

THE CHURCH IS THE TABERNACLE OF GOD

Brother Stephen Kaung

John 1:14—And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us (and we have contemplated his glory, a glory as of an only-begotten with a father), full of grace and truth.

John 2:13-22—And the Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. And he found in the temple the sellers of oxen and sheep and doves, and the money-changers sitting; and, having made a scourge of cords, he cast [them] all out of the temple, both the sheep and the oxen; and he poured out the change of the money-changers, and overturned the tables, and said to the sellers of doves, Take these things hence; make not my Father's house a house of merchandise. [And] his disciples remembered that it is written, The zeal of thy house devours me. The Jews therefore answered and said to him, What sign shewest thou to us, that thou doest these things? Jesus answered and said to them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. The Jews therefore said, Forty and six years was this temple building, and thou wilt raise it up in three days? But he spoke of the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from among [the] dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and believed the scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken.

Shall we pray:

Dear Lord, we want to thank Thee for gathering us together. We thank Thee for being with us, and we believe Thou art here with us. We do realize that we are standing on holy ground. We give this time totally over to Thee and may Thou speakest to each and every one of us. We thank Thee because Thou knowest each one of us and may Thou speak a personal word to each of us. We want Thee to be glorified in the midst of Thy own people. May our gathering together here hasten Thy return. Our hearts long for Thee. Come, Lord Jesus, come. We ask in Thy name. Amen.

Thank God for gathering us together. How good it will be if this will be the day of His return. This is really our hope. It is the cry of our heart: Come, Lord Jesus. We thank the Lord because He knows us. So again and again we find He gives us opportunities. He wants to see us with a joyous heart. And of course we want to see Him with joy also. So we believe as we gather here it is just another opportunity for us to be prepared for His return when we shall see His face and find that He is smiling at us. So this is really the hope of our gathering together.

God of the Heavens

We have mentioned how the children of Israel rebelled against God and were eventually taken captive to Babylon. It was really a very sad scene, but God is love and in spite of His people's failure, His heart was still towards them. Therefore, after seventy years of captivity God, in His mercy, allowed them to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. During the time of that

seventy years of captivity God was never mentioned as the God of the heavens and of the earth. He was only mentioned as the God of the heavens because on earth He had no testimony. His people had failed Him. But after seventy years of captivity God, in His great mercy, used Cyrus to allow His people to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple.

Rebuilding the Temple

If this had happened to us what would be our reaction? Probably, we would all rise up and return because this had been our hope through the seventy years. But unfortunately, the children of Israel were content to remain in the land of captivity because they were well treated and given certain liberties. They were able to build their own houses, to develop their own businesses, and they were very successful. So when the decree was given, only a remnant returned. These people were stirred by the Spirit of God. They loved God more than anything else and were willing to leave everything behind, travel back to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple of God. Why was it so important to rebuild the temple? Because it was through the temple that God would have a name upon the earth. So even in great difficulties they finally rebuilt the temple and all the temple services were restored.

However, we know the weakness of man. After a good beginning, gradually the people began to fall back. Because of the difficulties some of them even returned to Babylon, and even those who remained in Judea began to mix with the natives; they even began to worship their gods. So God's people again and again rebelled against God. For this reason, after the last time the voice of God challenged them in Malachi, He was silent for four hundred years.

John the Baptist

Our God is the God who speaks. It is His delight to reveal Himself to His own, but the condition of the people will shut His mouth. Think of that! Four hundred long years God was silent, not because He did not want to speak to His people, but because of their condition. But no matter how man fails, God cannot fail. So after four hundred years, suddenly God began to speak. John the Baptist came out of the wilderness and he proclaimed: "Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens has drawn nigh." He was the forerunner of the Lord Jesus Christ. After the failure of man, God in His great mercy, sent His only begotten Son into the world to become a Man to accomplish all that God had planned for man. The Bible tells us the Word became flesh. He was the eternal Word, and yet He became a Man full of grace and truth.

When our Lord Jesus was on earth, we find that three times the heavens were opened. After being shut for four hundred years, suddenly the heavens were opened and the voice spoke: "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him."

The Lord Jesus Was Governed by the Father's Will

When the Lord Jesus was on earth, His whole life was governed by the Father's will. Even though as a Man He had His own will, yet He never followed it; He followed the will of the Father. He said, "I cannot do anything by myself." Humanly speaking, He was able but He refused to do anything. Whatever He did, He did according to the Father's will. He even said, "I cannot say anything unless I hear what the Father has said." And He said, "My time is not My own; I have to

wait upon the Father.” Throughout His whole life He denied Himself. If there has ever been anyone on earth who did not need to deny Himself, it was our Lord Jesus. Yet He did deny Himself and lived a life totally by God. This is what man ought to be. So in Him we see a typical man, the man that God is after.

Jesus Took on the Image of a Bondman

In Philippians 2 we find a description of His life on earth. “For let this mind be in you which [was] also in Christ Jesus; who, subsisting in the form of God, did not esteem it an object of rapine to be on an equality with God” (vv. 5-6). The *form* here does not refer to outward form; it is an image; it refers to the inner quality. Because He is God He has all the qualities of God and that was not something to be grasped at.

When we read this word, it reminds us that there was one who grasped at the form of God. There was one who was created, yet he wanted to be equal with God, and that was the fallen angel, Lucifer. But so far as our Lord Jesus is concerned, it is His right because that is what He is. It all belongs to Him because He and the Father are one. Whatever is the quality of the Father is His quality; nothing less, nothing more, because He and the Father are one.

Then we find He took an action: “but emptied Himself” (v. 7a). Sometimes we talk about emptying, but how much do we have to empty? Probably we have to empty our sins and our transgressions, but we really have nothing to empty. However, our Lord Jesus, who is God Himself, has all the fullness of the Godhead dwelling in Him bodily. He had so much to empty. But we must remember one thing: In spite of all the emptying of Himself, He could not empty His godliness. He is God, and that is something He could not empty. However, He emptied all the glory and honor, all the worship and power; it is indeed the greatest emptying.

And He took a bondman’s form. Again, this form is image; it is the inward quality. When He was born as a man, He took a bondman’s heart inwardly. Before God He was One who had no rights because He had given all rights to God. His inward sense was a bondman’s heart.

In God’s original idea this is what man should have been. God created man with such glory, but He wanted him to have a bondman’s heart in order to serve God’s purpose. But man wanted to be independent, and be his own lord, his own god. That was the failure of man and still is.

When our Lord Jesus came into this world, He took a bondman’s heart; He gave up His own rights to God. He was willing to be obedient to God His Father. Outwardly, He took on a man’s fashion, but inwardly He had a bondman’s heart. This is the original idea of man in God’s plan. Outwardly, we are men, but inwardly we are bondmen. We are here not to do our own will or exercise our own right. The cry of the world is “my right.” But the man of God’s heart is one who does not want his own right; he wants God to have every right over him; and that is exactly the life of our Lord Jesus.

The Lord Jesus Humbled Himself to the Death of the Cross

“Having been found in figure as a man, humbled himself, becoming obedient even unto death, and that the death of the cross” (v. 8).

This is the man after God’s own heart, the man that God has created. And we know that everything concerning man has been fulfilled in God’s heart in Jesus. For our sake He went to the cross to bear our sin in His body, and when He was dying, He said: “It is finished.” Everything is

done; salvation is provided. This was the life of our Lord Jesus as Man. He demonstrated to us what God's man should be; but He not only demonstrated this life to us, He has also provided a salvation to enable us to follow Him so that His life will be our life, His manner of life will be our manner of life. This is the salvation that He has provided for us.

The Lord Jesus Came into this World to Seek His Bride

Why did our Lord Jesus come into this world the first time? If we read the book of Luke we may think that He came into this world to seek and to save the lost; but in the Gospel of John he shows us the inner meaning of His coming. We are told He came into this world as a Bridegroom seeking for His bride. But while He was on earth according to the records of the four gospels it seems as if all He met were those who were sick, blind, lame, crippled, and dead. These people could not be His bride, and nowhere could He find her. So He had to prepare a people for His bride, and that is the reason He saved us. Even to the very last of His ministry He told us why He came into this world.

When the children of Israel rejected Him He retreated to the border of Caesarea-Philippi which was a Gentile city. He was forced to retreat, but for the first time He told us why He came into this world. He said, "I will build my church upon this rock, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (see Matthew 16:18). This was at the time of His rejection by the nation of Israel, and He asked His disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" Of course, the disciples had heard many criticisms about our Lord, but the only things they related to the Lord were the good ones. "You are John the Baptist returned to life; You are Elijah; You are the prophet that God prophesied in Deuteronomy." Everything was rosy and good.

Whom Do You Say that I Am?

If you are Chinese and people say to you that you are like Confucius what would be your reaction? Oh, you would say, "I dare not say so because I am not worthy." And even the disciples gave the Lord Jesus the best of what people said, but our Lord was not satisfied. So He asked His disciples: "You have been with me for three years; you should know Me better. Whom do you say that I am?" Thank God for Peter. He said, "You are the Christ, the Son of God. So far as who You are, You are the Son of God; so far as Your work is concerned, You are the Christ. You are sent by God for a special mission." Because of this our Lord began to reveal why He came into this world: "I will build My church and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." Out of the massive rock, which refers to the Lord Himself, comes the little stone which refers to Peter. Upon this rock refers to Peter's confession of our Lord: "You are the Christ, the Son of God." This is the foundation.

Solomon's Temple had No Ark

When our Lord was on earth, the temple had been rebuilt, but of course, that temple could not be compared with the temple built by Solomon. King Herod tried to enlarge the temple area and beautified it with gifts of gold and precious stones. So the second temple at that time was a glorious building. You remember when the Lord Jesus was leaving the temple how His disciples pointed to the temple and said: "What a temple that is!" It was the glory of the nation of Israel

with all the temple services going on. But there was something lacking in that temple; there was no ark. There was the altar, the lampstand, the table of showbread, the altar of incense, yet in the holiest of all, it was empty; there was no ark. If there was no ark there was no presence of God. You can have everything religious, but it is all outward; there is nothing real in it. God was not there. Where was God? God was with Jesus Christ.

Jesus Is the Temple of God

So at that time the Lord Jesus was the real temple of God. When the Lord Jesus came to Jerusalem, what did He find in the temple? He found in the temple area there were those who were selling animals and the money changers. Why was it so? When the children of Israel came to the temple, they had to buy sheep, or oxen, and this had to be approved by the priest. If a person tried to bring a goat or lamb from afar, the priest might not approve it, so it could not be offered; all the animals had to be approved by the priests. And if you wanted to pay the temple tax it had to be the temple money. Outwardly, for the convenience of the people, in the temple area there were those who sold these animals which had been preapproved, and the money changers were ready to change the people's money so they could buy an animal. Outwardly, it was for convenience, but actually it was a good business and very profitable for the priests as well as to the merchants. People came to the temple without noticing these things, but the Lord Jesus saw what was really going on. And in the beginning of the Lord's ministry He cleansed the temple by overturning the tables and throwing out the animals. He said, "You have made My Father's house a house of merchandise." Then towards the end of His ministry, when He entered into Jerusalem for the last time, He went to the temple and the same thing was happening, even worse than before. And the Lord said, "This is a house of prayer for all nations and you have made it a robber's den."

So throughout His life, in the beginning of His ministry as well as at the end, He tried to cleanse the temple, but they refused. The temple that outwardly appeared to be God's house actually was a robber's den.

Where is the tabernacle of God on earth? It is in our Lord Jesus. So when they challenged Him, He said, "If you destroy this temple, in three days I will raise it up." And the Jews said, "This temple has been built for forty-six years and it is still not finished." How can you destroy and build it in three days? But the Lord was speaking of His own body, for if they destroyed His body He would be raised on the third day. And after He was resurrected His disciples recalled it.

The Lord Jesus Prepares the Way to Build the Church

When the Lord Jesus was on earth, He was the real tabernacle of God. Not only was He the tabernacle Himself but He was preparing the way to build the church as the tabernacle of God, and that will bring us into the book of Acts.

After the Lord ascended to heaven, one hundred and twenty responded to His command: "Return to Jerusalem and wait for the power on high." These hundred and twenty gathered together to give themselves to prayer and waited for the blessing from above. And thank God, on the day of Pentecost they heard a loud breathing, like the breathing of a person. It was God who was breathing. His breath filled the house and tongues of fire fell upon their heads, and they began to speak of the glory of God. On the very same day three thousand were added.

The Early Church Persevered in the Teaching and Fellowship of the Apostles

What was the manner of life for these three thousand, one hundred and twenty believers? We find in Acts 2:42 that they all continued or persevered in the teaching and fellowship of the apostles in breaking of bread and prayers. Apostles is in plural number, but the teaching and fellowship are in singular number. In other words, even though there were twelve apostles and each one had his own emphasis, yet their teaching was one because what they had received from the Lord they taught. They did not have their own teaching; they only taught what they were taught of the Lord. Not only that, they had only one fellowship. Peter did not have his fellowship; James did not have his fellowship; there was only the fellowship of the Lord Jesus.

The Church is Expressed Especially by Two Things

So they continued on together and this was expressed especially by two things. One was the breaking of bread. In Christianity today the breaking of bread has been neglected, but in the early church the breaking of bread, which was the remembering of the Lord, was the foundation of their church life. The other one was their coming together to pray. Today, we find that the breaking of bread is only being done occasionally, and very few people attend church prayer. But at that time this was their life, and God blessed them. They had a glorious beginning, and within thirty some years the gospel had been preached to the end of the world which at that time was Rome. It was true they had problems, but thank God, if a problem is solved according to God's will it is a blessing. Today, we are afraid of problems. But if we can bring our problems to the Lord and they are solved according to the will of God, it is a blessing to the church. For example, when the food for those Hellenistic widows had been neglected, it was a problem. But it was solved when the seven people who were chosen to take care of the food were all Hellenistic Jews except probably the last one. The Hebrew Jews were willing to elect all the Hellenistic Jews to do this work. There was nothing selfish there; it was all for the glory of God. The church began to grow and within thirty some years it had reached Rome. It had a glorious beginning.

The End of the First Century

However, by the end of the first century, of the twelve apostles, the only one still living was John, and he was serving in Asia Minor. But he was sent to the island Patmos because of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus. And on the Lord's day he was in the Spirit and he saw a vision. He saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of them he saw One like the Son of Man. It was a vision of the heavenly ministry of the Lord Jesus. Because John was the one closest to the Lord and knew Him more than anybody else when He was on earth, he was given a vision of the heavenly ministry of the Lord.

I remember a story of an elderly sister. She wanted to be baptized, and at that time if anyone wanted to be baptized he had to be questioned by the elders. So when the elders questioned her, they asked her this question: "What is the Lord doing in heaven?" She thought for a while, and then said, "The Lord in heaven is looking down upon me and trying to find fault with me." Of course she did not pass.

The Lord is in heaven as our great High Priest ministering to us, and not only to each one of us, He is also ministering to the church at large. Here we see the Lord ministering to the seven churches in Asia Minor. These were the churches that John ministered to before he was exiled; yet the Lord Himself was ministering to the churches. What was the Lord looking for? He was looking for Himself.

Again I remember a story, and it is a real one. A. J. Gordon was a great servant of the Lord. He ministered in the Boston area and was greatly used by the Lord. Once he dreamed that he was in a meeting, and he was sitting at the front looking out at the congregation. He saw a strange person come in looking for a seat, and finally he was given a seat near the front. Somehow that strange person attracted A. J. Gordon. So when he stood up to preach, he looked at him and wondered what he would think of his sermon. What will that strange person think of our pipe organ? What will that stranger think of our choir? Before he finished his sermon he said to himself, I have to meet that strange person. And usually after the sermon the pastor will go to the door and greet everybody. However, when he arrived at the door, the stranger was already gone. So he asked the usher, "Who is that strange person?" And the usher said, "Don't you know Him? He is Jesus." And you know what happened? The pipe organ was gone, the choir was gone; everything changed, and he became a servant of God greatly used by God. "When Jesus comes to church." Do you think it is a strange thing? This is what it ought to be. If our Lord Jesus is not here why should we meet? We are gathering unto His name, and He is ministering to His church.

The Church in the Second Century

In the second century of church history the church was greatly persecuted. During this time there is the famous story of Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna. When there was persecution, brothers and sisters begged him to escape and hide himself. He did not want to do that, but they begged him so much that he went to another village; but somehow the soldiers found him. One day they came to the door and he asked them to come in. He treated them with a feast and then he said, "Give me an hour; I want to pray." So he went to his room to pray and he prayed for two hours. Then he came out and let them take him. When he was brought to the proconsul, he saw that Polycarp was such an old man that he had pity on him. And he said, "If you will only worship the emperor you will be free; but he said, "I have served the Lord for eighty-six years; He has never done any wrong to me. How can I deny His name?" So he was pushed down from the carriage and was to be burned.

During the second and third centuries many of God's people were martyred. I cannot give you all the stories because there are so many, but thank God there were those who were faithful to the end.

The Church in the Fourth Century

In the fourth century Constantine the Great accepted Christianity as a lawful religion, and he encouraged his soldiers to be baptized. If they were willing to be baptized they would be given money and clothing; so in order to please the emperor and to get money, of course, many of the soldiers were baptized. As a result, Christianity became very popular, but those who were baptized knew nothing about salvation, so how could they serve God? Therefore, they had to train some people to do special so-called divine work, and Christianity began to falter.

The Church in the Sixth Century

When you come to the sixth century, the Roman Catholic Church was officially established, and from the sixth century to the sixteenth century it is known as the “Dark Ages” because Christianity had lost its spirit. People did not even know how to be saved. The priests said that you had to accumulate merits, and if you had enough merits when you died you could go to heaven. If you did not have enough merits you had to go to Purgatory. But there were a few saints who had more merits than they needed, so if you prayed to them they would share some of their merits, and it would diminish your days in Purgatory. Also the Roman Catholic Church wanted to build St. Peter’s Cathedral, and they needed money, so they sent people out to sell indulgences. When your money entered into the box, your relative would rise out of Purgatory. Now that was the sixteenth century, and that was one of the reasons for the Reformation. We do praise and thank the Lord that in the sixteenth century God raised up some people who proclaimed salvation by grace. They also demanded an open Bible because at that time it was locked. The common people were not allowed to read the Bible, but during the Reformation God raised up Martin Luther, John Calvin, Zwingli, and other reformers who said, “We want an open Bible.” And they also insisted upon salvation by grace. That was the beginning of the Reformation.

The Church in the Seventeenth Century

In the seventeenth century in the Protestant area there were the Pietists. They were people who wanted to really get close to the Lord, and one of them was George Fox whom God used to begin the Friends Society. There were others also who were famous Pietists. Of course, in the Catholic Church there was also a reaction, and among those was Madame Guyon.

The Church in the Eighteenth Century

In the eighteenth century there was a brother by the name of Zinzendorf who began the Moravian movement. And out of that movement people were sent throughout the world to preach the gospel. They even sold themselves as slaves in order to preach to the slaves. They began the twenty-four hour prayer meeting which continued on for a hundred years. Then there were John Wesley and George Whitefield and the beginning of the Methodist Church.

The Church in the Nineteenth Century

In the nineteenth century, we find the Brethren Movement. It was a great movement in which many laid down their titles and called each other brother.

The Church in the Twentieth Century

We believe God began the recovery work beginning with the sixteenth century and when we come to the twentieth century, God raised up a number of brothers in China who were greatly used by the Lord. For instance, in the north there was Wang Ming-Dao and John Sung who was the greatest evangelist in China. I knew him very well. And then there was Watchman Nee. All of

these were raised up in China. In England there was T. Austin Sparks who began to preach the eternal purpose of God. In India there was Bakht Singh, and the gospel was spread throughout India.

The Church in the Twenty-first Century

Now we are in the twenty-first century. I believe that this time is probably not for spiritual giants but for God's people to learn how to be united in one body, that the body of Christ might be completed. Then, of course, there is the coming of the Lord.

Shall we pray:

Dear Lord, it is the prayer of our hearts that You will come quickly; Thy people are waiting for Thee. In Thy name. Amen.

West Coast Christian Conference