by revelation does not lie still once received. His Life goes on unfolding in those who share it.

This is the mystery Paul says was hidden for ages and is now made known—and when he finally speaks its content, it is breathtakingly small and infinitely large at once: *Christ in you, the hope of glory.*[1] Not Christ above you. Not Christ before you as an example. Not even Christ for you, though He is gloriously that. Christ *in* you. The Life that has entered carries within itself everything it intends to become, the way a seed carries the whole of the tree.

We know this from our own beginnings. No child labors to gather life within the womb. Life is given, and life unfolds—hidden, unhurried, and not without travail. Whatever is alive already carries within itself everything it has been given to become. This is the image Paul reaches for. The word he chooses—*formed*—is not the shaping of an outer likeness, but the quiet emergence of an inward life: Christ taking form within His people. It is intimate language because the reality itself is intimate. He has not left us with instructions. He has given us Himself.

This is why the New Testament turns us, again and again, toward abiding rather than effort. Jesus spoke of branches remaining in the vine because fruit was never the branch's achievement to begin with. A branch does not strain to bear what only the vine can give. It remains where the life is already flowing, and the life brings forth what belongs to its own nature. Christ did not come to improve the branch. He came to be the Vine—to share His own life so fully that what appears is quietly, unmistakably His. Life shared leaves its mark, and fruit quietly bears witness to the life being shared.

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[1] Col. 1:27

Paul knew this in his own body. The man who once carried letters of arrest against the followers of Jesus became, in time, a living witness to the One he had hunted. No education accounts for such a change. No reform of character can explain it. The Christ revealed on the Damascus road did not remain behind as a memory. What was revealed was received, and what was received continued its hidden work within him. The Life he encountered became the Life he carried, until the persecutor was so deeply inhabited that he could say, "It is no longer I who live" (Gal. 2:20).

Perhaps this is why Paul speaks so naturally of Christ being formed within. He does not treat revelation and formation as separate realities. The Christ revealed on the Damascus road continued making Himself known long after the light had faded from the sky. What entered through revelation did not fall silent once received. The Life Paul carried became the ongoing disclosure of the One he had encountered. Revelation had not ended. It had simply gone inward. The Christ who first made Himself known continued to make Himself known through a life now shared.

There is a difference between knowing that a life has been given and discovering what that life contains. A bride may truly love the one she has received, yet years of shared life will reveal dimensions of him that could never have been known on the day of her wedding. The covenant was complete from the beginning; the life within the covenant had simply not yet come to light. What was first received in joy and wonder becomes familiar through shared life. So it is with Christ. The revelation is real. The encounter is real. Yet the life received through revelation continues unfolding long after the first moment has passed. Life shared leaves its mark.

And this is our story as well. Revelation opens the door. Reception welcomes Him in. But the Christ who enters does not remain at the threshold. The One who revealed Himself continues sharing His own life with those who receive Him.

The Fruit Reveals the Life

There is something remarkable about the way Paul speaks of Christ. Years after Damascus, he does not sound like a man preserving the memory of an encounter, but like a man still living from One who remains present. The Christ revealed to him had become the Christ now dwelling within him. This is why Paul's language keeps moving inward: Christ in you, Christ dwelling in your hearts, Christ formed within. He speaks this way because revelation, once received, does not remain external. It becomes a shared life—and shared life, in time, begins to show.

Perhaps this is what makes Galatians 4:19 so arresting. Paul does not say that greater knowledge is being formed in them. He does not say stronger discipline is being formed in them. He does not even say maturity is being formed in them. Christ is being formed in them. In Paul's mind, what is at stake is not their improvement, but Christ's formation within them. The Christ they received is continuing His work within them. The One who entered through revelation is still making Himself known through the life He shares with them.

A bride receives her husband in a moment. A wife discovers, over years of shared life, the one she received on the day of her covenant. The covenant is complete from the beginning, yet the knowing is not. Time discloses what a single day could never contain—faithfulness under strain, kindness in

needful hours, strength revealed only by what must be borne. Neither the covenant nor the husband has changed. Yet the one she received becomes more deeply known through the life they share.

There is something here that exceeds the comparison itself. The life Christ shares with us is not life alongside us, but life within us. And so the wonder deepens: the Christ we received is not spent in the moment we receive Him. Years later we find ourselves meeting depths of patience we had not yet seen mercies reaching into places we did not know they could reach. What was first given through revelation continues becoming known through the life we share with Him.

What is true in shared life is true in life itself: what is given at the beginning may remain hidden for a time, yet it unfolds according to what it already contains. A seed carries within itself a future hidden from immediate sight. The life is present long before the fruit appears. The roots are present long before they are seen. The future is present long before it becomes visible. The seed does not create its future. It reveals what it contains. So it is with Christ. The life received through revelation carries within itself everything it intends to become. What was first received in mystery gradually becomes visible through shared life. The fruit does not create the life. The fruit reveals the life.

The wonder deepens still when Peter reaches for language that seems almost beyond speech. He speaks of becoming partakers of the divine nature. The words themselves are staggering. The One who revealed Himself has not remained outside us. He has given Himself to be shared. We are no longer standing outside His life looking in. We are brought to partake of a life that did not begin with us. And because His life is being shared, the Christ we first received continues becoming known from within.

We often speak of becoming like Christ, and there is truth in the phrase. Yet the witness of Scripture keeps pressing us toward something deeper: Christ in you, the hope of glory; partakers of the divine nature; Christ dwelling in your hearts through faith[1]. Again and again, the language turns inward. Perhaps this is what the prophets were straining toward all along—a new heart, a new spirit, My Spirit within you. The promise was never merely that God's people would be shown a better way to live. It reached further in. The written law could describe life, point toward life, and command life, but it could not impart the life it named. Everything shifts from what stands before us to the life now dwelling within us.

The One who revealed Himself now shares His own life with His people. And because His life is being shared, the Christ we received continues becoming known from within. This is why Jesus speaks of abiding. A branch does not labor to be fruitful. It remains where the life is already flowing, and the fruit comes in its season. In time, what is visible bears witness to what is hidden. The marks begin to show, and the life being shared is quietly made known.

Perhaps this is where we begin to understand why everything that once governed us slowly yields. Not because we have learned to manage ourselves well. Not because fear has been mastered,

[1] Col. 1:27; 2 Peter 1:4; Eph. 3:17

ambition subdued, or every wound finally brought under control. Something deeper is taking place. The Christ we received continues making Himself known. And as He becomes more deeply known, everything that once occupied the center begins giving way to His life. Fear gives way before His peace. Wounds yield before His mercy. Self-protection yields before His love. Ambition yields before His kingdom. The yielding is not the source of the life. The yielding is the evidence that another Life is now present.

Slowly, often too quietly to notice in the moment, the marks begin to appear. A word that would once have felt sharp no longer cuts. A circumstance that used to produce fear is met with a peace we did not generate through our own effort. A hand that once closed tightly around what was ours opens toward another. Not perfectly. Not all at once. But undeniably. The responses of Another beginning to surface where our own once ruled.

So it is with Christ. Wherever His life is truly shared, His nature will not remain hidden forever.

The Marks of Christ

Life shared leaves its mark. And in time, those marks become recognizable—not because they draw attention to the one carrying them, but because they bear the resemblance of the life that produced them. What becomes recognizable is Christ Himself. Not because we have succeeded in becoming something new, but because Christ continues being Himself in those who share His life. Not because we have mastered a discipline, gathered enough knowledge, or learned how to present ourselves a certain way. Recognition comes for the oldest reason there is: whatever is truly alive in time reveals its own nature.

It is no accident that Scripture so often speaks in the language of fruit. Fruit is not an accomplishment; it is evidence. The apple tree does not strain to prove itself; its fruit simply tells the truth about the life within it. And it is worth noticing what Paul actually wrote. He did not list the fruits of the Spirit, as though we were assembling a collection of separate virtues. He wrote the fruit—one fruit, in the singular—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.[1] Not nine achievements. One Life, seen from many angles. One Person, becoming visible.

And what makes this fruit so beautiful is that we have seen it before. We see it in Him. Long before these marks appeared in us, they were revealed in Him. We saw patience sit among disciples who misunderstood Him at nearly every turn. We saw kindness move toward the ones the world had written off. We saw gentleness stoop to restore Peter after Peter had cursed and denied Him. We saw goodness go out toward the sick, the unclean, and the overlooked. We saw faithfulness set its face toward Jerusalem and refuse to turn back. We saw love remain on the cross when it could easily have come down.

[1] Galatians 5:22–23

The fruit of the Spirit does not introduce us to a new kind of life. It is the same Life we behold in Jesus surfacing in those who share it. It is the recognizable evidence of His life making His home within us.

There is something deeply familiar about these marks. We do not meet them as strangers. We recognize them. Before patience ever appeared in us, we saw it move through Him. Before mercy began softening our own responses, we already received it from Him. Before love took root in our lives, we already encountered it at the cross. This is why the life of Christ becoming visible within His people carries such quiet power. We are not witnessing the arrival of something unknown. We are recognizing the continued presence of Someone we have already met. The same life that revealed the Father in the Son is now revealing the Son through those who share His life.

What is alive may remain hidden through long seasons, but it cannot remain concealed forever. In time, it gives its nature away. This is the quiet movement beneath the whole of our life in Christ. What was received through revelation was never meant to remain an inward possession alone. The life received becomes the life expressed. What was first hidden within gradually comes into view. And as His life finds expression through those who share it, His nature becomes recognizable once again.

This is part of what Paul means by being conformed to the image of the Son. The aim was never the formation of religious qualities considered apart from Christ Himself. The aim is that the Life we share with Him would become recognizable as His—that what was made visible in the Son would become visible again through His people. It is one Life, shared among many, and He remains the firstborn among those brought to partake of it.[1]

But there is a deeper word here, hidden in the very phrase we have been using: the marks of Christ. Near the close of Galatians, Paul gives the phrase an unexpected weight: he bears on his body the marks of Jesus.[2] The word is stigmata—the brand, the scar, the wound. These were not the marks of Paul's accomplishment. They were the print of the cross worn into a man. And this tells us something we might rather not hear and cannot afford to miss: the clearest mark of a life shared with Christ is the shape of His cross beginning to appear in us. The patience that costs us. The love that keeps its place when it would be easier to come down. The mercy that bears a wound and does not return it. These are not the soft ornaments of a comfortable faith. They are the marks of Christ—and they are cross-shaped, because He is.

This is why the deepest marks are so seldom the dramatic ones. They do not announce themselves. They do not ask to be seen. A patient answer where rage once ruled. Mercy where retaliation would have been easier. Peace holding steady where everything urged panic. Compassion standing where indifference used to stand. Such things carry the unmistakable fragrance of His presence precisely because they bear the unmistakable shape of His self-giving.

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[1] Romans 8:29
[2] Galatians 6:17

None of this diminishes gifts, or service, or the work of the body. It gives them their proper place. We have already seen that not everything which appears spiritual truly reveals Christ—that brilliance may be present where His nature is absent. Here we meet the quieter and more searching truth on the other side: the clearest witness to Christ is often nothing more dramatic than His own Life becoming recognizable in an ordinary person who has shared it long enough.

Yet this work was never meant to remain within a single life. The Christ who shares His life with us is sharing that same life throughout His people. The patience appearing in one brother, the mercy becoming visible in one sister, the faithfulness rising in another life—these are not separate works calling attention to separate people. They are the recognizable marks of the same Christ unfolding His life throughout His body. What He is forming within us one by one is being formed among His people together. And because it is one Life being shared among many, every recognizable mark becomes another witness to the One who lives within us all. The longer His life is shared, the more these marks appear—not as performance, not as an identity we assemble, not as proof of maturity, but simply because Christ goes on being Himself in those who share His life. The goal was never to become impressive. The goal was always to become recognizable.

Seeing the Marks of His Life

Christ formed within us and Christ made visible through us are not separate realities. Paul gives us the pattern. “Beholding… the glory of the Lord, we are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory” (2 Cor. 3:18 NKJV).

As we behold Him, we are transformed into His likeness. The transformation does not come by striving, but by seeing—and as we are changed, the One we behold becomes more deeply known. Seeing and being formed are not two separate gifts. They are one Life, drawing us deeper into itself. This is why Paul could pray for people already converted, that the eyes of their hearts would be opened. Some realities stand directly before us, unseen, until Christ Himself unveils them.

And what we begin to see, first, is God Himself. The more familiar Christ becomes within us, the less foreign the Father’s heart appears. What once stood before us in mystery begins to come clear. The mercy we received, the patience we encountered, the steadfast love that moved toward us in Christ no longer feel far away. They become familiar because His life is now being shared within us.

The God we once feared from a distance becomes the Father whose face we have now seen in the Son. The God we could not make sense of becomes recognizable in Jesus Christ. What was once given in revelation continues to unfold: the more familiar His nature grows in us, the more clearly we recognize the Father whose perfect image He is. What was revealed in the Son is now being shared through the Son. And the longer His life is shared, the more clearly we recognize the very heart that first moved toward us in Jesus Christ.

We begin to see ourselves differently as well. What was present from the beginning becomes increasingly recognizable, much like the family likeness that quietly emerges through years of shared life. Old identities lose their authority. Old accusations lose their power to name us. We

stop reading our lives primarily through our failures, our successes, our wounds, our histories—not because we have thought better of ourselves, but because Christ in us has become more real than the story we used to tell. The truest thing about us is no longer what we have done. It is Who now lives here.

And we begin to see others through the eyes of the Life we share. It grows steadily harder to reduce a person to the category we once kept them in. We start to see the people around us as those for whom Christ gave Himself—and when that is what we see, mercy comes more easily, and patience, and the willingness to let grace cost us something. The marks His Life leaves within us quietly reshape the way we look at everyone outside us.

Even the gathered Ekklesia Assembly comes into focus. We stop seeing a collection of individuals assembled around shared opinions and begin to recognize a people sharing one Life. The body of Christ stops being a doctrine and becomes a thing we can see. For the same Christ being formed in us is being formed in our brothers and sisters too, and we start to find His fingerprints everywhere among them—the patience we did not expect, the kindness that meets us, the faithfulness that holds, the mercy we receive. Each one is the same Life, recognized again.

And the seeing reaches further still—out past ourselves and past the Ekklesia Assembly, into the world. We begin to look at it without fear, without despair, without surrendering our sight to the noise that competes for it. We see, instead, through Christ Himself: the One who fills all things, who is reconciling all things to Himself, whose Life keeps moving wherever He is received.

Perhaps this is among the most beautiful marks of all. Life shared leaves its mark, even upon the way we see. The more His Life is formed in us, the more clearly we see; and the more clearly we see, the more readily we recognize Him. What looked ordinary begins to show His handiwork. What was hidden comes into view. The Life we share does not only leave its mark upon us. It hands back to us the eyes to recognize the One whose Life we are sharing.

Life shared leaves its mark.

And among the most beautiful of those marks is the gift of seeing with new eyes.

What began in revelation did not end there. The Christ who reveals Himself gives Himself. And the Christ who is received goes on sharing His Life with those who receive Him. What entered in a moment keeps moving long after the moment has passed. It unfolds across a lifetime.

We were never left to reproduce a Christ withheld from us, never handed the impossible task of manufacturing His nature through our own effort. The One who called us into fellowship with Himself shared His own Life with us. What He imparts, He goes on unfolding. What He plants, He goes on growing. What He reveals, He goes on forming.

The revelation continues because the Revealer remains present.

The marks were never the goal. The Life was. Yet wherever His Life is truly shared, His likeness begins to appear. Life shared leaves its mark. And in time, the marks become recognizable. Not because we have become impressive, but because Christ has become visible.

But Christ never meant His Life to become visible in isolated lives alone. He is the Firstborn among many. The Life being shared within us is the same Life being shared among us. The patience appearing in one life, the mercy becoming visible in another, the love that bears the unmistakable shape of His cross—none of these belong to us alone. They are the marks of one Life being shared throughout a people.

And if life shared leaves its mark in a single life, what becomes visible when that same Life is shared across a whole people?

CHRIST RECOGNIZED

> *The life of Christ formed within His people becomes a visible witness through which His nature is made recognizable to the world.*

Where the King Is Recognized

A person can spend years hearing words such as kingdom, revival, apostolic, prophetic, discipleship, presence, and community while still wondering what any of it actually looks like when it becomes real. Not theoretically. Not doctrinally. Not positionally. What does it look like when the life of Christ is actually present among a people?

For many people, 'kingdom' has become a replacement word. Some use it because they are dissatisfied with institutional church language. Some use it because it sounds larger and more dynamic. Some use it because it communicates mission, purpose, or influence. But often, if you ask ten people what they mean by 'kingdom,' you will receive ten different answers. The word itself begins carrying whatever meaning the speaker wants it to carry.

The difficulty is not that definitions do not exist. A person may be able to describe the kingdom while remaining uncertain how to recognize it when it is standing before them.

Definitions can tell us what something means. Recognition comes when the reality itself becomes visible. And the question before us is not merely what the kingdom means. The question is how the kingdom becomes recognizable.

Once we ask how the kingdom becomes recognizable, we are pressed back to Christ Himself. We can no longer hide behind terminology, or behind movements, or behind doctrinal labels. We are left with a single question: what would the world encounter if Christ were truly living among us?

When Jesus walked among people, He did not merely teach about the kingdom. He revealed the King. The mercy they encountered revealed the King. The compassion they encountered revealed

the King. The love they encountered revealed the King. The patience they encountered revealed the King. Again and again, the nature of the King became visible. And wherever the King became visible, the kingdom became recognizable.

When Jesus revealed the kingdom, He made His Father's nature visible. The kingdom was not becoming recognizable because people had mastered kingdom vocabulary. The kingdom was becoming recognizable because the nature of the King was becoming visible.

Christ is formed within His people so that Christ may be recognized through His people. The kingdom becomes recognizable wherever the nature of the King is made visible through His people.

Not everything that uses kingdom language reveals the kingdom.

Because the kingdom is ultimately recognized where the King is recognized.

And the King is recognized where His nature becomes visible.

A Kingdom Question, a Witness Answer

When the disciples gathered around Jesus in the final moments before His ascension, they asked a question concerning the kingdom. It was not a strange question. Everything they had witnessed seemed to point toward it. They had walked with the Messiah. They had watched the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the sick restored, demons driven out, and the dead raised. They had watched authority unlike anything they had ever known. They had heard Him speak repeatedly concerning the kingdom of God. Now, standing before the risen Christ, they asked the question that seemed to gather all their hopes into a single moment.

"Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6 NASB).

The answer Jesus gave has echoed through the centuries. Yet perhaps its very familiarity has hidden its significance from us. The disciples asked a kingdom question, but Jesus answered with a witness answer. He spoke of the Holy Spirit. He spoke of power. And He told them that they would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

At first glance, the two subjects appear unrelated. One concerns a kingdom. The other concerns witnesses. Yet the more we sit with His answer, the more we begin to see that they are inseparably connected.

The disciples wanted to know when the kingdom would appear.

Jesus spoke of how it would become recognizable.

The kingdom was never intended to be known merely through explanation. It was intended to be recognized through witness. This is why Jesus did not leave behind a definition alone. He left behind a people who would receive His Spirit.

The Father was revealed in the Son. The invisible God became visible in Jesus Christ. Those who encountered Jesus encountered more than His teaching. They encountered His nature. They

encountered mercy. They encountered compassion. They encountered patience. They encountered holiness. They encountered the very character of God taking visible form before them.

Now Jesus speaks of a witness that will continue after His departure.

Not a different witness.

The same witness.

The same life that revealed the Father would now be shared with His people. The same life that had become visible in the Son would now take form within those carrying His Spirit. What had been gathered into one Man would now be entrusted to a people. The witness would continue because His life would continue—not as a memory of Him, but as His presence taking form among them.

This is where our understanding of witness begins to deepen. We often think of witness primarily as something we do. We witness by speaking. We witness by sharing testimony. We witness by proclaiming what we know to be true. Yet beneath all of those things stands something deeper still.

A witness is evidence.

A witness makes a reality known.

A witness makes something previously unseen recognizable.

Evidence does not strain to convince. It simply presents what is, and the truth becomes plain to the one who sees.

The witness Jesus spoke of was never meant to be reduced to words alone. Words can testify about Christ. A witness reveals Christ. Words can describe His life. A witness makes His life visible. Words can announce the kingdom. A witness makes the reality of the kingdom recognizable.

When the life of Christ takes recognizable form among His people, something extraordinary begins to happen. The world is no longer merely hearing about Him. The world is encountering evidence of Him.

The witness is not merely what becomes visible.

The witness is what becomes recognizable.

Many things, after all, can become visible. Activity can become visible. Power can become visible. Knowledge can become visible. Gifts can become visible. Influence can become visible. Yet visibility by itself does not create witness. The question is always the same: what is being recognized?

For visibility shows only that something is present. Recognition means that Someone has been met. The world may see a great deal and still recognize nothing of Christ. But where His life has taken form among His people, what the world meets is no longer a report about Him, nor a claim concerning Him, but Him—and He is recognized.

The kingdom becomes recognizable where the King becomes recognizable. And the King becomes recognizable where His life has taken form among His people.

The witness, then, is not merely what we proclaim about Christ. The witness is what becomes recognizable when His life takes form among His people. We do not simply testify concerning Him. We become evidence of Him. And where His life is recognized, the reality of His kingdom is recognized as well.

Before the Works of the King

If the witness is what becomes recognizable, then everything depends upon what we expect to recognize.

When many people hear the phrase visible witness, their minds move immediately toward activity. Gifts. Manifestations. Signs. Wonders. Supernatural encounters. These become the assumed evidence that Christ is present and the kingdom has come near. We look for what is happening. We look for what is occurring. We look for what can be seen.

A person may witness an action and still remain uncertain concerning the nature of the one performing it. The two are related, but they are not the same.

This distinction appears long before the arrival of Messiah.

When Isaiah is given revelation concerning the coming Branch, the prophet is not first shown what Messiah will do. He is first shown who Messiah is. Wisdom and understanding rest upon Him. Counsel and strength rest upon Him. Knowledge and the fear of the Lord rest upon Him. He delights in righteousness. He judges with equity. He stands in faithfulness. Here, before Isaiah sees the activity of Messiah, he is introduced to the character of Messiah. [Is. 11]

Only later does the prophet begin to see the activity flowing from that nature. Good news is proclaimed. The brokenhearted are healed. Captives are set free. Mourners are comforted. Ruins are rebuilt. Restoration begins moving outward into the world. [Is. 61]

The order is significant. The prophet is first introduced to the King before he is introduced to the works of the King. Character is revealed before activity. Nature is revealed before expression.

Not because gifts are unimportant. But because activity alone does not necessarily reveal the nature of the One who is acting.

Not everything that appears spiritual reveals Christ Himself. Some things reveal activity. Some things reveal ability. Some things reveal gifting. Some things reveal power. Yet the life of Christ formed within His people reveals His nature.

A manifestation may reveal that God is acting. Love reveals what God is like. A gift may reveal His power. Mercy reveals His heart. Prophecy may reveal His voice. Patience reveals His character. Healing may reveal His authority. Compassion reveals His nature. Both matter. But they are not the same thing.

This is why the visible witness of Christ cannot be measured merely by what occurs among His people. The deeper question is what becomes recognizable through what occurs. Witness does not simply make known that God is active. Witness makes Christ Himself known.

The world may stand in awe of power and still remain uncertain concerning His nature. It may marvel at activity and still fail to recognize His heart.

Recognition begins where the nature of Christ becomes visible.

By This All Will Know

If recognition begins where the nature of Christ becomes visible, then everything now turns upon a single question. Where does that nature take visible form among His people?

We are given the answer on the night before He suffered.

Gathered with those who had walked with Him, hours from the cross, Jesus does not leave them a final strategy. He does not rehearse the signs they are to perform. He gives them something He calls new.

“A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also are to love one another” (John 13:34 BSB).

And then He speaks the words that press directly upon everything we have been asking.

“By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35 BSB).

By this. Not by your power. Not by your knowledge. Not by the wonders worked among you. By this—by the love that takes form among you—all will know.

Here Jesus tells us where His nature will become recognizable. Not first in what any one of His own can do, but in what becomes visible between them. The witness He names is not a solitary brilliance. It is a shared life. The love of Christ, taking form among His people, becomes the sign by which He is known.

We must not pass too quickly over the measure He gives. He does not say, love one another as you are able. He does not say, love one another as the world has loved you. He says, as I have loved you. The love that becomes the witness is not a love His people generate. It is a love they have first received. It is His own love, given to them, now taking form among them.

This is why the witness remains His and never theirs. They do not produce the sign. They carry it.

And so the focus shifts—from observation to encounter. The question is no longer whether we possess certain qualities. The question is what the world meets when it draws near to a people carrying His life.

The language itself must change.

Not: we are patient. But: the world encounters the patience of Christ.

Not: we are merciful. But: the world encounters the mercy of Christ.

Not: we forgive. But: the world encounters the forgiveness of Christ.

The deeper reality is that the life of Christ—His patience, mercy, and forgiveness—has become visible among them.

The difference is not strictly grammatical. To say we are patient turns the attention toward us. To say the world encounters the patience of Christ keeps Him at the center of everything that becomes visible. The virtue is never ours to display. It is His life, taking form among us, met by a watching world.

And notice where He asks this love to take form. He does not say, love Me. He says, love one another. The command turns His people toward each other. The nature of Christ becomes visible not in how a people regard the One they cannot see, but in how they bear with the ones they can.

For it is one thing to speak of the patience of Christ. It is another for that patience to become visible in how a people endure one another. It is one thing to speak of His mercy. It is another for that mercy to become visible in how they forgive one another. It is one thing to speak of His love. It is another for that love to hold together a people who, by every natural measure, would have drifted apart.

This is where the world was given to look. Not at a teaching about love, but at love itself, taking form in the spaces between those who carry His life. The nature of Christ is not recognized in isolation. It is recognized in communion. What the world could not see in any one of us, it begins to recognize in what we become together.

So the witness is not first a wonder the world observes. It is a love the world encounters. And the love it encounters is His.

The world encounters the nature of Christ through His people.

The Earth Beginning to See Again

The witness described in Acts is doing more than revealing the life of an early community. It is revealing the restoration of something far older.

When Luke describes believers sharing their lives together, carrying one another's burdens, giving freely to one another, breaking bread together, and walking in gladness and sincerity of heart, he is not merely describing what they are doing. He is bearing witness to what has become recognizable among them. The life once visible in Jesus is becoming visible through a people. The nature once encountered in the Son is appearing again within the earth.

This is why the witness carries such weight. What we see in Acts is not an introduction to a new reality. From the beginning, humanity was created in the image of God. Humanity was created to bear witness to the One whose image it carried. The creation itself was meant to encounter

something true concerning its Creator through those who bore His likeness. Hidden within humanity's creation was a vocation. Humanity was created to reveal God.

Yet what was created to reveal Him no longer revealed Him clearly. The image remained. But the witness became obscured. The vocation remained. But the revelation became distorted.

Then Christ appeared. The image of the invisible God. The One who did not merely speak about the Father but revealed the Father. Whoever had seen Him had seen the Father. For the first time since humanity's beginning, the earth looked upon a human life and saw perfectly what it had always been intended to see. The witness stood before them. Not distorted. Not fragmented. Not obscured.

Though the witness stood before them in Christ, the wonder of the gospel is that the story does not end there. The Christ who reveals the Father now shares His life with His people. The image once revealed perfectly in the Son is now being formed within those who belong to Him. What was visible in Christ alone is becoming visible through a people carrying His life together. This is what the author of Acts is bearing witness to.

This is what the visible witness of Christ ultimately reveals. Image-bearing restored. The earth beginning to see again what humanity was always intended to reveal.

The Father revealed in the Son.

The Son revealed through His people.

The life of Christ becoming recognizable within the earth once again.

The Christ who revealed the Father did not merely come to be admired, studied, or remembered. He came to share His life. The life that revealed the Father in Him now reveals the Father through a people carrying that same life together.

What began as revelation has become witness.

The world is no longer merely hearing about Him.

The world is encountering evidence of Him.

The life we share does not come to us empty of character. It is the life of Christ. And because it is His life, what takes form among us cannot finally be understood by what appears impressive, powerful, or even genuinely spiritual. The deeper question is whether what is becoming visible bears the nature of the One whose life we share.

This brings us somewhere more searching than the reality of participation alone. Gifts may be given. Grace may be moving. Spiritual realities may be genuinely present. Yet the life of Christ carries within itself the character of Christ, and Scripture continually brings us back to the place where that character becomes recognizable.

We are not only asking whether Christ is being expressed through His people. We are asking what Christ looks like when His life takes form among us.

ENTRUSTED

> *Christ has entrusted His people with the sacred responsibility of representation, that through their lives His nature, His presence, and His kingdom might become visible among His people and recognizable to the world.*

The Steward and the House

Something I have learned to trust over the years is that whenever the Lord begins unveiling Himself through His Word—

hold on and wait.

There is usually more.

There are moments when the Lord unveils something with such beauty that it seems to fill the whole landscape. For a time, we witness it as though we have seen the fullness of the matter. It feels complete. It feels expansive. It feels as though nothing more could be added. Yet as we continue walking with Him, another light shines on it. And we see a further witness rise from the Scriptures. And what once filled our entire vision becomes part of a greater panorama. The revelation deepens, and we are enlarged with it.

It's one of the great joys of walking with Christ.

However much is unveiled, there is always more of Him than has yet to be seen. The testimony of Jesus keeps widening because the Person at its center cannot be contained within one revelation, one season, or one measure of understanding.

When we look back over the years, we can trace those quiet unveiling progressions. Specific passages remain marked in our memory. Truths that altered the way we saw Him. Moments which caused familiar words to shine with a meaning we had not seen before. Yet as precious as those discoveries were, the discovery itself was never the final treasure. Their true gift was that they brought us nearer to the One they revealed.

The purpose was never simply to grasp the revelation.
It was to know the One being revealed.

Revelation was never meant to become something we mastered, managed, or possessed. It was given to bring us into deeper fellowship with Him. Perhaps this is why every true unveiling awakens the same cry within us: Lord, show me more of Yourself. Not merely more information. Not merely greater understanding. Not merely deeper insight. More of You. Every true revelation, if it is truly from Him, leads us back to Him.

The testimony we have been tracing does not end with discovery. We have watched the life of Christ emerge from the Scriptures, take recognizable form among His people, and reveal the love that governs the life we share in Him. We have seen the invisible God made visible in the Son, and we have begun to see that same life made visible through a people joined to Him.

Nothing we have received was given merely for ourselves. The discoveries, the understanding, the light from the Scriptures—none of these were entrusted to us so that we might possess them as our own. They carry responsibility because they belong to the One who gave them.

The life is His.
The testimony is His.
The people are His.
The house is His.

And when everything is seen in relation to Him, stewardship becomes far more than the handling of responsibilities. It becomes the sacred matter of caring for what is precious to His heart.

If everything belongs to Him, then the heart of stewardship is not found merely in identifying what has been placed in our hands. It is discovered in recognizing what is precious to the One who placed it there.

Here the Scriptures begin to unfold a remarkable witness—one that begins with a steward in the house of David, reaches its fullness in Christ Himself, and opens before us the sacred responsibility given to every member of His body.

For we have been entrusted with a testimony.

Not our testimony.

His.

Whose House Is It?

We have been entrusted with a testimony.

Not our testimony.

His.

At first, that realization may seem to belong mostly to message, doctrine, or revelation. We think of testimony as truth entrusted to us—something to receive, carry, speak, and preserve. And surely it is. Every revelation of Christ bears the weight of His life, His heart, and His purpose. What He makes known is never meant to be handled lightly. And Scripture does not allow testimony to remain exclusively in the realm of words. The testimony of Christ carries the life of Christ, the heart of Christ, and His concern for all that belongs to Him.

Paul understood this when he spoke of the stewardship given to him. What he carried did not originate in him, and it was never meant to center around him. It had been received from Another and entrusted to him for the sake of others. The stewardship did not begin in Paul. It passed through Paul. What had been placed in his hands still carried the purpose and heart of the One who gave it. This same principle is not only apostolic; it is woven into the prophetic witness as well.

What has been entrusted to us remains joined to the heart of the One who entrusted it. The gift is still His, though it may operate through us. The word is still His, though it may pass through our mouths. The responsibility is still His, though it may rest upon our lives. The house is His. The people are His. The testimony is His. The steward is never the center of the stewardship.

Isaiah brings this reality before us with unusual clarity. In Isaiah 22, the Lord addresses Shebna, the steward who was over the house. The language is poignant: Shebna held responsibility within a house that did not belong to him. He occupied a position of authority and had access to matters far larger than himself. Yet the prophet's word exposes a deep misalignment in the way he carried what had been entrusted to him.

Shebna treated his position as though it belonged to him, rather than as something entrusted to him. He carved out a tomb in a high place, cutting a resting place for himself in the rock, as though his name and legacy deserved to be preserved before the eyes of the people. The office that should have pointed beyond him became a means of drawing attention to himself. What had been entrusted for the sake of the house became enmeshed with his desire for recognition and legacy.

There is something deeply sobering in this. A person can remain in the house, occupy the office, and carry authority, while the heart of stewardship has already been lost. Nothing in the passage suggests that Shebna lacked the ability to serve in that position. The issue was deeper than competence. What had been entrusted to him had begun to revolve around himself, and the steward became visible where the heart of the one he was meant to represent should have been seen.

When the steward makes himself the focus of what has been entrusted to him, what belongs to another begins serving his significance rather than revealing the heart of its owner. The office may remain in their hands for a season, but the representation has already failed. A house cannot be faithfully served by a steward who has made himself the focus. Yet the Lord's desire was not merely to expose Shebna. It was to establish another. A new steward is summoned.

Eliakim.

In contrast to Shebna, the Lord says He will call His servant Eliakim, clothe him with the robe, secure him with the sash, and commit authority into his hand. Everything in the language speaks of stewardship. Responsibility has been reassigned. The office has been transferred. Authority over the house has been placed upon another. Yet the passage does not leave us with official position alone. It opens a window into the heart required to carry what belongs to Another.

"He shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah" (Isaiah 22:21).

The statement almost catches us by surprise. Until now, the passage has spoken of robe, sash, authority, and office. But with this one sentence, the focus shifts from what the steward carries to whom the steward serves. The responsibility entrusted to Eliakim is not merely administrative. It is relational. It concerns the people who belong to the house. Almost pastorally, his investiture with the sash carried echoes of a sacred priestly office, not merely political position.

A pattern begins to emerge. The faithful steward is not revealed merely by the authority placed in his hand, but by the heart he represents. The key matters. The office matters. The responsibility matters. Yet all of it points beyond the steward to the one whose house he serves.

Shebna reveals stewardship distorted by self-importance. Eliakim reveals stewardship shaped by the heart of the owner. The difference is not merely competence; the difference is heart. One uses the house to establish himself. The other humbly receives authority for the sake of those entrusted to his care. One makes the steward central. The other makes the owner's heart paramount.

What Christ entrusts to His people cannot be separated from what Christ loves. We may begin with a sense of responsibility, aware that something has been placed in our hands. But as stewardship deepens, we are brought nearer to His heart. We begin to care differently because we begin to see differently. What has been entrusted becomes precious to us because it is precious to Him.

The entrusted key is not the treasure, nor is the office itself. The house is precious because it belongs to Him, and the people are precious because they belong to Him.

We too may have begun by thinking of our stewardship primarily in terms of responsibility—what Christ has given us to do, to say, to carry, to guard, or preserve. Yet Isaiah brings us into a house, sets two stewards before us, and reveals that the deeper question is not merely who has been entrusted with what responsibility, but whose heart is being represented through the one who carries it.

The steward is not the point.
The One being represented is.

Centuries later, the risen Christ speaks to the assembly in Philadelphia: “These things says He who is holy, He who is true, He who has the key of David…” (Rev. 3:7 NKJV) With those words, Isaiah’s witness rises again. The key once placed upon Eliakim’s shoulder now appears in the hands of Christ. What had been entrusted figuratively to a servant over the house is now held in fullness by the Son over His own house.

Eliakim was never the destination. He was the shadow, not the substance; the witness, not the fulfillment. The steward pointed beyond himself. The key pointed beyond his shoulder. And the house aimed beyond its earthly administration. Now the One to whom Eliakim bore witness stands before us in fullness.

The sash is His.

The key is His.

The house is His.

The people are His.

And what belongs to Him must be carried according to His heart.

The Son Who Reveals the Father

The writer of Hebrews brings before us another servant. And in doing so, he doesn’t diminish Moses. He honors his testimony: Moses was faithful in all God’s house, faithful as a servant, faithful to the end. Nothing in that witness is devalued. Yet as the comparison unfolds, we begin to see that the writer is not contrasting faithfulness with failure. He is showing us two different relationships to the house. Two men stand before us. Both devoted. Both obedient. Both faithful.

Moses was faithful in the house as a servant. Christ was faithful over the house as a Son.

We may read past it too quickly. We should not. What separates the servant from the Son is not effort, devotion, or even obedience. Something much deeper distinguishes the Son from the servant. It is something much more fundamental. The servant serves the interests of another. The Son shares them. The servant faithfully carries what has been placed in his hands. The Son carries within Himself the heart of His Father. At first, that distinction seems subtle. But in the words of the Son Himself, it begins to expand.

“The Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing” (John 5:19 NASB).

We have read those words before. Perhaps many times. But something happens when we slow down long enough to feel their weight. Jesus does not say He follows the Father from a distance. He does not say He consults the Father, reports to the Father, or carries out the Father’s commands

as a faithful servant would. He says He sees the Father. He watches. He knows. He participates in a life so shared, so intimate, so thoroughly held in common, that nothing He does or reveals is separated from that communion.

The heart of the Father is not out of His reach. The Father's interests and concerns are not kept from Him. There is no gap between them—no distance across which information must travel, no veil through which the Father's will must be discerned. The Son lives inside the Father's life. And everything we see flowing out of Him is flowing from there.

Then Philip asks the question: "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us" (John 14:8 NASB).

And Jesus answers in a way that should stop us completely.

"He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9 NASB).

Not merely, "He who has heard My teaching." Not merely, "He who has understood My doctrine." Not merely, "He who has interpreted the Scriptures correctly." He who has *seen Me*. The Father was not hidden somewhere beyond reach. He had been making Himself known in the Son standing before Philip the whole time.

And now we look again. The leper kneels before Him, uncertain whether mercy will extend this far—and Jesus reaches out His hand and *touches* him. The widow stands beside her son's coffin, and something moves within Jesus before He ever speaks a word. Children press toward Him while the disciples try to manage the crowd away—and Jesus receives them. A woman is brought before Him in her shame, the accusations still ringing in the air—and Jesus neither dismisses what she has done nor dismisses *her*.

In these ordinary, devastating, and tender moments, the Father's heart is continually made visible in the Son. It is not merely compassion as a quality. It is not mercy as a policy. It is a *Person* becoming recognizable. The Father, making Himself known through the Son. Not His power only. Not His authority only. Not even His will alone. His *heart*.

The compassion we are watching is not just Jesus acting in a manner consistent with the Father. It is the Father's own compassion made visible in the Son. The mercy is not an approximation of the Father's mercy. It is the Father's mercy expressed through a Son who has never lived a moment separated from Him.

The Son can do nothing of Himself (John 5:19 NASB).

Of course He cannot. Everything flowing out of Him has been flowing from somewhere—from a life so entirely shared with the Father that nothing He does is independent, nothing He reveals is self-generated, and nothing in Him separates from the Father but only makes the Father known. The works, the words, the grief, the joy, the love—all of it is received, held, and expressed from within a communion we can barely find words to describe.

For three years the disciples had watched. They had seen what we have been seeing—the compassion, the authority, the patience, the tears at Lazarus's tomb, the love that never seemed to calculate what it cost. They had seen the Father made visible in the Son.

Later, the Son opens His mouth and speaks to the Father, and for a moment the inner life behind all of it is opened before us. "The words which You gave Me I have given to them" (John 17:8 NASB). "The glory which You have given Me I have given to them" (John 17:22 NASB). "They were Yours, and You gave them to Me" (John 17:6). This is the language of a life entirely shared—not the formal language of delegation, not the careful language of duty, but the language of love that existed before the world began. Shared purpose. Shared concern. Shared life that has never for a single moment been interrupted.

And then He turns toward those the Father has given Him, and the prayer opens wider than we expected. "*That they may be one, just as We are one"* (John 17:22 NASB).

The communion we have been beholding—the love between the Father and the Son, the fellowship never broken, the shared life from which every visible expression has flowed—is not kept at a distance from us. Jesus asks the Father to bring us inside. Not simply to behold it. Not simply to admire it from afar. To *participate* in it.

The life that made the Father visible in the Son is now the life Christ shares with His people.

Sharing His Concerns

The final words of Jesus in John 17 remain before us, especially the way He speaks of those who belong to Him.

Those You have given Me. Those who are Mine. Those who will believe through their testimony.

The people who remain ever present before His heart.

Not many days later, we find ourselves on the shore again. The sea is quiet. The disciples have returned to familiar waters. Peter stands there, carrying the weight of all that has passed—the loyalty he declared, the sword he drew, the distance at which he followed, his denial before the night was over. And now he stands before the risen Christ.

Jesus begins with a question.

"Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" (John 21:15).

Not: Will you serve Me? Not: Will you preach for Me? Not: Will you lead My people? Not even: Will you prove yourself faithful again?

Do you love Me?

Peter answers, and Jesus responds: *"Feed my lambs"* (John 21:15).

The question comes again. Peter answers again. Jesus says, *"Tend my sheep"* (John 21:16).

Then a third time: *"Do you love me?"* (John 21:17).

Peter is grieved. The repetition reaches into a place deeper than memory, deeper than failure, deeper than regret. And still Jesus says, *"Feed my sheep"* (John 21:17).

Every question concerns love. Every answer concerns sheep. Love Me—feed them. Love Me—tend them. Love Me—feed them.

Jesus does not separate love for Himself from concern for those who belong to Him. The flock is never treated as a ministry assignment, a responsibility to be managed, or an opportunity for influence. His people belong to Him. They belong to His heart.

My lambs. My sheep. My sheep.

Everything returns to what belongs to Him.

The prayer of John 17 still lingers as we stand beside the sea. Those You have given Me. Those who are Mine. And now the risen Christ says, My lambs. My sheep. The same people who remain before His heart in prayer now stand before Peter as a trust.

Peter is not merely being restored. He is being brought into the Shepherd's concern—to care for those the Shepherd loves, to tend what belongs to Him, to allow what is precious to Christ to become precious to him.

The questions reveal something about Jesus Himself. The sheep matter to Him. The lambs matter to Him. The people entrusted to His care matter to Him.

Paul carries this same depth of concern. He is an apostle. He is a teacher. He is one entrusted with mysteries and revelation. But when he speaks from the burden of Christ for His people, the language of office gives way to the language of affection.

"My little children."

Not from a position. From a burden. "*My little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!"* (Gal. 4:19). The language is beyond that of office and instruction. It moves into travail. Paul carries them in his heart before Christ, longing not merely that they would understand, but that Christ would be formed in them.

They remain before him—not as assignments, not as accomplishments, but as children.

Then there's John the Baptist. John stands watching as the crowds move away from him and toward Jesus. Influence is shifting. Attention is shifting. But John does not respond as one whose place is being threatened. His response rises from a heart untouched by rivalry.

"The one who has the bride is the bridegroom" (John 3:29).

John is not grieving the loss of followers; he is rejoicing that the bride is coming to the Bridegroom. The joy of the Bridegroom has become his joy. What matters to the Bridegroom matters to him. *"He*

must increase, but I must decrease[1]*"*—not with resentment, not with reluctance, but with joy. The friend has entered into the Bridegroom's own concern.

Friendship reaches back further than we might expect. Abraham stands before the Lord as the conversation turns toward Sodom and Gomorrah. He could have listened and gone his way. Instead, he remains. He questions. He appeals. He intercedes. Not because the cities are his. Not because their fate serves his interests. It is as though something of his Friend's concern has touched him. The dialogue feels less like negotiation and more like the loving participation of friendship.

The sheep. The children. The bride. The friend who remains before God.

Different scenes. Different voices. The same sacred movement. Peter is drawn into the Shepherd's concern. Paul carries the travail of a father. John rejoices with the Bridegroom's joy. Abraham remains with God as God's concerns touch his own heart.

What matters to Him begins to matter to them. What rests upon His heart begins to rest upon theirs. What began as responsibility becomes participation. What began as service becomes shared concern. What began in the hands finds its way into the heart.

What Belongs to Him Is Precious to Him

A question remains before us. It lingers in the heart.

How does Christ feel about those He has entrusted to us?

Paul spoke often of stewardship—grace given, mysteries entrusted, a testimony received rather than originated. But when he blesses "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," he carries us behind the stewardship itself, into a purpose that existed before the foundation of the world. The passage seems to unfold into something that existed long before any of us entered the story. *"He chose us in him before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4)*.

Before failure. Before success. Before faithfulness. Before rebellion. Before usefulness. Before anything could be done for Him or entrusted by Him.

"He predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 1:5).

Not merely acceptance. Not merely tolerance. Not merely permission to remain nearby. Adoption. The passage carries affection within it—desire, purpose, and the Father's intention for a family.

Before anything was placed into human hands, the Father's heart was already set upon a people. Before stewardship. Before service. Before responsibility. Sons and daughters were already His desire. The people come before the task. The relationship comes before the assignment. The Father desired a family before He entrusted a stewardship.

[1] John 3:30

The mystery entrusted to Paul cannot be separated from the people for whom it was given. The stewardship serves the Father's purpose. The testimony serves the Father's purpose. And the Father's purpose has always moved toward people—children, sons, daughters, a household, a family.

The people remain before His heart.

Then Isaiah speaks.

"Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the LORD has spoken: 'Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me'" (Isaiah 1:2).

The Lord could have spoken as King, Judge, or Holy One of Israel. Instead, He speaks as a Father. His grief cannot be separated from His love; His sorrow cannot be separated from the relationship.

Even in judgment, the language of relationship remains: a Father is still speaking to His children.

"Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD" (Isaiah 1:18).

The Holy One is still pursuing restoration. The Father's heart has not left the conversation.

The Shepherd and His sheep. The Father and His children. The Bridegroom and His bride. The friend who remains before God. The Father still calling to His children. Each witness carries the same truth: what belongs to Him is precious to Him.

What He entrusts to us must be carried according to His heart.

We have been entrusted with a testimony.

Not our testimony.

His.

The key was never the award. The position was never the prize. The stewardship was never the treasure. The people matter because they belong to Him. The house matters because it belongs to Him. The testimony matters because it belongs to Him.

What He entrusts to us must be carried according to His heart. Not merely as words to preserve, doctrine to defend, or responsibilities to fulfill, but as the testimony of Christ—the life of Christ, the heart of Christ, the concern of Christ, the love of Christ.

And now, through those who share the life of the Son, that testimony continues. Something sacred has been entrusted to His people. Not merely gifts. Not merely ministries. Not merely opportunities. The sacred responsibility of revealing His heart through the life we share with Him.

What belongs to Him has been placed into human hands.

And what belongs to Him must be carried according to His heart.

EXPRESSION FOR THE COMMON GOOD

> *The ascended Christ continues His own ministry through the people who share His life. As His people live from that shared life, He continues strengthening, nourishing, encouraging, and supplying His body for the common good. Ministry is not something added to Christ's life. It is Christ Himself continuing His care through His body.*

The Question Beneath the Question

Jesus doesn't simply hand us assignments. He shares His life with us. Ministry is not an add-on to the Christian life. It grows out of the life Christ has already shared with us. In the previous chapter we saw that God takes more stock in relationship than how efficient or capable we are. He doesn't entrust us with gifts, position, or authority in an effort to impart to us a sense of significance. He loves us. Gifts don't make us valuable. We are valuable because we are His.

The ascension did not create a vacuum with Christ's absence. It opened a new way for His presence to be expressed through the Ekklesia, His body. The ascended Christ continues His ministry through those who share His life and as we live from this shared life, the family resemblance begins to emerge on its own. The Holy Spirit was never sent to replace the Son, nor was the Ekklesia raised up to replace Him. The ascended Christ continues His own ministry through the Spirit by sharing His life with His people.

That's the theology. But few of us experience this conversation as theology. We experience it as years of unanswered questions that touch us much deeper. They hit places where we question our significance, our belonging, and even whether our lives truly matter.

So, say the word ministry, and most of us reach instinctively for a familiar definition. Gifts. Calling. Role. Function. And depending on the stream that raised us, we are already scanning ourselves for evidence—what am I good at, where do I fit, what have I been given?

Before long, the language of service begins pressing on the deeper question of belonging. It's a sincere question. We ask it ourselves. We want to contribute. We want to belong. Too often the nagging question placed before us as believers is, "What gifts do you possess?" Not to mention, churches need volunteers to perform certain tasks.

Our natural tendency is to identify ourselves by what we do rather than who we are. And well-meaning individuals, in an effort to keep things running, just want to know where we can be the most useful for their need. Most of us haven't a clue. Not at the beginning anyway. What we do know is that we aren't the same as we once were. We're saved. We're free, and we're excited to serve. We are eager to find our place. We want to feel like we belong in our new home.

And we ponder. I have been given this amazing gift of salvation. I have God in residence within me. He is changing, transforming and speaking. He is showing me wonderful things in His word. He is

pursuing my heart. He is even guiding me and directing me by His Spirit. It's glorious. I just don't know where I fit.

We go looking for ways to give back. We find a job in the kitchen, the nursery, even the parking lot. We stand at the door and shake hands just so we can be a part of something bigger than ourselves. Hoping usefulness would settle this inner ache. And when it doesn't—when we served faithfully and the stirring doesn't go away—we assumed the assignment was wrong. So, we go looking for another way. Maybe on more visible one. Something that might finally say, from the outside, what we had been waiting all along to hear on the inside. It isn't vanity, though it can wear vanity's clothes.

There is something Christ has placed within me that longs to find expression, but I do not know where to take it. And because I cannot see where my life fits, I quietly begin to wonder whether I belong here at all. Sometimes the thought becomes even more painful: no one seems to want what I carry. Others are noticed, invited, recognized—while I am still straining to be seen.

We have called it waiting for our gift to be discovered. We have called it looking for our place. More quietly, we have wondered whether we missed our calling somewhere along the way, at a fork in the road we did not realize we were standing before. But perhaps we have not recognized the lens through which we were interpreting the question. What felt like confusion about calling may have been something deeper: an identity wound—a heart still waiting to be told, in a way it can finally believe, that it already belongs.

This is where we begin—not because the ache is greater than the theology, but because Paul begins here too. Before he ever speaks to the Ephesians about gifts, the body, or what each member carries, he first spends three chapters anchoring them in who they already are in Christ. Only then, from the settled ground of belonging, does he turn to what they carry.

The sequence itself is part of the message. If we rush past identity into usefulness, we just might spend the rest of our lives asking our calling to answer a question theology was never meant to answer.

So, for now, we may have to let that question stay unresolved a little longer than feels comfortable.

Before it can be answered, it needs to be heard. It needs to rummage through our history.

It needs to be felt.

The Ministry That Never Ended

Christ has entrusted something precious to His people. Earlier we discovered that ministry begins with stewardship before it ever becomes expression. Before Christ asks anything of His people, He first shares something of Himself with them.

Many of us answer instinctively—gifts, calling, ministry, purpose. We picture Christ handing out assignments before returning to the Father. Teaching to one. Serving to another. Encouragement,

leadership, mercy, prophecy, scattered like inheritance among the family. The conversation quickly becomes an inventory: what did I receive?

Scripture does speak this way. But it begins somewhere much deeper.

When Paul turns to this subject in Ephesians 4, he does something unexpected. Before he ever mentions apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, or teachers, he seemingly interrupts the conversation by reaching back into Israel's Scriptures.

"When He ascended on high,
He led captivity captive,
and gave gifts to men"
(Ephesians 4:8 NKJV, quoting Psalm 68:18).

Paul did not insert that quotation of Psalm 68 for decoration or flair. And it was not because Paul's thoughts scattered before pulling them back. Rather, Paul expects those he was addressing to remember the story behind it. Psalm 68 celebrates the triumph of Israel's victorious King. Having conquered His enemies, the King ascends Mount Zion amid songs of rejoicing and takes His rightful place upon His holy mountain. His ascent is not just a journey upward. It is the public declaration that the battle has been won, the kingdom has been secured, and the King now reigns.

Traditionally, victorious kings ascended in triumph and distributed the spoils of their victory. This incredible generosity flowed out of what had been accomplished. Paul looks at that ancient psalm and is saying: That King is Jesus**.** The One who descended into our humanity has now ascended far above all the heavens. His cross was His victory. His resurrection was His vindication. His ascension was His enthronement. Everything in Psalm 68 has reached its fulfillment in Him.

Yet Paul refuses to let our attention settle merely on the gifts flowing from the King's victory. He directs our gaze to something much greater. "He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things" (Eph. 4:10).

These words are easy to pass over, yet they hold the center of Paul's argument. Christ did not ascend simply to return to heaven. He ascended to fill all things. The focus is not first on the gifts He gives, but on the enthroned Christ Himself—present, active, and filling His body with His own life. The gifts matter because they are expressions of His living presence among His people.

How does the ascended and enthroned Christ, now seated at the Father's right hand, continue filling His people? Jesus Himself answered that question on the night before His crucifixion. "Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you" (John 16:7). Those words have often been understood simply as the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit. And they are certainly that. Yet Jesus immediately explains what the Spirit will actually do.

"He will not speak on his own authority… He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (John 16:13–14).

The Spirit does not replace the ministry of Christ, but as the One through whom Christ continues to reveal Himself, the Spirit continually makes the living Christ known. He reveals Christ, magnifies Christ, applies the finished work of Christ, teaches the words of Christ, forms the life of Christ within His people, and continually directs attention back to the Son.

The Spirit was not sent in like a second string substitute. The ministry has not changed hands. The ministry has changed its mode of expression.

If that is true, then what if the question is no longer, "What gifts has Jesus distributed?" but rather, "What is the ascended Christ doing now?"

When Paul finally says, "And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers…" (Ephesians 4:11 NKJV), he is not describing a handoff. He is describing an activity that has never stopped–Christ's continuing activity.

The book of Acts is not the story of Jesus stepping aside while the Church begins its own ministry. It is the story of the ascended Christ pouring out His Spirit and continuing His own ministry through the people who now share His life. The Epistles then explain what that continuing ministry looks like as His life matures throughout His people.

The ascended Lord is still teaching, shepherding, strengthening, encouraging, nourishing, healing, and building up His people. Nothing about Jesus has changed. The Teacher is still teaching. The Shepherd is still shepherding. The Great Physician still heals broken hearts. The Bread of Life still feeds His people. The Son still reveals the Father. Only now He does so through the life He shares with His body by the Holy Spirit. In other words, ministry is the ongoing life of Christ becoming visible through His people.

Gifts, then, are not the subject of Ephesians 4. Christ is. The ministries are not the revelation. Christ is. The Ekklesia Assembly is not learning how to replace Jesus. His collective body is joining in the continuing ministry of the living Christ.

This same pattern appears throughout the New Testament. In Romans 12, Paul describes many different expressions of grace, yet every one exists so that the members of one body may serve one another in harmony. The diversity serves the life of the whole body.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul tells us that there are varieties of gifts, varieties of ministries, and varieties of workings, yet the same Spirit, the same Lord, and the same God is at work in them all. Every manifestation of the Spirit is given "for the common good" (1 Cor. 12:7). The emphasis is never on personal distinction but on Christ supplying what His entire body needs through each member.

Peter talks the same way. "As each one has received a gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the varied grace of God" (1 Peter 4:10). Notice Peter's language. Not owners. Stewards.

The grace entrusted to us is meant to continue flowing through us toward others. Every witness is telling the same story. Christ continues caring for His people. Only now are we ready to answer the question that brought us here.

What has Christ entrusted to His people? It's His life. Not merely gifts. Not only ministries. Not just assignments. He has shared His own life. Everything else flows from that. The gifts are one manifestation of that shared life. Ministry is another expression of that shared life. Service, encouragement, teaching, and shepherding are all expressions of that same shared life.

Everything begins much deeper than function. Jesus does not simply assign work to His people. He shares His life with them. That is why His earthly ministry never truly ended. It just changed its mode of expression.

The One who revealed the Father throughout the Gospels continues revealing the Father today. The One who strengthened the weary still strengthens them. The One who taught the crowds still teaches His people. The One who shepherded His disciples still shepherds His flock. The One who comforted the broken still comforts them. He continues being Himself. And through the life He shares with His people, His ministry becomes visible once again.

The Jesus who walked beside the Sea of Galilee has not stopped being Himself. And through those with whom He has shared His life, His ministry continues.

From Belonging, Not for Belonging

This changes everything, but only if we allow it to change the way we think.

It is possible to nod in agreement with all of this and still return to the Christian life with the same old eyes. We can affirm that Christ continues His ministry through His people while still measuring ourselves by usefulness, visibility, and place. But revelation was never given merely to inform us. It was given to reorder our sight. And this is where the struggle often begins—not in our theology, but in the hidden questions we have carried for years.

For most of us, the struggle does not begin with apostles, prophets, or spiritual gifts. It begins with questions much closer to the heart.

Do I matter? Where do I fit? Has God forgotten me? Why does everyone else seem to know their purpose? Have I somehow missed mine? These questions may sound like they belong to ministry, but they reach much deeper. They are questions of identity. And when we do not recognize them for what they are, we carry them into our service and quietly ask ministry to give us what only the Father's love can give.

Without realizing it, we may begin looking to ministry for the reassurance only Christ can give. Ministry becomes the place where we hope to discover our worth. Recognition becomes evidence that we matter. Fruit becomes proof that we are useful. Opportunity begins to feel like acceptance. Then, when someone else is recognized, something hurts. When another person's ministry flourishes, something hurts. When our own service goes unnoticed, something hurts. Not always because we are proud. Often because something much older has been touched. The heart is asking ministry to answer what only the Father's love can settle.

Paul takes us somewhere entirely different. Long before he teaches about the body in Ephesians 4, he spends three chapters helping believers discover who they already are because of Christ. That order is profoundly important. Paul understands that ministry does not flow merely from what we understand. It flows from the identity in which we have learned to live.

So, before he ever says a word about apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, or every member supplying the body, he first settles a far deeper question. Who are you now that you belong to Christ? He begins by lifting our eyes away from ourselves and toward the Father's eternal purpose.

Before we ever sought Him, the Father had already set His love upon us. Before we ever wondered whether we mattered, He had already chosen us in Christ. Before we ever questioned whether we belonged, He had already determined that we would be adopted as His sons and daughters through Jesus Christ. Our place in His family did not begin with our usefulness. It began with His love.

Paul continues by reminding us that our standing before God does not rest upon our ability to become better people. We have been redeemed through the blood of Christ. Our sins have been forgiven according to the riches of His grace. The guilt that once separated us from the Father has already been dealt with at the cross. We are not working toward acceptance. We are living from acceptance already given.

Nor does the Father leave us wondering whether we truly belong to Him. Paul says we have been sealed with the promised Holy Spirit. In the ancient world a seal marked ownership, authenticity, and security. The Spirit Himself becomes the Father's testimony that we belong to Him. Our confidence does not rest upon how securely we hold on to God. It rests upon the God who has securely placed His own Spirit within us.

Then Paul reaches even higher. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead has raised us together with Him. We have been made alive with Christ. We have been seated with Him in the heavenly places. This is no longer merely language about forgiveness. It is language about participation. The life Christ now lives has become the life we share. We are no longer relating to Him only as forgiven sinners. We are living as sons and daughters who have been brought into His own life.

Only after Paul has established all of that does he finally begin speaking about ministry. He refuses to build ministry upon insecurity. He refuses to build service upon the fear of not mattering. He refuses to build participation upon the need to prove ourselves. Instead, he builds everything upon the Father's love. Identity comes before ministry. Belonging comes before participation. Sonship comes before stewardship. Shared life comes before shared labor.

The more securely we know that we already belong, the more freely we can strengthen others without secretly asking ministry to reassure us that we matter. This is why two people can hear exactly the same passage of Scripture and walk away with entirely different experiences. One hears freedom. Another hears pressure. One hears invitation. Another hears expectation. One hears the

Father saying, *"You already belong."* Another hears, *"Now prove that you deserve to."* The words have not changed. What has changed is the way the heart hears them.

We do not hear Scripture apart from the story our hearts have lived. We bring the memory of love received and the ache of love withheld. Some learned early that they were secure. Others learned to brace for love to disappear. Some learned that belonging could be received as a gift. Others learned that acceptance had to be earned. And over time, those lessons became lenses through which even the Father's voice could sound different than He intended.

The Father's answer is never condemnation. He does not shame wounded hearts for misunderstanding Him. He reveals Himself. Throughout Scripture, the Father answers fear with His presence, insecurity with His love, uncertainty with His faithfulness. Revelation is His way of healing the heart.

As His love becomes more deeply rooted within us, something remarkable begins to happen. The questions that once consumed us begin losing their urgency. Not because we finally become stronger. Because they have finally been answered. That changes the way we understand the cross.

Many believers have learned to hear the cross as a summons to personal diminishment. Somewhere along the way, the message seemed to become: *"You are the problem. Become less. Disappear. Empty yourself. Become nothing."* But the Father has never set His heart on the destruction of the person He loves. At the cross, He judges what has enslaved that person—sin, fear, shame, alienation, self-protection, comparison, performance, and every false refuge the old humanity built in search of safety. Those things meet their end there. The beloved child does not.

The Father is not destroying the person He loves. He is setting that person free. This is why the familiar phrase *die to self* must also be understood through the Father's love. Without that foundation, wounded hearts hear those words as another demand to disappear. The person who has spent a lifetime believing they are unwanted hears, *"God doesn't want me either."* But Jesus never calls His disciples toward self-erasure. He calls them into freedom. The self that dies is not the person the Father created. It is the old humanity that has spent its entire life trying to establish its own identity apart from Him. The old humanity dies. The beloved child lives. The cross does not make us less human. It finally frees us to become fully human.

That is why spiritual formation cannot be reduced to learning better habits or becoming more disciplined. Those things certainly have their place, but they are not the heart of formation. Formation is not the gradual construction of a better Christian. It is the unfolding of the life Christ has already shared with us as we learn to live from what has been given. We are not building something that does not yet exist. We are learning to live from something already given. Recognition matures into participation. Participation matures into expression. That is how the Christian life grows.

Now we may finally be prepared to hear Ephesians 4 the way Paul intended. Most of us have read the chapter as though its primary concern were spiritual gifts. Paul's concern is much larger than

that. The chapter begins with the ascended Christ filling all things. It continues with Christ giving apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. It culminates in the whole body being joined together, every member supplying what Christ has entrusted, until the body grows into the fullness of Christ Himself. The center never moves away from Christ. He fills. He gives. He supplies. He builds. He matures. He is the subject of every movement. The gifts are simply one of the ways His ongoing ministry becomes visible. Everything moves from Him and toward Him. The gifts, then, are not trophies of personal identity. They are traces of His continuing care, ways His life becomes tangible among His people.

Teaching is Christ continuing to teach. Encouragement is Christ continuing to strengthen. Mercy is Christ continuing to comfort. Shepherding is Christ continuing to care. Giving is Christ continuing to supply. Leadership is Christ continuing to guide. Every gift points beyond itself to the One who is still ministering. The same is true of ministry. Ministry is no longer the search for my place. It is participation in Christ's ministry. It is joining the work He is already doing.

The question quietly changes. No longer, "What ministry has Christ given me?" Now, "Where is Christ already at work?" No longer, "What is my gift?" Now, "What is Christ supplying?" No longer, "How can I become more useful?" Now, "How is Christ caring for His people, and how may I participate?" No longer, "How do I become significant?" Now, "How does Christ become visible?"

This is the quiet reordering that must take place before expression becomes possible. As we learn to live securely in the Father's love, we become increasingly free to participate in the Son's ministry without constantly turning back to ourselves.

Children do not spend their lives trying to become members of the family. They live from the security of already belonging. And because they share the Father's life, the family resemblance slowly begins to appear—not through striving, but through life itself.

The Life That Keeps Moving

Christ has shared His life with His people. The Father has rooted their identity in His love. The Spirit has opened their eyes to the life they have already received. Now something begins happening that could never be manufactured by human effort. That life begins to appear. This is where many discussions of ministry immediately become practical. What should I do? How should I serve? Where should I volunteer? How do I discover my gifts?

The New Testament asks a different question. What does Christ look like when His life is shared by an entire people? That question changes everything. Expression is not the beginning of ministry. Expression is what shared life looks like as it matures. Nothing truly Christian begins with expression. Everything begins with life. Fruit does not create the tree. The tree produces the fruit. In exactly the same way, ministry does not create the life of Christ. The life of Christ produces ministry.

The Father never intended His people to manufacture something that looked like Jesus. He shared the life of His Son with them so that Jesus Himself might continue becoming visible. That is why

stewardship naturally moves toward expression. Nothing entrusted by Christ is intended to terminate with the one who receives it. Everything He gives continues moving. Love moves. Grace moves. Mercy moves. Truth moves. Encouragement moves. Wisdom moves. Strength moves. Comfort moves. Everything received immediately begins looking for someone else to whom it may be given.

This is the nature of life. Blood does not circulate in order to admire itself. It flows because every part of the body depends upon its supply. The same is true of the body of Christ. Nothing Christ shares with one individual belongs only to that individual. Everything He shares immediately becomes part of the circulation of His own life. This is why Paul refuses to allow us to think independently of one another.

He continually returns to the image of one body. "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you'" (1 Cor. 12:21). The issue is much deeper than cooperation. It is participation in one shared life. Mutual dependence is not evidence of weakness. It is evidence of divine design. Christ intentionally distributes His grace. No individual receives the fullness. No one person carries everything. No one reflects Christ completely. The fullness belongs to the whole body because the fullness belongs to Christ.

What one member lacks, another supplies. What one member cannot see, another recognizes. What one member cannot carry alone, another strengthens. Not because Christ has become divided. But because Christ delights in sharing His own life among His people. The body therefore becomes the visible testimony that Christ is still serving His people.

Think about the earthly ministry of Jesus. He strengthened the weary. He encouraged the fearful. He comforted the brokenhearted. He fed the hungry. He taught the crowds. He restored the fallen. He welcomed the forgotten. He carried the weak.

Now read the New Testament letters. Bear one another's burdens. Encourage one another daily. Comfort one another. Build one another up. Teach and admonish one another. Show hospitality without complaint. Pray for one another. Forgive one another. Serve one another. The resemblance is unmistakable.[1]

Christ is still doing exactly what He has always done. Only now His ministry has become visible throughout His body. The gifts are not independent abilities. They are recognizable expressions of the continuing ministry of Jesus Himself. None of these expressions originate with us. They originate with Him.

We are participating in a ministry that already belongs to Christ. That realization quietly changes the emotional atmosphere of ministry. The pressure begins disappearing. No longer must I become something extraordinary. I simply learn to recognize where Christ is already loving His people. Then I join Him there.

[1] See: Gal. 6:2; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:16; 1 Thess. 4:18; 5:11; Heb. 3:13; James 5:16; 1 Peter 4:9–10

That is why Paul repeatedly says every manifestation is given for the common good. Not personal distinction. Not spiritual achievement. Not religious recognition. The common good. Christ is not expressing Himself for the benefit of isolated individuals. He is building a family.

Every expression strengthens someone. Every grace nourishes someone. Every gift supplies someone. Every act of love reveals Someone. Everything moves toward the same destination: the building up of the body of Christ.

Notice how different this is from the way we often think about ministry. We ask, "What ministry am I called to?" The New Testament turns our attention toward who is being strengthened. We ask, "What platform has God given me?" The New Testament asks, "Who is being nourished?" We ask, "Am I using my gift?" The New Testament asks, "Is Christ supplying His people?" The center has quietly shifted again. Expression is no longer about visibility. It is about nourishment. Not about being seen. About seeing others strengthened. Not about influence. About love becoming tangible. This is family life.

Healthy families do not spend their days asking who is most important. Life simply circulates. Parents care for children. Children learn from parents. Older siblings help younger siblings. Meals are shared. Needs are noticed. Strength is given wherever weakness appears. No one announces, "I am now exercising my gift." Life simply expresses itself.

The same is true of the household of God. The Father's life naturally moves toward His children because that is what love does. And as His children learn to live from that shared life, something beautiful begins appearing almost unnoticed. The family resemblance. No one wakes up one morning deciding to resemble their father. Resemblance quietly emerges because life is shared.

The same is true of Christ. We do not become like Him through imitation alone. His own Life is being expressed through us, and as that Life becomes visible, the resemblance becomes recognizable.

The Father is not merely making Christ visible through His people. He is making Him recognizable. As His life circulates among the body, His character becomes increasingly familiar. His patience becomes familiar. His mercy becomes familiar. His compassion becomes familiar. His truth carries a familiar voice. Before long, people are no longer simply observing kind or faithful people. They begin recognizing the life of Christ Himself. That recognition is what prepares the way for true manifestation.

This is why the New Testament never separates spiritual maturity from love. Love is not one gift among many. Love is the atmosphere in which every expression of Christ becomes recognizable. Without love, gifts remain impressive. With love, Christ becomes visible. That is Paul's entire argument in 1 Corinthians. Not that gifts are unimportant. That gifts without Christ's nature fail to reveal Christ. The Father has never been interested in producing impressive ministries. He is revealing His Son. Everything else serves that purpose.

This is the great miracle of the Ekklesia Assembly. Not that gifted people gather together. But that the invisible Christ becomes increasingly recognizable through an ordinary people who have learned to share one extraordinary life. The goal has never been ministry. The goal has never even been manifestation. The goal is that someone encountering the body of Christ begins to recognize the One whose life is flowing through it. Not merely, *"Those people are kind."* Not merely, *"Those people serve well."* But something much deeper. *"Surely Christ is among them."* That is the common good.

That is expression.

That is why Christ shared His life.

Everything Christ shares is meant to keep moving until someone else encounters His life.

This isn't about gifts. It's about circulation. The life of Christ continues circulating through His body. And wherever His life continues to flow, nothing stagnates. Love never stagnates. Grace never stagnates. Mercy never stagnates. Truth never stagnates. Strength never stagnates. Encouragement never stagnates. Hope never stagnates. The life of Christ is always moving toward someone else. That is how His body lives. That is how Christ continues His ministry.

For a moment, imagine walking beside Jesus along the shores of Galilee.

Watch Him teaching.

Watch Him feeding.

Watch Him comforting.

Watch Him restoring.

Watch Him carrying the burdens of those who could no longer carry them themselves.

Then close the Gospels. Open the Epistles. The same ministry is still unfolding. The same compassion. The same truth. The same patience. The same mercy. The same Shepherd. The same Christ.

The only thing that has changed...

is the body through which His life is now being expressed.

This is how Christ, though unseen, continues to be known, recognized, and encountered in and through His body.

Living in the Father's House

The deeper question is not simply what we have been given or how faithfully we have served. The deeper question is: From what place are we living? Because beneath every gift, every ministry, and every act of faithfulness, the heart is always living from somewhere.

There is a profound difference between living in the Father's house and living as the Father's child. At first those two realities may appear almost identical. Both remain in the house. Both care for what belongs to the Father. Both can be diligent. Both can be trusted. From the outside they may even look exactly the same. Yet they are not the same. One serves from responsibility. The other serves from belonging.

That distinction has been present from the earliest pages of Scripture. When Abram looked at his household, he saw a problem that seemed impossible to solve. The promises of God pointed toward an inheritance, yet Abram remained childless. Looking around his house, the answer appeared obvious.

"But Abram said, 'Sovereign LORD, what can You give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?' … 'You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir'" (Genesis 15:2–3 NIV).

From every human perspective, Abraham's conclusion made perfect sense. Eliezer had faithfully served his master. He had cared for Abraham's household. He had proven himself trustworthy. If there was no son, surely the faithful servant could inherit. But God immediately interrupted Abraham's reasoning. "This man shall not be your heir; your own son shall be your heir" (Genesis 15:4).

The issue was never Eliezer's faithfulness. Scripture never criticizes him. The issue was something deeper. The distinction appears early: a faithful servant in the house is not the same as a son. And as that thread continues through Scripture, it opens into something far greater until it finds its fullness in Christ.

Paul tells us that we have not received the spirit of slavery leading again to fear, but the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry, "Abba, Father."[1] Because we are sons and daughters, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts. The relationship Christ shares with His Father has become the relationship into which we ourselves have been welcomed.

The Father is not merely gathering faithful servants. He is bringing many sons and daughters into His own household. That changes everything. It means the Christian life was never intended to begin with responsibility. It begins with belonging. Before we are entrusted, we are received. Before we are sent, we are seated. Before we strengthen others, we are embraced by the Father's love. Before we carry His concerns, we learn His heart.

That is why Paul spends three chapters in Ephesians establishing our identity before saying a single word about the body functioning together. He knows something we often forget. People always minister from the identity in which they live.

If I quietly believe I must prove that I matter, I will eventually ask ministry to prove it. If I quietly believe I must earn my place, I will eventually ask service to secure it. If I quietly believe the Father

[1] Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6

accepts me because I am useful, usefulness will become my master. The work may still be beautiful. The life beneath it becomes exhausting.

Perhaps that is why so many sincere believers grow weary. Not because Christ's yoke is heavy. But because we have quietly placed another yoke beneath His. The burden of proving ourselves. The burden of mattering. The burden of earning what love had already given. Without realizing it, we begin working in the Father's house while remaining uncertain that we truly belong there.

The tragedy is not that we stop serving. The tragedy is that we begin serving from the wrong place. Jesus tells a story that quietly exposes this same reality. The older brother never leaves his father's house. He remains faithful. He works. He serves. He carries responsibility. When he finally speaks, however, something hidden within his heart becomes visible. "Look, these many years I have served you…" (Luke 15:29). He does not speak as a son. He speaks as a servant. His relationship has quietly become defined by his labor.

The father answers with remarkable tenderness. "Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours" (Luke 15:31). The father does not first correct his behavior. He reminds him of what had always been true. "You are always with me." "Everything I have is yours." The older brother had been living in the father's house. He had never really learned to live as the father's son.

Could it be that many of us have done the very same thing?

Could it be that we have become remarkably faithful in the Father's work while quietly forgetting how to live from the Father's life?

Could it be that we have become excellent servants while never becoming settled children?

Could it be that we have spent years carrying the Father's concerns while never resting in the Father's embrace?

If that is true, then ministry itself can become the place where we hide from the very relationship it was meant to express. We become busy. Faithful. Dependable. Fruitful. Necessary. Yet somewhere beneath all of that activity, an old question continues whispering. "Do I belong?"

The Father has never answered that question by giving us more work. He answered it by giving us His Son.

Everything Christ has entrusted to us grows out of that one gift. The gifts. The ministry. The stewardship. The body. The service. The expressions of grace. All of them are meant to flow from a life already shared, not toward a life still waiting to be earned.

The Father did not prepare a place at His table as the reward for faithful service. The place came first. Before we knew how to serve, we were welcomed. Before we knew how to strengthen others, we were received. Before we knew how to carry His concerns, we were brought near. Before we ever learned the work of the house, we were given a place in the family.

This is where ministry begins. Not in proving. Not in striving. Not in earning. Not in wondering whether there is room. Ministry begins in the security of already belonging. The Father never intended His children merely to work in His house. He intended them to live from His life. Everything else grows from there.

Imagine spending your whole life working in a house where your chair has already been waiting. Imagine preparing the meals. Setting the table. Serving everyone else. Cleaning the dishes. Maintaining the household. Yet every evening remaining quietly near the doorway because somewhere deep inside you are still wondering whether you have truly been invited to sit.

No one asked us to remain standing. The Father has been inviting us to the table all along. For whatever reason, many of us quietly assume that the day we will finally belong is still somewhere ahead of us. Perhaps after we have served faithfully enough. Perhaps after we have matured a little more. Perhaps after we have finally become the kind of people we imagine the Father can fully welcome. So, we remain near the doorway.

We see the table. We notice the chair. We continue serving. The work is real. Our love is sincere. The stewardship matters. Yet perhaps there is still something the Father has been trying to show us. Not simply that He has given us work to do. But that He has already given us a place to belong. The life Christ shares with us was never meant merely to make us useful. It was meant to bring us home.

That realization changes everything. It changes the atmosphere of ministry. It frees us from striving. It teaches us to serve from belonging instead of serving toward belonging. It reminds us that everything Christ entrusts to us grows out of a life already shared.

And yet, there is still one quiet question which remains.

Have I been working in the Father's house… without ever learning to rest in the Father's love?

That is not a question of effort. It is not a question of faithfulness. It is not even a question of ministry. It is a question of where my heart has found its home.

Believers who have walked with Christ for any length of time probably recognize what comes next. Looking back over our journey, our deepest regrets are seldom, *"I wish I had known more."* They are rarely, *"I wish I had done more."* More often they sound like this: I should have listened.

There was no dramatic collapse. No obvious rebellion. Nothing outward appeared wrong. The work continued. The ministry continued. The activity continued. Everything appeared healthy. Yet something inside quietly paused. Something whispered, *"Pay attention."* Perhaps this is why the Lord speaks as He does to the church in Sardis. *"You have a name that you are alive…"* (Rev. 3:1 NASB).

The lights are still on. The work continues. The house is still full. Everything appears to be functioning. Then, almost before we can process it, He says, *"…but you are dead"* (Rev. 3:1 NASB). For one brief moment, the lights flicker. Not long enough to plunge the house into darkness. Just

long enough for us to realize that activity is not the measure of life. A reputation for life is not the same thing as life itself. For one brief moment, Christ exposes a reality that outward appearances have concealed.

Not to shame us.

Not to frighten us.

But because He loves us too much to let us mistake activity for life.

Once the lights flicker, we cannot simply pretend we never noticed.

We find ourselves listening more carefully. Not with fear. But with humility. Not because we assume something is wrong. But because we have learned that when Christ quietly says, *"Pay attention,"* it is always an invitation into something deeper.

Some questions are too precious to answer quickly.

They first teach us how to listen.

And perhaps that is exactly where Christ wants us to be before He speaks again.

IS THE LAMP STILL BURNING?

> *What was born through living communion must continue through living communion. The greatest danger is not that what Christ began dies. The greatest danger is that what was born through living communion gradually becomes sustained through memory, experience, habit, giftedness, institutional faithfulness, or doctrinal preservation rather than through ongoing dependence upon the living Christ who still walks among His lampstands.*

The Invitation to See from Heaven

"A reputation for life is not life." The thought of that has left a lingering trace, like smoke in the air after the smoker has already passed by. We can't get away from the fact it was said. We want to but the memory of it persists. Sardis carries that unsettling quality. It tells us that somehow something remains, at the same time something essential has been lost.

And that leaves us with a question: a question too precious to push aside quickly.

What does Christ do when an earthly assembly continues to function, continues to meet, continues to bear a name, yet steadily loses its connection to the life from which it was born?

If Christ merely evaluates it, the letters become assessment reports. If He watches from a distance, waiting to see improvement, the matter collapses into human effort. But Sardis does not allow such earthly conclusions. It forces us beyond appearances to ask where Christ is, what

ministry He continues to exercise, and how heaven sees what a human perspective has learned to call alive.

For that journey, we are invited to join the apostle, John. Imprisoned in exile and surrounded by circumstances that should have convinced him he had been abandoned by God, John is about to be brought into the very perspective from which the condition of Sardis can finally be understood.

The quiet words with which John begins his account are so familiar that we can easily pass over them without noticing what is actually taking place. “I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day…” (Rev. 1:10). For most of us, those words merely establish the setting of an incredible vision. We picture an aged apostle on the rocky island of Patmos about to receive one of the most extraordinary revelations ever entrusted to a human being. Yet something even more profound is happening.

Before Christ reveals anything about the churches, He first does something within the man who will receive the revelation. That alone should arrest our attention. John isn’t just some random prophet about to receive a vision. He is the apostle who has spent decades pouring his life into these very assemblies. He is the one who remained. The one who watched the gospel spread throughout Asia. The one whose letters overflow with the language of a spiritual father.

Often, he writes “Beloved…” not because it is a formal church expression or a phrase expected of spiritual leaders, nor as language borrowed from religious life, but because that is truly how he sees them.

These are not anonymous congregations to him. They are people whose faces he knows. Voices he has heard. Lives into which he has poured himself. He has celebrated their victories. Grieved over their losses. Watched false teachers arise. Taught them how to identify false apostles among them. Rejoiced when truth prevailed. Endured persecution alongside them and at times on their behalf.

He would have carried them in his heart before the Lord through years of faithful apostolic labor. If anyone could accurately assess the spiritual condition of these assemblies from earth, surely it would be John. Who knew them better? Who loved them more faithfully? Who had invested more of himself into their maturity? Surely, if Christ were about to address these assemblies, He would first ask His beloved apostle what he had observed.

But He doesn’t.

Christ never asks John to evaluate the churches. He never asks him what concerns him about Ephesus. He never asks which assembly appears strongest. He never asks where he believes correction is needed.

Instead…

He meets him in the place heaven and earth unite. He meets him in the living sanctuary. And in that place John is taken in the Spirit. And as Paul might have written: in the body or out of the body we

do not know[1]. But one thing we do know. Everything changes in that moment. Not because John's love is insufficient. Not because his years of labor had been in vain. Not because his discernment was somehow flawed. Quite the opposite. He was now being entrusted with something greater: Christ's priestly heart for those He loved.

John does not leave his love behind as he ascends. His love ascends with him. His concerns ascend with him. His years of faithful stewardship ascend with him. Everything he has devotedly carried is gathered up into the presence of Christ. And there, something remarkable happens. His love is not diminished. It is purified by Christ's perspective. His knowledge is not discarded. It becomes subordinated when exposed to the reality of Christ's divine revelation. His years of faithful observation are not rejected. They are illuminated by the eyes of the One whose eyes are a flame of fire and who walks among the golden lampstands.[2]

The collision between every conclusion that can be reached from earth…

…and the reality that can only be seen from heaven, created an atmospheric transition zone.

Even in the natural we understand this phenomenon. Air masses with different temperatures and densities don't easily mix. Instead of simply blending, the boundary of each acts like a battleground where the denser air forces its way under or over the lighter air. And when winds blow toward the same destination and collide, it is called convergence. This spiritual convergence is not a tempest of judgment. It's not a typhoon of frightening prophecy. It's a storm of a different kind.

John already knows these people. He knows their history. Their strengths. Their weaknesses. Their leaders. Their struggles. But Christ is about to show him something that no amount of earthly faithfulness or spiritual discernment could ever reveal. Because there are things that can only be seen through Christ's eyes.

The astonishing thing is that this collision does not first happen when Jesus discusses Ephesus. It happens in John. The earthly steward meets with the heavenly High Priest, the living Christ. Human love encounters divine sight.

Heaven and earth touch—not first in the throne room—but within the yielded servant who is willing to surrender even his most mature understanding so that Christ alone becomes the final interpreter of everything he sees.

Perhaps this is why Revelation begins here. Christ is not merely preparing John to write seven letters. He is preparing John to receive what can only be seen through His eyes. Only then can John faithfully carry Christ's heart to the people he already loves. It's more than a heavenly perspective. It's not so that John can interpret what he sees and hears through his own spiritual senses. It's so that he can see that no one sees like Jesus. And perhaps that is where every steward must begin.

If the apostle whom Jesus loved…

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[1] 2 Cor. 12:2–3
[2] Rev. 1:12–14; 2:1, 18

If the man who leaned upon His breast…

If the steward who spent decades pouring out his life for these assemblies…

If even John must first ascend before speaking…

Then what hope do we have of seeing rightly while remaining content with the view from earth?

Perhaps the invitation was never intended for John alone. Perhaps it is Christ's continual invitation to every steward who desires to see His people as He sees them. Because there comes a moment when earth has reached the limits of its ability to interpret what is happening. And only heaven can finish the sentence.

Perhaps this is where every faithful steward eventually understands the question is no longer whether we have loved Christ faithfully. It is no longer whether we have served diligently or endured patiently. The question becomes whether we are willing to let the living Christ reinterpret everything we have faithfully come to know. Will we continue interpreting Christ through everything we have learned, or will we allow everything we have learned to be reinterpreted by Christ?

The High Priest Who Never Ceased Ministering

Some of us have been taught that the realities experienced by the apostles belonged to a unique chapter in the life of the church.

The stories remain in Scripture. The accounts are still read. We still marvel at Pentecost, at prophetic words, supernatural healings, visions, dreams, angelic visitations, and the remarkable ways the Holy Spirit moved among the first believers. Yet we have often been told these things belonged primarily to the birth of the church.

The explanations are usually sincere and often rooted in a desire to honor Scripture. God was establishing His church. The apostles were laying its foundation. The gospel was advancing into the world for the first time. Extraordinary signs accompanied their ministry because extraordinary circumstances required them. The signs confirmed the message. The gifts authenticated the apostles. The miraculous served the foundation being laid.

Then, as the explanation goes, the foundation was completed. The apostles died. The Scriptures were preserved. The church became established. What had been necessary for its beginning was no longer necessary for its continuation.

The Holy Spirit had not departed. God still saved. God still sanctified. God still answered prayer. God still guided His people through His Word. But many came to believe that certain manifestations associated with the apostolic era were not intended to continue as a normal expectation throughout the life of Christ's Ekklesia Assembly.

For generations, countless believers inherited this understanding. Many of us have learned to read the book of Acts as the history of the church's beginning rather than as a description of what might continue. The miracles remained in the text, but often not in expectation. The gifts remained on the

page, but largely as witnesses to the past. And so an entire framework gradually emerged. The question was no longer, “Why do we not see these things?” The question became, “Why would we expect to?”

Have we unintentionally learned to relate to Christ primarily through what He once did rather than through what He is continuing to do? And we will need to answer that question for ourselves before we can follow John beyond the limits of what can be seen from earth. Because long before John heard those words on Patmos, another group of disciples was already being prepared for that ascent. The transition did not begin in Revelation. It began on a road.

On the road to Emmaus, two disciples walked away from Jerusalem carrying disappointment, confusion, and grief. Their conversation revolved entirely around what Jesus had done, what they had hoped He would do, and what had now seemingly been lost. Their language was filled with the past. "We had hoped..." (Luke 24:21).

Jesus joins them, yet they do not recognize Him. That detail matters. The risen Christ is present, active, speaking, teaching, opening Scripture, and revealing Himself, while remaining hidden from their natural sight. Something new has begun. The resurrection did not simply prove that Jesus was alive. It began teaching His disciples how to relate to Him in a new way.

At Emmaus, Christ ministers to His people while unseen. He walks with them unseen. He teaches them unseen. He opens the Scriptures unseen. He kindles their hearts unseen. Only afterward are their eyes opened to recognize the One who had already been ministering to them the entire journey. Then He vanishes from their sight. Not because His ministry has ended. But because the lesson has begun.

What Emmaus demonstrates, the Upper Room discourse had already prepared them for. Before His crucifixion, Jesus repeatedly told His disciples that the relationship they had known with Him was about to change. “It is to your advantage that I go away” (John 16:7). At first those words seem almost impossible to believe. How could the absence of Christ ever be preferable to His presence? Yet Jesus was not describing His departure from ministry. He was describing a transition in ministry. The Holy Spirit would not replace Christ. The Holy Spirit would reveal Christ. “He will glorify Me.” “He will take what is Mine and declare it to you” (John 16:14). The Spirit would continue making known the same Christ who had walked beside them. The same Teacher. The same Shepherd. The same Lord. The same Son revealing the Father. And Hebrews shows us where this continuing communion has brought us.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, through His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let’s approach God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water (Hebrews 10:19–22 NASB).

What they had once experienced through Christ’s physical nearness would now be experienced through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The form changed. The ministry did not. The ascension did

not end Christ's ministry. The death, burial, resurrection, and ascension made possible a new way for Christ to connect with His people: by the Spirit. And that transition was never temporary.

It was not merely a bridge between the first century and the establishment of the church. It did not belong exclusively to the apostles. It was the very means by which the ascended Christ would continue sharing His life with His people until the end of the age. The same Spirit who opened the Scriptures on the road to Emmaus still opens them. The same Spirit who revealed Christ to the apostles still reveals Him. The same Spirit who made the presence of the risen Lord known among the first believers still makes Him known.

What changed at the ascension has never changed back. We do not relate to Christ through physical sight. We relate to Him by the Spirit. We do not walk beside Him along the roads of Galilee. We walk with Him through the communion made possible by the Holy Spirit.

This is why the New Testament speaks so naturally of Christ dwelling in His people, guiding His people, teaching His people, strengthening His people, comforting His people, and making Himself known among His people. The apostles did not speak of Christ merely as One who had ministered. They spoke of Him as One who was ministering still. For them, communion with Christ was not the memory of a relationship. It was the continuation of one.

This is what I mean by living communion.

Not merely remembering Christ. Not merely preserving His teaching. Not merely honoring what He once did. Living communion is the ongoing participation of His people in the life of the risen Christ through the Holy Spirit. It is the continuing fellowship of a living Lord with a living people.

Yet living communion does not erase the distinction between the One who is seen and those who are learning to see through Him. The Holy Spirit truly reveals Christ. He truly teaches, guides, comforts, reminds, convicts, and makes known the things of Christ. Through the Spirit we genuinely participate in His life. We are not left with memories of Christ. We are brought into present fellowship with Him. But participation does not make us the Christ with whom we commune. The disciple remains dependent upon the Lord whose life he shares.

This is where the vision of Isaiah becomes important. Speaking of Messiah, Isaiah says: "He will not judge by what His eyes see, nor make a decision by what His ears hear" (Isaiah 11:3 NASB). The prophet is describing a way of seeing that belongs to Christ alone. Human beings naturally interpret reality through appearance. We evaluate outward conditions. We draw conclusions from what seems obvious. Even when we learn to walk in the Spirit, we remain dependent upon revelation because we still do not possess the fullness of Christ's sight. We see truly, but we do not see completely. We discern genuinely, but we do not discern perfectly.

Christ sees what remains hidden to everyone else. He sees beneath reputation. He sees beneath activity. He sees beneath apparent success and apparent failure. He sees what is taking place beneath the surface where human observation can no longer reach. He sees through divine eyes. He sees from heaven's perspective. He sees through His love.

The Spirit gives us participation in His life, but participation continually teaches us our dependence upon His sight. This is precisely why John's encounter with the risen Christ is so significant. If anyone might have seemed capable of evaluating the assemblies correctly, it would have been John. He had walked with Jesus. He had known the Lord's voice for decades. He had spent years caring for these assemblies. He knew their stories, their struggles, their strengths, and their failures. He loved them deeply. Yet before John can carry Christ's assessment of the assemblies, he must encounter the risen Christ who walks among them.

The lesson is profound. Christ does not begin by asking John what he thinks about Ephesus. He does not ask for John's assessment of Sardis. He does not request a report concerning Laodicea. Instead, John is first confronted with the risen Christ Himself. Before he sees the assemblies, he sees the One who walks among the lampstands. Before he hears Christ's evaluation, he must surrender his own. Before he can understand the true condition of these assemblies, he must first behold the One whose eyes are like a flame of fire.

Living communion is real. It is precious. It is the continuing fellowship of Christ with His people through the Holy Spirit. But one of the greatest gifts living communion gives us is the continual reminder that no one sees as Christ sees. The closer we walk with Him, the more deeply we discover our need of His perspective. For there are things that can only be seen from where He stands.

What Was Born Through Living Communion

Once John beholds the risen Christ, something subtle but profound begins to change in the way the letters themselves are read. Most of us approach the letters as evaluations. We read them as assessments of spiritual condition. Christ identifies strengths, exposes weaknesses, offers correction, and promises reward. The assemblies become the primary subject of the conversation, and the letters function almost as heavenly report cards.

Yet when we begin reading the letters through the vision John has just received, another reality begins to emerge. The central figure is not Ephesus. The central figure is not Smyrna. The central figure is not Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, or Laodicea. The central figure is the One walking among the lampstands.

Before John sees a single assembly, he sees Christ. Before he hears a single correction, he beholds the High Priest. Before he receives a single message, he encounters the One whose eyes are like a flame of fire and whose presence fills the sanctuary.

The letters are not first about assemblies under examination. They are about a living Christ who continues ministering among a people He refuses to abandon.

When viewed this way, the letters begin sounding less like evaluation and more like priesthood. Less like inspection and more like guardianship. Less like a distant judge issuing verdicts and more like the faithful High Priest tending the sanctuary entrusted to His care. The sanctuary is no longer a building made of stone. The sanctuary is His people. The living temple. The gathered assemblies.

The lampstands among which He continues to walk. He is not absent from them. He is among them. He is not waiting for reports. He is already present. He has not ceased ministering. He is ministering still. This becomes especially clear as we arrive at Ephesus.

Ephesus—The Quiet Departure from Living Communion

On the surface, Ephesus appears remarkably healthy. Christ acknowledges their labor. He acknowledges their perseverance. He acknowledges their discernment. He acknowledges their refusal to tolerate falsehood. He even commends their willingness to expose those falsely claiming apostolic authority. By every ordinary measure, this appears to be a flourishing assembly. Yet Christ sees something no earthly observer could easily detect. Beneath the visible faithfulness, He identifies a subtle separation taking place. Beneath the perseverance, beneath the doctrinal vigilance, beneath years of labor and sacrifice, He sees something being exchanged.

"You have left your first love." The warning is startling precisely because it is not addressed to obvious failure. Christ is not confronting open rebellion. He is not exposing gross compromise. He is not correcting public scandal. He is addressing something far more subtle. Something that can happen while much of what is visible continues functioning.

The more carefully we listen to Christ's words to Ephesus, the more surprising they become. Nothing in His opening observations prepares us for what He is about to say. "I know your deeds." "I know your labor." "I know your perseverance." "I know you cannot tolerate evil men." "I know you tested those who call themselves apostles." "I know you have endured." "I know you have not grown weary."

One commendation follows another until it almost seems there could be nothing left to address. This is not an assembly characterized by compromise. It is not careless with truth. It has not surrendered to false teaching. It has labored faithfully. It has guarded the testimony entrusted to it. It has persevered through difficulty without abandoning its responsibility. Every outward indication suggests remarkable spiritual health.

Perhaps this is exactly why Christ begins here.

If the problem were obvious, no heavenly revelation would be necessary. If open rebellion had erupted among them, even earthly observation could have identified it. But the One walking among the lampstands does not merely see what everyone else sees. He sees beneath what everyone else faithfully celebrates.

Then, after affirming everything that can honestly be affirmed, He speaks the words that cause every steward to stop breathing.

"But I have this against you…" (Revelation 2:4 NASB).

How can that be?

How can a people so faithful in labor, so careful with truth, so steadfast in endurance, still hear those words from the lips of Christ? The answer reaches far deeper than their activity. It reaches

the source from which that activity once flowed. “You have left your first love.” The tragedy is not that the works disappeared. They remained. The labor remained. The endurance remained. Their discernment remained. Their commitment to truth remained. What changed was not necessarily what they were doing.

What changed was the place from which those things were being sustained.

That is a profoundly different diagnosis.

Christ does not condemn their labor. He never tells them to become less discerning. He never asks them to stop serving. He never suggests they abandon their perseverance. Everything He commends remains genuinely good because it still bears the marks of His own life. His concern is not with the fruit. His concern is with the life from which the fruit was first born.

Somewhere beneath years of faithful service, something precious had begun slipping quietly into the background. The communion from which everything had first emerged was no longer occupying the same place.

The assembly still remembered Christ. They still defended Christ. They still labored for Christ. But remembering Him is not the same as abiding in Him. Defending truth is not the same as drawing life from the Truth Himself. Serving Christ is not the same as lingering with Christ. This is why Christ’s words are so searching. He is not exposing obvious failure. He is exposing subtle substitution.

The danger is almost invisible because everything valuable still appears to be present. The works continue. Ministry continues. Faithfulness continues. The testimony continues. Yet something has quietly begun carrying what only living communion was ever meant to sustain.

Experience begins replacing dependence. Memory begins replacing fellowship. Habit begins replacing hunger. The strength accumulated through years of faithful service begins quietly replacing the continual supply of the One who still walks among His lampstands.

No earthly observer would naturally diagnose such a condition. In fact, many would celebrate it. We instinctively measure what can be seen. Christ measures what gives life to what is seen.

This is why the letters cannot be read merely as evaluations. They are the continuing ministry of the great High Priest.[1] He is not searching for faults to condemn. He is guarding the flame from which every true work proceeds. He refuses to allow His people to mistake faithful activity for living communion.

Suddenly His invitation to “remember… repent… and do the deeds you did at first” (Rev. 2:5 NASB) takes on an entirely different meaning. He is not asking them to become more productive. He is inviting them back to the place where everything began. Back to the place where serving flowed from abiding. Where labor flowed from love. Where discernment flowed from fellowship. Where

[1] Referencing Hebrews 4:14

every work was sustained, not by accumulated strength, but by continual participation in His own life. Only then do we begin to understand why Ephesus stands at the beginning of the seven letters.

Christ is not merely correcting one assembly. He is giving His people the interpretive key for everything that follows. Every remaining letter will reveal another way the flame may be threatened. Every remaining letter will uncover another substitute capable of quietly replacing living communion. But the first warning is the deepest. What was born through living communion must continue through living communion.

Smyrna—The Communion That Suffering Could Not Steal

At first glance, Smyrna almost seems out of place. There is no rebuke.

No warning that something has been abandoned. No call to remember where they had fallen. No exposure of hidden compromise. Instead, Christ speaks to a people surrounded by suffering. Poverty presses upon them. Persecution threatens them. Prison awaits some of them. Death itself stands before them as a real possibility.

If we were evaluating the assemblies from earth, Smyrna might appear to be among the weakest. Their circumstances certainly offered little evidence of blessing. Nothing about their outward condition suggested success. They possessed neither influence nor security. They had no impressive reputation to protect. Everything visible appeared fragile. Yet Christ returns to the words, "I know…"

Once again, the High Priest speaks as the One walking among the lampstands. He does not begin with what others see. He begins with what He Himself knows. "I know your tribulation." "I know your poverty…" "…but you are rich."[1] What an astonishing reversal. The assembly that appeared poor was rich. The assembly under pressure was secure. The assembly threatened with death possessed a life that persecution itself could not extinguish. Then we begin seeing another dimension of Christ's concern. External suffering is not His greatest danger. Pressure from the world cannot steal what only communion supplies.

In fact, persecution often accomplishes the opposite. It strips away every false support until dependence upon Christ becomes almost instinctive. When earthly securities disappear, living communion often becomes more precious, not less. The very hardships Satan intends to destroy Christ's people frequently become the means by which they cling more closely to the One who walks among them.

This explains why Smyrna receives no rebuke. Not because suffering is enjoyable. Not because persecution is desirable. But because the flame is still burning. The circumstances are severe. The communion remains alive. The life from which everything began is still present. What Ephesus teaches us from one direction, Smyrna confirms from another. The greatest threat to Christ's people is not suffering. It is substitution.

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[1] Revelation 2:9 NASB

The enemy would gladly exchange persecution for comfort if comfort could quietly accomplish what persecution never could: persuading God's people that they can continue without living dependence upon Christ Himself.

The High Priest, however, sees something entirely different. He is not measuring comfort. He is not measuring influence. He is not measuring visible success. He is tending the flame. And in Smyrna, despite all they endure, the lamp is still burning.

Pergamum—When Another Voice Is Welcomed Alongside Christ

If Ephesus reveals the subtle loss of living communion, Pergamum reveals the danger that almost inevitably follows. Once the life Christ Himself supplies is no longer held as the sole source of our strength, other influences begin finding room within the life of His people. The movement is rarely sudden. It seldom begins with open rebellion. More often it begins with accommodation. What was once recognized as foreign gradually becomes familiar. What was once resisted quietly becomes tolerated. The substitute that first appeared almost unnoticed now begins taking its place alongside what Christ alone was meant to provide.

Yet even here Christ begins as He has before. "I know where you dwell" (Rev. 2:13). He acknowledges their difficult circumstances. He recognizes the pressure under which they have remained faithful. They have not denied His name. They have continued holding fast even in the place where Satan's throne is said to be. Once again, the High Priest first acknowledges everything that genuinely reflects His own life. His words remind us that He is not searching for reasons to condemn His people. He is faithfully tending the sanctuary entrusted to His care.

Then His attention turns toward something more subtle.

"You have some there…" (Rev. 2:14).

The words are striking because Christ does not immediately describe an entire assembly abandoning Him. Instead, He points to influences that have been allowed to remain among them. The danger is no longer merely what individual believers carry within their own hearts. Another way of thinking has begun finding a place within the fellowship itself. Something foreign has been permitted to exist alongside the life Christ is cultivating.

This is the nature of mixture. Mixture rarely demands that Christ be rejected altogether. It simply insists that Christ need not be enough. His voice remains present, but it is no longer the only voice shaping His people. Other loyalties begin sharing the same space. Other sources begin informing their judgments. Other desires quietly begin directing their affections. The life Christ first imparted is not openly abandoned. It is simply joined by influences that slowly compete for the same ground.

Perhaps this explains why Scripture so often warns against divided hearts. The issue has never been merely outward compromise. The issue is always communion. Living communion with Christ possesses a beautiful simplicity because everything flows from Him. As long as He remains the fountain, His life continues nourishing every branch. But the moment other wells begin supplying what only He was intended to provide, the life of the assembly inevitably becomes divided.

The references to Balaam help us see this even more clearly. Balaam understood that God's people could not easily be defeated from the outside. If they remained faithfully joined to the Lord, no curse could prevail against them. The only successful strategy was to entice them into something they willingly embraced themselves. The greatest danger was never external opposition. It was internal mixture.

That pattern has not changed.

The enemy rarely succeeds by convincing Christ's people to abandon Him altogether. Far more often he succeeds by persuading them to add something alongside Him. Christ remains honored. His name continues to be confessed. His truth is still affirmed. Yet other influences quietly begin supplying identity, wisdom, security, purpose, or success. Communion with Christ is no longer abandoned, but it is no longer exclusive.

The High Priest immediately recognizes the danger because He knows what mixture eventually produces. Every competing influence gradually forms the heart that welcomes it. What begins as accommodation eventually becomes formation. The substitute first tolerated eventually begins shaping the life of the people themselves.

This is why Pergamum naturally prepares us for Thyatira. Christ is not merely exposing another problem. He is showing us the progression. What first began at Ephesus as a quiet departure from living communion has now created room for another influence to dwell among His people. Unless that movement is arrested, the substitute will eventually become formative. Another voice will begin shaping the very people Christ Himself longs to form.

Once again, the concern beneath the surface is not simply doctrine or morality. It is the protection of the life that flows only from living communion. The One walking among the lampstands refuses to allow anything to quietly occupy the place that belongs to Him alone.

Thyatira—When Another Voice Begins Forming His People

By the time we arrive at Thyatira, the pattern Christ first revealed at Ephesus has become even more apparent. At Ephesus, the danger was almost invisible. The labor remained. The endurance remained. The doctrine remained. Everything that could be observed from earth still appeared healthy, yet Christ saw that the living communion from which those things had first been born was quietly being replaced by something else. Thyatira reveals what happens when that subtle exchange is allowed to continue. The movement away from living communion has now begun shaping the life of the assembly itself.

Once again Christ begins, not with correction, but with affirmation. He says, "I know your deeds, your love, your faith, your service, and your perseverance" (Rev. 2:19 NASB). Even more remarkable, He declares that their latter deeds exceed the first. From every outward appearance, this assembly seems to be advancing rather than declining. Their service has increased. Their works have multiplied. They have not become inactive or indifferent. If someone were evaluating

the assembly from the outside, Thyatira might easily be celebrated as a growing and fruitful fellowship.

Yet once again, the One who walks among the lampstands sees what no one else naturally sees. After acknowledging everything that genuinely reflects His own life, He speaks the words that have now become familiar throughout these letters: “But I have this against you” (Rev. 2:20 NASB). Just as at Ephesus, the issue is not first their activity. Christ does not rebuke their service, their perseverance, or even their increasing works. His concern lies beneath all of those things. He sees that something foreign has been allowed to remain within the very life He is tending.

The key to the entire letter may be found in a single word: “You tolerate” (Rev. 2:20 NASB). Christ is no longer describing something attacking His people from outside. He is describing something that has been welcomed, permitted, or simply left unchallenged within the assembly itself. The danger has become more than an inward substitution of dependence. Another voice has begun occupying space within the life of God’s people. Something other than Christ is now exerting influence over those whom He Himself desires to form.

This reveals something profoundly important about living communion. Communion with Christ is never merely private devotion or inward affection. To remain in communion with Him is to remain continually formed by Him. His presence is active. His Spirit teaches, convicts, comforts, leads, and continually reveals the Son. Living communion is therefore always living formation. As long as Christ Himself remains the One shaping His people, His own life continues to flow freely through them. But when another voice gradually assumes that place, the outward expressions of faith may continue even while the source from which they arise has begun to change.

Perhaps this is why Christ identifies Jezebel before He speaks about the consequences of her influence. The deepest issue is not merely false teaching. False teaching is only the visible manifestation of something more fundamental. Someone other than Christ has begun shaping the hearts, desires, and imaginations of His people. Another source has begun participating in the formation that rightly belongs to Him alone.

Formation always works quietly. It is rarely dramatic in the beginning. It does not usually announce itself as rebellion against Christ. Instead, it slowly reshapes how a people think, what they value, how they interpret success, what they desire, and even what they expect from God. Little by little, another influence begins supplying what only living communion with Christ was ever intended to provide. The people may not even recognize that the change has occurred because so much of their outward faithfulness continues exactly as before.

This is why Christ speaks so firmly. He is not protecting His authority out of possessiveness or insecurity. He is protecting the source of His people’s life. He knows that whoever continually forms a people will inevitably shape the life they express. If another voice becomes their primary influence, another life will gradually begin appearing, even while the language of faith and the activities of ministry remain remarkably familiar.

Perhaps this is one of the greatest dangers facing every generation of Christ's people. We rarely abandon Christ in a single decisive moment. More often, we simply begin listening to other voices with equal or greater attentiveness. Our thinking slowly adopts categories borrowed from the world around us. Our expectations become governed by different measures. Our desires are quietly reshaped by influences we scarcely recognize. Without intending to leave Christ, we gradually allow other voices to participate in the work of forming us.

Yet even here the heart of the High Priest remains unchanged. The One who exposes the substitute is the same One who desires to restore communion. He is still walking among His lampstands. He is still tending the flame. He is still guarding the life He Himself placed within His people. His purpose is not merely to expose deception but to preserve the living fellowship from which every true expression of His life is born.

Seen in this light, Thyatira is no longer simply a warning about a false prophetess in the first century. It becomes another expression of Christ's continuing priestly ministry. The One who first called His people into communion now refuses to allow another voice to quietly occupy the place that belongs to Him alone. What was born through living communion can only continue through living communion.

Sardis—When Reputation Outlives Living Communion

By the time we arrive at Sardis, the progression Christ has been revealing reaches its most sobering expression. What began at Ephesus as a quiet departure from living communion has now become visible. The substitute has matured. The hidden movement beneath the surface has finally produced an outward condition that even Christ Himself describes in startling language.

"I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead" (Rev. 3:1 NASB). Few words in all of the seven letters are more unsettling than these. Notice what Christ does not say. He does not say they once possessed a reputation. He says they have one now. The reputation is current. The appearance remains convincing.

Others still recognize Sardis as a living assembly. They continue gathering. Ministry continues. The rhythms of congregational life continue. Whatever observers use to measure spiritual vitality still seems sufficiently present that Sardis has become known as a place where life exists.

Yet the One who walks among the lampstands sees something entirely different.

This is precisely why John first had to encounter the risen Christ before carrying these letters. Had he remained content with the view from earth, Sardis might have appeared successful. Reputation can only be evaluated from below. Life can only be evaluated from above. Christ alone possesses the authority to distinguish between the two.

How terrifying that distinction truly is.

A reputation is something carried in the minds of others. Life is something carried within the fellowship of Christ Himself. The two may often exist together, but they are not the same thing. One

may continue long after the other has begun to fade. Perhaps this is the most sobering discovery Christ has yet revealed. No assembly suddenly arrives at Sardis.

Reputations are not built overnight. They are earned through years of faithful labor, faithful teaching, faithful endurance, faithful stewardship, and faithful witness. Everything Christ commended at Ephesus may very well have contributed to the reputation Sardis now possesses. The tragedy is not that those earlier years were false. The tragedy is that yesterday's faithfulness can quietly become today's identity while today's communion gradually diminishes.

This is why Sardis cannot be understood apart from the letters that precede it. At Ephesus, Christ protected the source. At Pergamum, He warned against mixture. At Thyatira, He exposed the voices shaping His people. Now, at Sardis, we see where those quiet substitutions eventually lead.

The life once supplied through continual fellowship with Christ has slowly become sustained through memory, experience, giftedness, established patterns, accumulated wisdom, and institutional strength. Nothing necessarily appears broken. In many ways, everything continues functioning exactly as it always has. The machinery of faithfulness continues moving. The language remains familiar. The structure remains intact. Yet beneath all of it, Christ sees that the living supply from which everything first emerged is no longer filling the lamp as it once did.

This is why the letter to Sardis has never merely been about spiritual death. Christ immediately adds, "Strengthen what remains and is about to die" (Rev. 3:2). Those words reveal remarkable hope. Even here the High Priest has not abandoned His sanctuary. He still sees something worth preserving. Beneath the ashes He still recognizes embers capable of burning brightly once again. The issue is not that Christ has stopped ministering. The issue is that His people must once again receive the life He has never ceased supplying.

Notice, too, what Christ does not prescribe. He does not tell them to invent new ministries. He does not urge greater productivity. He does not recommend more impressive programs. Instead, He calls them to remember, to receive again, to keep, and to repent. Every one of those invitations leads them back toward dependence rather than performance. The solution is not creating something new. It is returning to the communion from which everything true was originally born.

Perhaps this is why Sardis strikes the heart with such force. Every faithful steward eventually faces the same question. Not whether people still appreciate the ministry. Not whether the work continues. Not whether the structure remains strong. The question becomes infinitely more personal.

Is the lamp still burning?

Not the memory of yesterday's fire.

Not the reputation built by yesterday's faithfulness.

Not the influence established through years of faithful labor.

Today.

Now.

Is the living Christ still supplying the life from which everything else flows?

Only the One walking among the lampstands can answer that question with perfect clarity. He alone sees beneath appearances. He alone distinguishes reputation from reality. And because He alone sees truly, He alone can restore what still remains.

The letter to Sardis, therefore, is not written to produce despair. It is written to awaken hope before the flame disappears altogether. The High Priest is still walking. The oil has not ceased flowing. The invitation remains exactly what it has always been. Return to the living communion from which every true expression of Christ's life is born. For what was born through living communion can never be sustained by reputation alone.

Philadelphia—The Continual Life of Dependence

After the searching words addressed to Sardis, the letter to Philadelphia arrives almost like the first light of dawn after a long night. Christ has walked with us through the hidden departures of Ephesus, the subtle mixture of Pergamum, the competing voices of Thyatira, and the frightening possibility that an entire reputation may continue after living communion has begun to fade. By the time we reach Philadelphia, we almost expect another warning. Another diagnosis. Another exposure of what has quietly gone wrong.

Instead, we find something altogether different.

Once again, Christ begins by revealing Himself before He speaks about His people. "He who is holy, He who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens" (Rev. 3:7 NASB). Before He says anything about Philadelphia, He reminds them that every true entrance, every genuine opportunity, every lasting work remains entirely within His own authority. Nothing in this assembly depends upon human strength. Nothing rests upon reputation. Nothing is sustained by influence. Everything begins and ends with the One who still holds the key.

Perhaps this is exactly why Philadelphia becomes such a beautiful answer to everything we have seen thus far.

"I know your deeds."

The familiar words return once more, but this time they are followed by no rebuke. There is no hidden substitution to expose. No competing influence to confront. No fading reputation to awaken. Instead, Christ simply says, "Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut" (Rev. 3:8 NASB).

Notice carefully whose action this is. Christ opens the door. Not their giftedness. Not their influence. Not their experience. Not their remarkable strength. The ministry that unfolds before Philadelphia is not something they have successfully built. It is something Christ Himself has opened. Then He explains why. "For you have a little strength" (Rev. 3:8 NASB). Those words are almost startling.

Had Christ been speaking according to earthly wisdom, we might have expected Him to praise their extraordinary power, their exceptional leadership, or their visible success. Instead, He acknowledges their weakness.

Not their failure.

Their weakness.

How different this is from the measurements we naturally make.

The world admires visible strength. Religion often admires visible strength as well. We celebrate impressive ministries, expanding influence, remarkable giftedness, and measurable results. Yet the High Priest speaks with an entirely different vocabulary. He is not embarrassed by a people who possess little strength because little strength often leaves far more room for continual dependence.

Perhaps this is what Christ has been protecting throughout every previous letter. Living communion flourishes most beautifully where dependence remains intact. The danger at Ephesus was never labor itself. It was labor quietly becoming independent of communion. The danger at Pergamum was never merely false teaching. It was allowing another source to stand beside Christ. The danger at Thyatira was never simply deception. It was another voice beginning to shape His people. The danger at Sardis was never reputation by itself. It was reputation surviving after dependence had quietly diminished.

Philadelphia reveals the opposite. Nothing here suggests self-sufficiency. Nothing suggests confidence in accumulated strength. Nothing suggests reliance upon reputation. Their little strength leaves no room for the illusion that they are sustaining themselves. Whatever remains among them must be received from Christ. And perhaps that is part of what makes His next words so significant: “You have kept My word and have not denied My name” (Revelation 3:8 NASB). Their strength may be little, but their dependence has not turned elsewhere.

His Word continues shaping them because His presence continues sustaining them. His name remains precious because they have never ceased drawing life from the One who bears it. Obedience here is not the product of remarkable discipline alone. It is the quiet fruit of a people who have remained near enough to Christ that His own life continues finding expression through them.

This is the greatest surprise Philadelphia has to offer. The assembly possessing the least apparent strength receives the greatest assurance. The assembly with no impressive reputation receives an open door no one can close. In their little strength, they remain dependent upon the One who opens the door and entrusts them with what lies beyond it. We begin seeing the seven letters from an entirely different perspective.

Christ has not been searching for the strongest assemblies. He has been preserving the most dependent people. Everything He corrected in the previous letters now finds its answer here. The flame continues burning because the oil has never ceased flowing. Communion has remained

living because dependence has remained continual. Nothing has replaced the quiet fellowship from which everything true is born. Perhaps this is why Philadelphia stands so near the end of the seven letters.

It is not merely another assembly among seven.

It is the living picture of what Christ has been protecting from the very beginning.

The High Priest has not spent these letters searching for faults to expose. He has been guarding a relationship. He has been preserving the continual fellowship through which His own life becomes visible among His people. Everything He warned against threatened that fellowship. Everything He commended protected it.

Seen this way, Philadelphia becomes much more than an encouraging letter to a faithful assembly. It becomes Christ's own testimony concerning the kind of people among whom He delights to dwell.

Not the strongest.

Not the most celebrated.

Not the most impressive.

But those who have never outgrown their need of Him.

For the lamp burns most brightly wherever the life of Christ continues to be received as continually as it was on the day it was first given.

Laodicea—The Complete Illusion of Self-Sufficiency

The journey through the seven letters reaches its final destination at Laodicea. Yet after everything Christ has revealed, His last concern is not what we might naturally expect. He does not conclude with the greatest persecution. He does not conclude with the most dangerous false teaching. He does not conclude with the strongest opposition from the world. Instead, He concludes with something far more subtle and, perhaps, far more dangerous. He concludes with a people who no longer recognize their need of Him. There is something profoundly sobering about that realization.

The greatest threat to living communion is not always suffering. It is not always deception. It is not always compromise. Sometimes the greatest danger is simply arriving at a place where we sincerely believe we possess everything necessary to continue without continually receiving from Christ Himself.

The contrast with Philadelphia could hardly be more striking. Philadelphia confessed little strength. Laodicea confessed no need. The difference between those two assemblies is not primarily the amount of ministry they accomplished, the influence they possessed, or the circumstances they endured. The difference lies in where they believed life was found.

Christ begins as He always has. "I know your deeds" (Rev. 3:15 NASB).

Once again, the High Priest speaks as the One who walks among the lampstands. Nothing has escaped His attention. Nothing has been hidden from His sight. Every step of this journey has reminded us that Christ always sees beneath appearances, and Laodicea proves no exception. For while the assembly speaks confidently about itself, Christ quietly reveals a reality they cannot yet perceive.

"You say, 'I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'" (Rev. 3:17 NASB). Those words may be among the most revealing in all seven letters. Notice that Christ does not accuse them of making false claims intentionally. There is no suggestion that they are deliberately deceiving others. They genuinely believe what they are saying. In their own understanding, they have become complete. They possess resources. They possess confidence. They possess stability. They possess everything they believe is necessary for continuing the life of the assembly. This is what makes Laodicea so profoundly tragic.

The greatest deception is not believing something false about Christ.

It is believing something false about ourselves.

As long as a people remain conscious of their need, they continue seeking the One who alone can satisfy it. But the moment they become persuaded that nothing essential is lacking, the pursuit itself begins quietly fading. Communion slowly gives way to confidence. Dependence quietly yields to self-sufficiency. The continual receiving of life is gradually replaced by the assumption that yesterday's supply is sufficient for today's journey.

Perhaps this is why Christ's diagnosis sounds so completely different from their own assessment.

"You do not know…" (Rev. 3:17 NASB).

How heartbreaking those words are. The people who believe they see most clearly are the very ones who no longer recognize their true condition. The people who consider themselves rich have become poor. The people who believe themselves secure stand in desperate need. The people who imagine themselves clothed are exposed before the One whose eyes penetrate every appearance. Once again, heaven and earth describe the same assembly in entirely different ways.

Everything we discovered when John first encountered the risen Christ in the Spirit now reaches its fullest expression. Earth says one thing. Heaven says another. The difference is not perspective alone. The difference is Christ. Only the One walking among the lampstands sees reality as it truly is.

Yet even here, after the strongest diagnosis of all seven letters, Christ's heart remains astonishingly tender. He counsels. He invites. He calls. He stands at the door and knocks. How remarkable that the One who possesses every right to pronounce final judgment instead extends fellowship. The image is deeply moving.

The High Priest who has walked among His lampstands throughout every letter now stands outside knocking, not because His love has diminished, but because He refuses to force Himself upon those who have gradually learned to live without consciously depending upon Him.

His invitation has never changed.

“If anyone hears My voice and opens the door…” (Rev. 3:20 NASB).

Everything returns to communion. Not merely forgiveness. Not merely restoration. Communion. “I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me” (Rev. 3:20 NASB). The final promise is not first about victory. It is about shared fellowship.

The meal recalls the intimacy from which every true work was originally born. It reminds us that Christ has never sought servants before sons, activity before abiding, or performance before presence. From the beginning of these letters until their conclusion, His deepest desire has remained exactly the same. He longs to share His own life with His people.

Perhaps this is why the sequence of the seven letters ends here. Laodicea is not the conclusion because Christ has finally found the worst assembly. It is the conclusion because He has exposed the final substitute. After memory. After mixture. After competing voices. After reputation. After every other exchange has been uncovered…

…the last substitute standing is self-sufficiency.

The belief that we can continue what only Christ can sustain. And with that discovery, the entire journey suddenly turns our eyes back toward Philadelphia.

The people before whom Christ placed an open door were not those who believed they possessed everything they needed. They were those of whom He could say, “you have a little strength,” yet they had kept His word and had not denied His name. The contrast with Laodicea could hardly be clearer: one assembly possessed little strength, while the other believed it had need of nothing.

Now something running through every letter becomes wonderfully clear. The High Priest has not merely been conducting inspections. He has been preserving communion. Every warning has protected it. Every correction has restored it. Every promise has flowed from it. Every lamp has been tended for its sake.

For what was born through living communion can never be sustained through self-sufficiency, no matter how sincere, how experienced, or how successful that self-sufficiency may appear. The life that Christ first breathed into His people must continue to be received from the same living Christ who still walks among His lampstands, still tends His sanctuary, and still lovingly calls His people to open the door and share His table once again.

These letters don’t simply move from bad assemblies to good assemblies. They move through progressively deeper substitutes for communion until only one question remains: **“**Where does your life come from today?”

Ephesus answers, “Not yesterday’s love.”

Smyrna answers, “Still alive under pressure.”

Pergamum answers, “Not another source.”

Thyatira answers, “Not another voice.”

Sardis answers, “Not yesterday’s reputation.”

Philadelphia answers, “Still from Christ.”

Laodicea answers, “Not from yourself.”

If that’s true—and I think it may be one of the deepest discoveries throughout our Life Made Visible journey—then the seven letters are not primarily seven diagnoses. They are seven successive unveilings of the High Priest’s unwavering commitment to preserve the living communion through which His own life continues to become visible in His people.

When we look at the progression:

Living communion is quietly departed from.

Suffering cannot steal it.

Mixture competes with it.

Another voice begins forming in its place.

Reputation survives after it.

Dependence preserves it.

Self-sufficiency finally abandons it.

These are no longer seven independent letters. They convey one continuous revelation from the High Priest walking among His lampstands.

Participating in the Continuing Ministry of Christ

Priesthood is not the authority to act for Christ. It is the privilege of participating with Christ in His continuing ministry. The privilege of a priest is not that Christ entrusts His sanctuary to us and departs. It is that He brings us into His sanctuary so that we may participate in His continuing guardianship under the ministry of our great High Priest.

A Kingdom of Priests

The seven letters leave us with a remarkable realization. The High Priest has never ceased walking among His lampstands. He has never ceased tending the flame. He has never ceased guarding the life He Himself placed within His people. Every warning, every correction, every promise, and every

invitation has revealed the same unwavering concern. Christ continues faithfully ministering within His sanctuary.

That discovery, however, immediately raises another question.

If Christ Himself continues exercising His priestly ministry, what place do His people now occupy within that ongoing work?

The New Testament answers that question in a way that is both familiar and astonishing. Peter calls us "a royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9). John writes that Christ "has made us a kingdom and priests unto His God and Father" (Rev. 1:6 NASB). The book of Revelation repeats the same testimony more than once. These descriptions are not poetic expressions intended merely to elevate our sense of worth. They are revealing something essential about the nature of our calling. Christ has not simply redeemed a people. He has constituted a priesthood.

The Scriptures could have identified us in countless ways. They call us sons and daughters. They call us the body of Christ, His bride, His flock, His temple, His household, His workmanship, and His inheritance. Yet alongside all of these beautiful descriptions, the Spirit repeatedly returns to this priestly identity. The question is not whether we are priests. The question is why.

Perhaps we have become so accustomed to hearing the language that we no longer feel its weight. Priesthood has often been treated as another theological category to be studied rather than as the very nature of the life into which Christ has brought His people. Yet if the Holy Spirit repeatedly identifies us in this way, we must ask what He intends us to understand.

The answer cannot be that Christ has somehow relinquished His own priesthood. Hebrews leaves no room for such a conclusion. Jesus Christ remains our great High Priest. His ministry did not conclude with His ascension. On the contrary, His ascension brought Him into the heavenly ministry Hebrews now reveals Him exercising on behalf of His people. He ever lives to make intercession. He continually ministers within the true sanctuary not made with human hands.[1] There is, therefore, only one High Priest.

If that is true, then our priesthood can never be independent of His.

That realization quietly transforms everything.

We are not priests because Christ has stepped away and entrusted His sanctuary to our care. We are priests because Christ has drawn us into His own ministry. Our priesthood is not parallel to His. It is participatory. Every privilege we possess flows from our union with the One who remains the great High Priest over the household of God.

This is precisely why the seven letters have reshaped our understanding of stewardship. Throughout Revelation we never observe Christ standing at a distance while His people attempt to preserve the testimony on their own. We never find Him delegating His concern and withdrawing

[1] Hebrews 7:25, 8:1–2 and 9:11, 24,

from His sanctuary. We find Him walking among His lampstands. We find Him tending the flame. We find Him guarding the life He Himself imparted. The ministry remains His because the sanctuary remains His.

Yet the wonder of the gospel is that He does not guard His sanctuary alone.

The One who shares His own life with His people also shares His own concern. Through the Holy Spirit, the burden of the High Priest begins to take shape within the hearts of those who belong to Him. His love becomes the source of their love. His discernment becomes the source of their discernment. His vigilance becomes the source of their stewardship. They do not merely observe His ministry. They begin participating in it because they are united with the One who is still faithfully carrying it forward.

Perhaps this is where our understanding of priesthood has often become too small. We have tended to think of priests primarily as those who perform sacred duties. Scripture presents something much deeper. A priest is one whose life is given to the presence of God, whose heart becomes occupied with the concerns of God, and whose service continually flows from communion with God. Priesthood is not first an activity. It is a participation in the heart of Another.

Throughout the New Testament, the writers speak of heavenly access with remarkable simplicity. John is in the Spirit. Paul is caught up into the third heaven. The writer of Hebrews tells us we have confidence to enter the Holy Place by the blood of Jesus. Later he declares that we have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal assembly. Paul writes that we have been seated with Christ in the heavenly places.

These writers never present heavenly participation as spiritual imagination, devotional symbolism, or merely future hope. They speak of it as the present reality made possible through the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ.

The veil has been removed. The way has been opened. The High Priest ministers in the true sanctuary, and through union with Him His people participate in that same priestly ministry even while faithfully expressing His life upon the earth. John's experience on Patmos was therefore not an isolated privilege granted to one apostle. It was the unveiling of the heavenly sanctuary from which the Ekklesia Assembly, as a kingdom of priests, is now called to minister under the continuing priesthood of Christ.

This brings us to the threshold of a discovery that stretches back to the opening pages of Scripture. Long before Aaron wore priestly garments, long before sacrifices were offered in the tabernacle, and long before Israel knew anything of the Levitical order, God had already revealed what priesthood was always intended to be. If we are to understand why Christ has made us a kingdom of priests, we must return to the place where that priestly vocation was first entrusted to humanity.

The Pattern Hidden in the Beginning

If we are to understand why Christ has made His people a kingdom of priests, we must return to the beginning. Not because the New Testament leaves the question unanswered, but because the

opening pages of Scripture reveal God's intention long before it is ever given a formal name. The priesthood did not suddenly appear in the wilderness when Aaron first put on sacred garments. The Levitical order preserved a pattern that had already been woven into the fabric of creation itself.

Genesis tells us that the Lord God planted a garden in Eden and placed the man within it. At first glance, the assignment appears remarkably simple. Adam is placed in a beautiful garden to cultivate the ground and care for its fruitfulness. Read that way, the account seems primarily agricultural. Yet the farther we follow the testimony of Scripture, the more that first impression begins to give way to something much deeper.

The language itself quietly points us in another direction. Adam is commanded "to work it and to keep it" (Gen. 2:15). Those words seem ordinary enough until they begin appearing again. Throughout the books of Moses, the same Hebrew words are repeatedly used to describe the ministry of the Levites within the tabernacle. They are to serve. They are to guard. They are to tend what belongs to God. What first appeared in a garden quietly reappears in the sanctuary.

That is no coincidence. The Spirit is inviting us to read Genesis through priestly eyes.

The garden no longer appears merely as humanity's first home. It begins to resemble humanity's first sanctuary. God walks there. His presence fills it. Life flows from Him at its very center. Everything within the garden belongs to Him, and the man is entrusted with its care. Adam's first vocation was therefore not merely cultivating plants. He was entrusted to tend and guard the place where God's presence dwelt with humanity.

This explains why the Levitical priesthood feels strangely familiar when we encounter it later in Scripture. The priests are once again tending sacred space. They are once again guarding what belongs to God. They minister before His presence, care for the lampstand, oversee the holy things, and faithfully preserve the sanctuary entrusted to them. None of this is arbitrary. The tabernacle is not inventing something new. It is preserving a pattern that reaches back to Eden itself. Yet even the tabernacle is not the destination.

The earthly sanctuary was always a shadow cast by a greater reality. Moses was instructed to construct it according to the pattern shown him on the mountain because its true origin was heavenly. Every curtain, every vessel, every sacrifice, every priestly duty pointed beyond itself. The earthly priesthood faithfully preserved the pattern until the One to whom the pattern belonged finally appeared.

That One is Christ.

Everything the first Adam failed to guard, Christ faithfully preserves. Everything the earthly priests maintained as a shadow, Christ now fulfills as the eternal High Priest ministering within the true sanctuary. He does not merely restore the priesthood. He restores its original purpose. Once again, humanity is invited into living fellowship with God. Once again, the sanctuary becomes the place where His life is shared. Once again, priesthood is revealed as participation in the life and concerns of God Himself.

Seen in this light, the story of Scripture possesses a remarkable unity. Eden, the tabernacle, the temple, and the heavenly sanctuary are not disconnected episodes in redemptive history. They are successive unveilings of one priestly purpose. From the very beginning, God has desired a people who live in His presence, share His heart, and faithfully tend what belongs to Him.

This is why the New Testament can so confidently declare that Christ has made us a kingdom of priests. It is not introducing a new vocation. It is announcing the restoration of the one God intended from the beginning. The High Priest has opened the way into the true sanctuary, and those who share His life are now invited to participate with Him in the very ministry for which humanity was first created.

The High Priest and His Kingdom of Priests

The pattern that began in Eden and was preserved through the Levitical priesthood finds its complete fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Everything that came before was preparing for Him. The earthly sanctuary pointed beyond itself. The sacrifices anticipated His offering. The priests served as shadows of a greater Priest yet to come. Every aspect of the priestly ministry quietly bore witness to the One who would finally enter the true sanctuary, not made with human hands, to minister forever before the Father on behalf of His people.

The New Testament therefore speaks of Christ's priesthood with remarkable confidence. He is not one priest among many. He is our great High Priest. Having offered Himself once for all, He entered the heavenly sanctuary by His own blood. There He continues His priestly ministry, ever living to make intercession for those who draw near to God through Him. His priesthood is eternal because His life is eternal. His ministry never passes to another because He Himself never ceases to live.

The Christ John beheld among the lampstands is not remembering a ministry once performed upon the earth. He is actively exercising His priesthood in the heavenly sanctuary. He is still tending the lampstands. He is still guarding the testimony. He is still calling His people back into living communion with Himself. The letters of Revelation are not the memories of a former Priest. They reveal the ongoing ministry of our living High Priest.

Yet the wonder of redemption is not only that Christ is our High Priest. The wonder is that the High Priest has gathered a people to share His own priestly life.

This is why the New Testament repeatedly calls believers a kingdom of priests. That language is not honorary. It is not merely describing a privileged status before God. It is revealing the vocation into which Christ has brought His people. Through union with Him, those who share His life are also brought into His priestly ministry. They do not become high priests themselves, nor do they mediate between God and humanity as He alone does. Rather, they participate in the very concerns of the One to whom they have been joined.

That distinction preserves the beauty of the gospel. There is only one High Priest. There is only one Mediator. There is only one who has entered the heavenly sanctuary through His own blood. Yet the life of that High Priest is now shared with His people. His concerns become their concerns. His love

becomes their love. His longing for holiness, communion, truth, and faithfulness begins taking shape within those who abide in Him.

The priesthood of the believer is never independent activity performed for Christ. It is participation with the continuing ministry of Christ Himself.

This explains why stewardship can never be reduced to merely protecting doctrine or preserving religious institutions. The High Priest is not asking His people to guard something He has left behind. He is inviting them to share in what He Himself continues doing. As they remain united with Him, His burden becomes their burden. They begin loving what He loves, grieving what grieves Him, rejoicing in what brings Him joy, and carefully tending what He faithfully tends.

Adam was entrusted to tend and guard the sanctuary where God walked with humanity. The sons of Aaron tended and guarded the earthly sanctuary according to the pattern God had revealed. Christ now ministers within the true sanctuary as our eternal High Priest. Those who have been joined to Him are made a kingdom of priests, not to establish a ministry of their own, but to participate in His.

Seen this way, the priesthood is not another doctrine to be studied. It is the very shape of the life Christ shares with His people. Living union with Christ expresses itself through participation in Christ. Those who abide in the High Priest gradually begin sharing His own concern for the Father's house. They discover that stewardship is no longer simply a responsibility they have accepted. It is the natural expression of a life that has become joined to His.

This is why the Holy Spirit occupies such an indispensable place in the life of every believer. He does not merely communicate information about Christ's ministry. He forms within us the very mind of Christ. He makes the concerns of the High Priest known within His people. He teaches us to discern as Christ discerns, to love as Christ loves, and to faithfully participate in the continuing guardianship of the life and testimony that have always belonged to Him.

The Heavenly Sanctuary Is Our Place of Ministry

Everything we have discovered thus far leads us to one final question. If Christ continues ministering as our great High Priest within the heavenly sanctuary, and if His people have been made a kingdom of priests who participate in His continuing guardianship, where does that priestly ministry actually take place?

The New Testament answers that question with remarkable consistency.

It does not direct our attention merely toward earthly service. It lifts our eyes toward the heavenly sanctuary where Christ Himself now ministers. The astonishing claim of the gospel is not simply that heaven has become accessible after death. It is that through the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, the way into the true sanctuary has already been opened for those who share His life.

Perhaps nowhere is this more beautifully illustrated than in the opening words of John's vision. "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day…" (Rev. 1:10). Those words are far more than the setting for the visions that follow. They describe the doorway through which everything else becomes possible. John does not force his way into heaven. He does not ascend by spiritual effort. He does not discover the heavenly sanctuary through extraordinary discipline or mystical achievement. He is in the Spirit. And through the Spirit, the way into heaven stands open before him.

The Spirit ushers him into the place where Christ is presently ministering so that he may see what can never be discerned from the earth alone.

We have followed John into that heavenly sanctuary. We have stood with him as he beheld the glorified Christ walking among His lampstands. We have listened as the High Priest spoke to the assemblies from within heaven's perspective rather than earth's. Every discovery has depended upon John's being brought into the Spirit. Had he remained only with what could be seen upon the earth, the deepest realities of the seven churches would have remained hidden from him.

This is precisely what Jesus promised His disciples on the night before the cross. "When He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth… He will glorify Me, for He will take what is Mine and disclose it to you" (John 16:13–14 NASB). The ministry of the Holy Spirit has never been merely to communicate information about Christ. His ministry is to make Christ known.

He takes what belongs to the Son and brings His people into living participation with it. He continually turns our attention toward the One who now ministers before the Father. The Spirit does not compete with the ministry of Christ; He brings us into it.

This is why the writer of Hebrews speaks with such astonishing confidence. "Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus… let us draw near" (Heb. 10:19, 22 NASB). These are not the words of allegory. They are not devotional poetry. Neither are they promises reserved only for our life after death. They are the present privilege of those whose lives have been joined to Christ.

The veil has truly been removed.

The way has truly been opened.

Our great High Priest truly ministers within the heavenly sanctuary.

Therefore, we are truly invited to draw near.

The same confidence appears throughout the New Testament. We have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God. We have been seated with Christ in the heavenly places. Our life is hidden with Christ in God. These are not isolated metaphors scattered throughout the apostolic writings. They are successive witnesses to one magnificent reality. The life of the believer is now joined to Christ in the heavenly realm where He Himself ministers continually before the Father.

John's experience on Patmos becomes far more than the account of one extraordinary apostle. It becomes an unveiling. He is permitted to see the reality from which the Ekklesia Assembly herself is intended to live.

The Spirit who ushered John into the heavenly sanctuary has never ceased His ministry. He continues leading Christ's people into living communion with their great High Priest. In the quiet place of prayer, in the hidden life of fellowship, and in the continual yielding of the heart to God, the Spirit faithfully lifts our attention beyond what is merely earthly and forms within us the mind of Christ. He teaches us to see as the High Priest sees because He continually brings us into fellowship with the High Priest Himself.

This does not diminish our earthly calling.

It establishes it.

Every true expression upon the earth flows from participation in the heavenly ministry of Christ. We do not minister for heaven while remaining separated from it. We minister from the heavenly sanctuary because our life has been joined to the One who is already there. The invisible continually gives life to the visible. The heavenly continually governs the earthly. As priests under our great High Priest, we learn to tend what He tends, to love what He loves, and to faithfully guard what He faithfully guards, not through independent effort, but through continual participation in the life we now share with Him.

The journey that began with John's simple words, "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day" (Rev. 1:10), therefore becomes our own invitation. The Spirit still brings God's people into the living fellowship made possible by the blood of Christ. The High Priest still ministers in the heavenly sanctuary. The way still stands open. And those whom Christ has made a kingdom of priests are still invited to draw near, to participate in His continuing ministry, and to faithfully express upon the earth the life that continually flows from heaven.

Returning to Living Participation

By the time Christ finishes speaking to the seven assemblies, one truth has become unmistakably clear. His purpose has never been to expose His people for the sake of exposure itself. Every warning has carried within it the heart of restoration. Every rebuke has been spoken by the One who still walks among His lampstands. Every correction has come from the great High Priest who has never ceased ministering within His sanctuary. His desire has never been condemnation. His desire has always been communion.

This is why the repeated invitations throughout the seven letters must never be read as disconnected commands. "Remember." "Repent." "Strengthen what remains." "Hold fast." "Hear what the Spirit says." These are not isolated instructions scattered throughout the letters. Together they describe the gracious movements by which priestly participation is restored. They are the pathway by which Christ lovingly brings His people back into the life they were always created to share.

Restoration therefore begins when the priest once again hears the voice of the High Priest and returns to the heavenly sanctuary where Christ has never ceased ministering.

That thought changed the way we read every letter.

Ephesus is not simply being told to recover forgotten affection. The High Priest is calling His priests back into the place where love was first born. Smyrna is being strengthened by the High Priest to remain faithful within a communion suffering has not been able to steal. Pergamum is not merely abandoning compromise. The priest is turning away from every competing voice in order to hear once again the voice that speaks from the sanctuary. Thyatira is not simply rejecting false influence. The heart is being reformed beneath the gaze of the One whose presence alone gives life. Sardis is not rebuilding its reputation. The priest is returning to the place where the flame is tended. Philadelphia remains there in quiet dependence, while Laodicea hears the gentle knock of the High Priest who still desires fellowship with those who have unknowingly learned to live without continually drawing life from Him.

Seen in this light, restoration is far more than correcting behavior. It is the recovery of priestly life. It is the joyful return to the place where communion is renewed, where the voice of Christ is heard again with clarity, and where His own concerns once more become the concerns of His people. The goal has never been simply to improve the visible expression. The goal has always been to restore participation in the invisible reality from which that expression first flowed.

This is why the Holy Spirit remains indispensable to the life of every believer. The Spirit through whom John was brought into the heavenly sanctuary has never ceased His ministry. He still takes what belongs to Christ and discloses it to His people. He still glorifies the Son. He still leads God's priests into the living fellowship opened by the blood of Jesus. Restoration is therefore never achieved through greater determination or religious effort. It begins as the Spirit once again turns our attention toward the High Priest and gently leads us back into the sanctuary where He continually ministers on our behalf.

How remarkable that the One who speaks the strongest words of correction is also the One who never leaves His post. Christ does not wait for His people to restore themselves before returning to them. He is already there. He is already speaking. He is already tending the lamp. He is already interceding. He is already extending His invitation. The entire work of restoration begins, not with Christ returning to His people, but with His people returning to the Christ who never ceased ministering among them.

Perhaps this is why the writer of Hebrews speaks with such confidence: "Let us draw near" (Heb. 10:22). Those words are not simply an encouragement to pray more faithfully. They are the invitation of our great High Priest to enter the sanctuary He has opened through His own flesh. The veil has been removed. The way has been inaugurated. The throne of grace is no longer hidden behind barriers that only another priest may cross. Through the blood of Jesus, the priesthood has been welcomed home.

That invitation has never been withdrawn.

The sanctuary remains open. The High Priest remains at His ministry. The Spirit continues leading the people of God into living fellowship with Christ. Everything necessary for restoration has already been provided.

The question is no longer whether the way is open.

The question is whether we will return.

When we do, we discover that restoration is not the recovery of a former season, nor the recreation of yesterday's experience. It is not an attempt to relive what once was. The living Christ is never found in memory alone. He is encountered in the present reality of His continuing priesthood. As we return to Him, we discover that the life we feared had been lost was never preserved by our strength in the first place. It has always been sustained by the One who faithfully walks among His lampstands.

The highest honor of every priest, therefore, is not merely to protect the sanctuary. It is to become so united with the High Priest that His own life, His own love, His own discernment, and His own guardianship quietly find expression through them. They become transparent to Christ once again. The testimony entrusted to them is no longer carried through anxious striving but through joyful participation in the ministry of the One to whom it has always belonged.

And so the journey that began with John's quiet words, "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day" (Rev. 1:10) ends with the same invitation extended to every generation of God's people. The Spirit still calls us beyond the merely visible. He ushers the priests of God into the heavenly sanctuary where the High Priest has never ceased ministering.

And within the heavenly sanctuary the lampstands still stand before Him. The way remains open. Christ still speaks.

The question that echoes through every generation is no longer simply, "Is the lamp still burning?" It has become something deeper.

Will the priests return to the sanctuary?

Yet the sanctuary has never been the destination.

Priests do not remain within the sanctuary for their own sake. They enter in order that the life they receive in the presence of God might once again be faithfully expressed wherever God has placed them. What is received in communion is always meant to become visible in expression. The invisible life of heaven has always sought a visible witness upon the earth.

What does the world see when Christ's people no longer minister from memory, reputation, or self-sufficiency, but from living participation in His present ministry?

Where Every Witness Disappears into Christ

> *The life Christ has already shared becomes increasingly visible as His people learn to recognize what the Father has accomplished, live from that finished reality, and participate together in His ongoing priesthood until the world encounters God dwelling among His people.*

For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that those who live would no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose on their behalf. Therefore, from now on we recognize no one by the flesh; even though we have known Christ by the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, this person is a new creation; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their wrongdoings against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin to be sin in our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:14–21 NASB).

The Father's Finished Purpose

We saw how our priestly life in Christ is preserved. The question before us now is: What does that preserved life look like when it is recognized and lived from?

We have spent this journey asking questions that every sincere follower of Christ eventually asks. How do I become what God desires me to be? How do I remain faithful? How do I keep the fire burning? How do I live in a way that truly pleases Him?

Each question has carried us a little farther along the path. As necessary as those questions are, we have come to realize that they were never the Father's first concern. They arose from our longing to honor Him, but they did not originate in His heart. The Father has always begun somewhere else. He begins, not with becoming, but with sharing.

Before He ever called us to walk with Him, He gave us His Son. Before He ever entrusted us with His testimony, He united us with His life. Before He ever spoke of priesthood, stewardship, gifts, or witness, He accomplished through Christ everything upon which those realities would forever rest. The foundation was never our devotion to Him. It was always His unwavering devotion to us. This is why the Revelation of Jesus Christ opens as it does.

"To Him who loves us, and released us from our sins by His blood—and He made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father…" (Rev. 1:5–6 NASB).

Notice the order. Not loved.

Loves.

Not “will make.”

He made.

John begins where the Father has always begun—with an accomplished work flowing from an unchanging love. Everything that follows unfolds from that finished reality. After everything we have discovered together, the final question is no longer, *“What must I become?”*

A different question quietly rises before us. What if the life I have been seeking to produce is the very life the Father has already shared?

What if the journey has never been about striving toward a distant reality, but awakening to a present one?

What if the greatest transformation is not found in becoming someone else, but in finally recognizing what has been true because of Christ all along?

This changes the entire way we understand our journey. Recognition and attainment do not lead the heart in the same direction. Attainment measures how far I have come. Recognition beholds what the Father has faithfully accomplished. Recognition does not create reality. It awakens us to reality. One turns my gaze inward, weighing my own progress. The other lifts my eyes to the unwavering faithfulness of God.

Nothing in heaven changes. Christ remains the faithful witness. The Spirit continues to dwell within His people. The priesthood remains established. The Father’s purpose has never faltered. The only thing left to change…is my sight.

This is why Paul writes with such confidence: *“Now all these things are from God”* (2 Cor. 5:18 NASB). Everything. Union. Reconciliation. New creation. Priesthood. The ministry of reconciliation. The righteousness of God. None of it begins with us. All of it begins with Him.

And this is where Life Made Visible has been leading all along. Christ’s intention is not to place one more burden upon us. It is to open our eyes to the reality that we have been included in the Father’s accomplished work. We are not accomplishing the Father’s purpose through our effort. We are participating in the Father’s accomplished purpose through the life already shared with us in Christ.

So, what happens when God’s people finally recognize the life they have already been given?

Recognizing What Christ Has Already Accomplished

Every journey has a moment when we stop looking ahead and quietly turn around.

Not because we intend to go back, but because from where we now stand we can finally see where we have come from. The winding paths, the steep climbs, the valleys that once seemed endless, and the unexpected turns that often left us wondering where the Lord was leading—all of them

suddenly belong to one landscape. What once felt like disconnected experiences now form one continuous story.

This is often the way the Father's work is recognized. Only after we have learned to trust His heart do we begin to see what He has been accomplishing all along.

While we were walking, we naturally measured our progress. We wondered whether we were growing, whether we were faithful, whether we were becoming what He desired us to be. We rejoiced over victories, grieved over failures, and often imagined that the story depended more upon our perseverance than upon His faithfulness. It was the only way we knew to measure a journey whose destination we had not yet seen.

Yet standing here, something remarkable begins to happen.

The questions that once seemed so important begin quietly giving way to another kind of seeing. The answers had been present from the beginning. What changed was the way we learned to see them.

What if the Father's primary work was never measured by how far we had come? What if His work has always been measured by what His Son has accomplished?

That shift changes the way we see everything that has come before.

This is the way the apostles continually invite us to see. They do not begin by telling us what remains to be done. They begin by announcing what God has already done.

Listen carefully to Paul's words.

"For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that those who live would no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose on their behalf" (2 Cor. 5:14–15 NASB).

Notice where he begins. Not with our response. Not with our obedience. Not even with our love for Christ. He begins with Christ's love for us. Everything that follows rests upon that foundation. Paul is not inviting us to pursue a possibility. He is announcing an accomplished reality.

One died for all. Therefore, all died.

Paul does not argue toward the Cross.

He reasons from it.

He does not point us toward a future accomplishment.

He begins with one that has already changed everything.

Those few words carry us back to everything we have already discovered throughout this journey. The Cross was never merely the place where our sins were forgiven. It was the place where our old life found its end. The Resurrection was never merely Christ's vindication. It became the beginning

of our new life in Him. Union with Christ was never merely a beautiful theological idea. It is the very reality into which every believer has been brought.

This is why Paul never reasons from obligation. He reasons from participation. He never says, "Become someone different." He says, in effect, "You already share another Life. Now learn to live from it."

Once we recognize where Paul begins, our perception changes. The Christian life is no longer an attempt to become what Christ has made possible. It becomes the joyful discovery of what Christ has already made true. As that discovery deepens, His life is no longer merely believed. It becomes increasingly recognizable. And what is recognized within His people inevitably becomes visible through them.

Learning to See with the Eyes of Christ

Paul has established the foundation. Christ has accomplished what no human effort could ever achieve. Through His death and resurrection, we have been brought into a new creation. Yet before he begins speaking about reconciliation or ministry, he pauses to make a statement that seems almost incidental.

It is anything but incidental.

In a single sentence, Paul quietly describes one of the greatest transformations that can ever take place within the heart of a believer.

> *"Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer"* (2 Cor. 5:16 NASB).

Notice what has changed. Paul does not begin by speaking about different behavior. He speaks about different recognition. The first evidence that we are learning to live from the life of Christ is not found in what we are doing. It is found in what we are seeing. That may seem like a small distinction until we remember where this journey began.

For much of our lives we have learned to evaluate almost everything according to what is visible. We recognize success by appearance. We recognize maturity by knowledge. We recognize usefulness by activity. We recognize people by personality, gifting, history, strengths, weaknesses, and failures. Even our assessment of ourselves has often been shaped by those same measurements.

The flesh has become our natural way of recognizing reality. Paul says something has changed. From now on… We recognize differently. Notice that he begins with Christ Himself.

> *"Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer"* (2 Cor. 5:16 NASB).

The disciples once knew Jesus by what their natural eyes could see. They walked beside Him. They listened to His voice. They watched Him heal the sick, calm the sea, and raise the dead. Yet after His resurrection, He patiently led them into another way of knowing Him. He did not become less present. He became present in a deeper way. Their life with the visible Christ prepared them for a way of knowing Him that would no longer depend upon physical sight.

That is precisely what happened on the road to Emmaus. It was not enough for the disciples to know where Jesus had been. They had to learn where He now was. The One who had walked beside them would now dwell within them. Recognition itself had to be transformed before their participation could mature. That same movement now stands before us. If that is true of Christ, then it must also become true of those who belong to Him. From now on...

I no longer recognize myself according to the flesh. My failures no longer tell me who I am. Neither do my successes. My past does not define me. Neither does my gifting. Even my weaknesses are no longer the deepest truth about me.

The Father has already spoken the deepest truth. I am in Christ. Everything else now takes its meaning from that reality. And if I no longer recognize myself according to the flesh, I can no longer recognize you according to the flesh either.

That may be one of the greatest reorderings the Spirit ever accomplishes within His people.

I stop looking first at your maturity.

I stop looking first at your limitations.

I stop looking first at your personality.

I stop looking first at the places where you still need to grow.

Instead, I begin recognizing the life of Christ that already dwells within you. Suddenly my entire posture changes. Correction is no longer an attempt to fix you. Encouragement is no longer an attempt to motivate you. Teaching is no longer an attempt to improve you. Everything becomes an invitation to awaken together to the life we already share in Christ.

Recognition has changed the way I see. Because it has changed the way I see, it begins changing the way I love. And perhaps this is the deepest reordering of all. The Father has not merely given us another way to think. He has given us His Son. As His life becomes the source from which we live, we gradually begin seeing with His own eyes.

That is why Paul could write so confidently, “From now on we recognize no one according to the flesh.” He was not describing a discipline he had mastered. He was describing the perception that increasingly flows from a life governed by union with Christ.

Recognizing Christ Within One Another

When Paul says *"From now on we recognize no one according to the flesh,"* (2 Cor. 5:16 NASB) he is not merely describing a personal revelation. He is describing the beginning of an entirely new way of living together.

Recognition was never intended to remain private. It was always meant to become relational.

As long as I evaluate you according to the flesh, my ministry toward you will inevitably be shaped by the flesh. I will respond primarily to your strengths or your weaknesses, your maturity or your immaturity, your successes or your failures. Even my love can become subtly governed by what I observe rather than by what Christ has accomplished.

But the moment I begin recognizing the life of Christ within you, how I see you changes. I am no longer standing before someone who is merely trying to become a better Christian. I am standing before someone in whom Christ Himself has chosen to dwell.

That realization changes the entire atmosphere of ministry. We no longer approach each other primarily as a problem to be solved. Or a project to be improved. Or even a disciple to be developed. We approach each other as fellow participants in the very life that has already been shared with us both.

How different would our conversations become if that were the first thing we recognized?

How differently would correction sound?

How differently would encouragement be received?

How differently would we bear one another's burdens if we remembered that beneath every weakness, every struggle, every unfinished place, Christ Himself had already established His dwelling?

Recognition begins changing more than our thoughts. It begins changing the way love is expressed. Then patience is no longer the discipline of tolerating another person's shortcomings. It becomes the quiet confidence that Christ has not abandoned the work He began. Encouragement is no longer merely speaking kind words. It becomes calling forth the life that is already present. Correction is no longer an attempt to force transformation. It becomes an invitation to remember who we already are in Christ.

Even our service begins changing. No longer do I serve simply because there is work to be done. I serve because I recognize the Father's life within His family. Love begins flowing toward life.

This is the priesthood functioning exactly as the Father intended. Priests have never existed merely to perform sacred duties. They exist to safeguard the presence of God. That has always been the purpose of priesthood. Not simply to speak about Him. Not merely to represent Him. But to faithfully serve the reality of His dwelling among His people.

The reality of that has not changed. Only its expression has. Under the old covenant, priests ministered in a sanctuary where God had chosen to dwell. Under the new covenant, the sanctuary has become a people. The priest no longer walks into a holy place. He walks among a holy people.

Every conversation becomes sacred. Every act of encouragement becomes priestly. Every expression of forgiveness becomes priestly. Every shared burden becomes priestly. Every reminder of Christ's finished work becomes priestly. The ministry has not become less holy. It has become wonderfully personal.

This may be why Paul never separates recognition from reconciliation. The ministry of reconciliation is not limited to convincing strangers to come to Christ. It is also expressed within God's family continually ministering the reality of Christ to one another until His life becomes the atmosphere in which they all live. Only then can that same ministry overflow into the world.

This is what happens when recognition begins expanding. I recognize His life within me. Then I recognize His life within you. Then something remarkable happens. The life we recognize individually becomes the life we participate in together. The family begins supplying itself. The priesthood quietly comes alive.

And Christ, without fanfare, becomes increasingly visible among His people.

The Father Dwells Among His People

There comes a moment when every individual discovery quietly gives way to something far greater than itself. We no longer stand marveling at what Christ has done within us. Nor are we occupied merely with recognizing His life within one another. Our eyes are drawn to something that has been unfolding through every step of the journey. The Father's eternal purpose has become visible.

What began as the life of Christ within individual believers has become a people through whom the Father is pleased to dwell. This has always been the story. From the opening pages of Scripture, the Father has never sought merely to visit His creation. He has desired to dwell among His people. In Eden, He walked with them. In the wilderness, His glory filled the tabernacle. In Jerusalem, His presence rested within the temple. Then, in the fullness of time, *"the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*" (John 1:14). The dwelling place was no longer a structure.

It was a Person.

And through His death, resurrection, and the gift of the Spirit, that same dwelling has now been shared with all who belong to Him. This is why the journey does not end with forgiven individuals. Nor even with faithful congregations. It culminates with a breathtaking declaration.

"Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them…" (Revelation 21:3 NASB).

Revelation does not introduce a new desire within the Father's heart. It reveals the fulfillment of the desire He has carried from the very beginning. Everything we have discovered now finds its home. Union was never an end in itself. It was the Father's way of sharing His own life.

Formation was never about producing spiritual achievement. It was the quiet unfolding of the family likeness. The gifts were never about individual significance. They were the Father's provision for the continual supply of His household. Even the priesthood was never primarily about ministry. It has always existed to faithfully serve God's dwelling among His people.

Now we begin to understand why Christ walked among His lampstands. He was never merely inspecting assemblies. He was faithfully guarding the place where His Father's presence would be made known. He was preserving the communion through which heaven continues becoming visible upon the earth. The lampstand has never existed for its own sake. It exists because light reveals a dwelling. And that dwelling belongs to the Father.

This is why recognition has always been moving toward visibility.

As we recognize the life Christ has shared...

we begin living from that life.

As we live from that life...

the family likeness quietly emerges.

As the family likeness emerges...

the Father's house becomes recognizable.

And when the Father's house becomes recognizable...

the world no longer encounters merely a religious people. It encounters the living God.

This is why Paul could say, *"You are the temple of the living God"* (2 Cor. 6:16 NASB). Not merely because each believer has become a sanctuary. But because together we have become the dwelling place through which the Father's own life is expressed. This is the life for which creation itself has been longing—the children of God becoming recognizable as the dwelling place of the living God.

Not merely redeemed individuals. Not merely restored relationships. But God once again dwelling among His people. And as His dwelling becomes visible, something extraordinary begins happening.

Without striving to convince the world...

Without attempting to manufacture spiritual influence...

Without drawing attention to ourselves...

The testimony quietly rises from those who encounter this people.

“SURELY GOD IS AMONG YOU” (1 Cor. 14:25 LSV).

Life Made Visible

There is a quiet beauty in standing at the end of a journey and discovering that its destination has been present from the very beginning.

We have walked through the testimony of Scripture, followed the unfolding purpose of the Father, watched the invisible God reveal Himself perfectly in His Son, and discovered that the life of the Son has now been shared with those who belong to Him. We have seen that the Spirit does not merely remind us of Christ but continually makes His life our present reality. We have watched the priesthood emerge, the gifts find their proper place, communion restored, and the lampstand preserved.

And now, standing here, we realize that none of these were ever separate stories. They have always been one story. The Father sharing His own life until His dwelling becomes visible among His people. This is why the Christian life can never be reduced to self-improvement. Nor can the ekklesia ever be understood merely as an institution. The Father’s purpose has always been far greater. He has been forming a family. Not a family held together by common interests or shared beliefs alone, but by one shared Life.

And now, for the first time, we are able to behold the Father’s own delight in the work His Son has accomplished.

Everything now begins to make sense.

Why union?

Because life must first be shared.

Why abiding?

Because shared life must continually be enjoyed.

Why formation?

Because life naturally bears the likeness of its source.

Why love?

Because love is the atmosphere in which that life flourishes.

Why gifts?

Because one shared life continually supplies itself through every member.

Why priesthood?

Because the Father’s dwelling is faithfully served by those who live within it.

Why recognition?

Because what has been shared must finally be seen.

And why visibility?

Because the life of God was never given merely to remain hidden within His people. It was given so that the invisible God might once again become unmistakably recognizable upon the earth. And perhaps this is the deepest wonder of all.

When the Father's life becomes visible among His people, we are not simply witnessing the fulfillment of our hope. We are witnessing the fulfillment of His.

From the beginning He desired a people with whom He could dwell. A family who would share His life. Sons and daughters who would bear the likeness of His beloved Son. Every promise, every covenant, every act of redemption has quietly moved toward this one reality.

The Father is not searching the earth for extraordinary people. He delights in beholding the life of His Son faithfully expressed through ordinary sons and daughters who simply live from what He has already shared. This is the joy that has always rested before Him.

Not merely forgiven people.

Not merely faithful servants.

But beloved children, gathered into one household, in whom His own life has become unmistakably at home.

This is why Paul could write with such confidence: *"Now all these things are from God"* (2 Cor. 5:18 NASB).

He was not inviting us to accomplish what remained unfinished. He was inviting us to participate in what the Father had already accomplished through His Son. The Christian life is no longer an attempt to become what Christ has made possible. It becomes the joyful recognition of what Christ has already made true.

From that recognition comes participation.

From participation comes expression.

From expression comes visibility.

And from visibility comes the testimony that has echoed through every generation whenever God's people have truly lived from His life:

"SURELY GOD IS AMONG YOU" (1 Cor. 14:25 LSV).

Not because extraordinary people have finally achieved extraordinary things. But because ordinary people have learned to live from an extraordinary Life. The life that was revealed in Jesus Christ...

shared through His Spirit…

recognized within His people…

has quietly become visible once again.

And we begin seeing the Father's purpose as He has always seen it. Not as an unfinished dream waiting for our achievement. But as the joyful reality His Son has already secured.

The life has been shared.

The family has been formed.

The dwelling has been established.

And wherever His people simply live from the life they have already received, the Father's eternal purpose continues finding visible expression upon the earth.

EPILOGUE

If there is one thing I hope this journey has accomplished, it is not that you remember these pages. It is that you recognize Him more readily than when we first began.

Everything we have explored together has been written with one desire—that Christ Himself would become increasingly clear. Every passage we considered, every pattern we traced, every discovery we celebrated has always belonged to Him. If, somewhere along the way, these pages have helped you see Him more clearly, then they have fulfilled their purpose.

Books eventually close. Conversations come to an end. Even faithful witnesses quietly step aside. But Christ does not. He is still the faithful witness. He is still the Firstborn from the dead. He is still the One who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood. He is still sharing His priestly life with the kingdom of priests He has made. He is still walking among His lampstands. He is still building His Father's house. He is still sharing His own life. He is still making heaven visible upon the earth. That is why the path does not end here.

The Father's purpose continues unfolding every time His people gather around the life they already share in Christ. It continues whenever brothers and sisters recognize His life within one another. It continues whenever ordinary people quietly live from an extraordinary Life. The testimony has never depended upon one generation, one ministry, or one voice. It rests securely in the faithfulness of the One who remains forever.

If these pages have served you well, then let them do what every faithful witness must eventually do. Let them lead you beyond themselves.

Keep looking until Christ so fills your vision that these words quietly fade into the background.

Keep listening until His voice becomes more familiar than mine.

Keep following until the living Christ Himself becomes your continual companion, your daily bread, your great delight, and your all in all.

Keep walking until His life becomes so familiar that you no longer think about the path—you simply walk with Him.

Keep returning to the One who has been walking with you from the very beginning.

For this has always been the Father's desire. Not that we would become captivated by the witness…but by the One to whom it has always borne witness.

May His life become increasingly recognizable within you.

May His love abound within you until it overflows into those around you.

May the Father's dwelling become increasingly visible wherever His family gathers in His name.

And may the testimony that rises from your life, and from the family to whom you belong, continue bearing witness until the whole earth is filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord.

The witness now quietly steps aside.

Christ remains.

Now to Him who is able…

> *Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen (Jude 24–25 NASB).*

Until We Meet Again

Thank you for walking with me through *Life Made Visible*. We have spent these pages looking together at a life that begins in Christ, is formed through relationship with Him and with one another, and becomes tangible in the ordinary places where His people live.

I have never thought of this journey as ending with the final page. The life we have been talking about continues to be lived. There will always be more to recognize, more to receive from one another, and more of Christ becoming visible among His people.

Beyond the Dalet is where I continue that conversation. It is where I write about the things I am seeing in Scripture, the witnesses I am learning to recognize, and what they are teaching me about the way we live from what has already been given to us in Christ.

If you would like to continue walking with me, you are always welcome there.

Thank you for sharing this part of the journey with me.

Until we meet again,
Betty

Continue with Beyond the Dalet



The life of Christ was never meant to remain hidden within us.

What has been received is meant to become visible.

Life Made Visible explores what happens when the life we have received in Christ begins to take tangible form—not through striving to become something we are not, but through learning to live from the Life already given.

The journey begins with Christ. His life is the source, and our life with one another becomes one of the places where His life can be seen. We discover that formation is not the manufacture of a better version of ourselves, ministry is not the performance of spiritual usefulness, and love is more than something we believe. What has been received in Christ becomes recognizable as His life finds expression through His people.

Along the way, we encounter the vulnerability of being seen, the security of being loved, the freedom of living without the need to prove ourselves, and the surprising ways God supplies what is needed through the lives He joins together.

This is not a book about learning how to make Christ visible.

It is an invitation to recognize the Life already present, to remain in Him, to receive from one another, and to allow what is true in Christ to become tangible in the ordinary places where life is shared.

Because ultimately, the witness is not meant to draw attention to itself. Christ remains.

Betty Hall is the founder of *Beyond the Dalet*, where she writes and teaches from a life of walking with God, recognizing Christ through the witness of the Scriptures, and asking what that means for the way His people live.

A BEYOND THE DALET PUBLICATION