

## Message 4

### The Fourth Level—the Churches of God

Scripture Reading: Matt. 16:18; 18:17; 1 Cor. 1:2; Rev. 1:11-12

- I. **The churches of God are the fourth level of the meaning of God's New Testament economy—Eph. 1:22-23; Matt. 16:18; 18:17; Rev. 1:11-12.<sup>1</sup>**
- II. **Regarding the church, there are two terms in the Bible: the church of God (1 Cor. 10:32) and the churches of God (11:16);<sup>2</sup> the church of God refers to the universal church, the unique Body of Christ, whereas the churches of God refers to the local churches:<sup>3</sup>**
  - A. The Body needs to have a practical expression, an actual appearance, on earth;<sup>4</sup> the local churches are the practical expression of the Body of Christ—Matt. 16:18; 18:17; Eph. 1:22-23; 2:21-22; Rev. 1:11:<sup>5</sup>
    1. God is expressed in Christ, Christ is expressed in the Body, and the Body is expressed in the local churches—Col. 2:2, 9; Eph. 3:4; Rev. 1:11; cf. *Hymns*, #818.
    2. Without local churches the church only becomes a kind of term, something in the heavens, something in the future, something for us to look forward to but not so real and practical today on this earth.<sup>6</sup>
  - B. A local church is an expression of the Body of Christ in a certain locality—1 Cor. 1:2; 10:32b, 17; 12:12-13, 20, 27:<sup>7</sup>
    1. The unique Body of Christ is expressed in many local churches in the divine oneness as it is with the Triune God and in the divine nature, element, essence, expression, function, and testimony; there are many churches, yet they have one divine nature, one divine element, one divine essence, one divine expression, one divine function, and one divine testimony because they are one Body—Rev. 1:11; John 17:11, 21, 23.
    2. The church revealed in Matthew 16:18 is the universal church, the unique Body of Christ, whereas the church revealed in 18:17 is the local church, the expression of the unique Body of Christ in a certain locality.
    3. The one universal church—the Body of Christ—becomes the many local churches—local expressions of the Body of Christ—Rom. 12:4-5; 16:16.
    4. The unique Body of Christ is expressed in many localities as the local churches—Eph. 4:4; Rev. 1:4, 11:
      - a. The Body of Christ is the source of the local churches—Eph. 1:22-23; 2:21-22.
      - b. The universal Body is like the father to all the churches, and all the churches are like the children to the father—Rom. 12:4-5; 16:4.
    5. Every local church is a part of the unique, universal Body of Christ, a local expression of this Body—Eph. 4:4; 1 Cor. 1:2; 12:27:
      - a. Universally, all the local churches are one Body, and locally, every local church is a local expression of the universal Body; therefore, a local church is not the Body but only a part of the Body, an expression of the Body.
      - b. The universal Christ has a part of Himself in every local church; every local church is a part of Christ, and all these parts constitute the Body—Eph. 1:23; 2:22.
    6. The local ground of the church is basically the unique oneness of the Body of Christ practiced in the local churches—4:4; 1 Thes. 1:1:
      - a. Both the universal Body of Christ and the local churches are uniquely one.
      - b. There is one unique Body in the whole universe, and there is one unique local church in each locality respectively.
      - c. This unique oneness is the basic element in the church life—Acts 1:14; 2:46; 1 Cor. 1:10; Phil. 1:27; 2:1-2.

7. The churches in different localities are for the universal expression of Christ—Eph. 1:23; Rev. 1:4, 22; 22:16a:
  - a. A local church that makes everything local and that expresses only its locality has become a local sect, a local division.
  - b. All the basic things for the Body are not local—the Spirit, Christ, God, the Bible, the apostles' teaching, and the apostles' fellowship.

### **III. The book of Revelation is a book concerning the churches as the testimony of Jesus—vv. 1-2, 9, 11; 22:16a:<sup>8</sup>**

- A. The testimony of Jesus is not individual Christians—it is the local churches, the church in a practical way—1:2, 9, 11:
  1. To show Jesus to those in our locality, there is the need of a local church that testifies who Jesus is; thus, the church in our locality should bear the image, expression, appearance, and virtues of Christ—Col. 1:15; 3:10.
  2. Because the local churches are the expression of the all-inclusive Christ, they are the testimony of Jesus—v. 11; Rev. 1:2, 9, 11.
- B. The central concept of the first three chapters of Revelation is the seven lampstands as the seven local churches to be God's expression—1:11, 20:
  1. The churches as golden lampstands bear the testimony of Jesus—vv. 2, 9; 20:4:
    - a. The testimony of Jesus is the testimony of the Son coming with the Father by the Spirit to live on earth, to die on the cross to clear up the universe, to release the divine life, and to resurrect from the dead to become the life-giving Spirit, who then comes as the Son with the Father compounded with divinity, humanity, human living, crucifixion, and resurrection, including all the divine attributes and human virtues—John 10:38; 1 Cor. 15:45.
    - b. Such a compound testimony is the testimony of Jesus, and this testimony has a symbol—the golden lampstand—Rev. 1:12, 20.
  2. As golden lampstands, the local churches are a duplication of Christ as the unique lampstand—vv. 11-12, 20:
    - a. In Exodus 25 Christ, the embodiment and expression of God, is typified by the unique lampstand, but in Revelation this lampstand has been duplicated; each lampstand is a reproduction of the lampstand revealed in Exodus 25.
    - b. When all the lampstands, or local churches, are added together, they are the multiplication of Christ, the multiplied embodiment and expression of the Triune God to be the testimony of Jesus—Rev. 1:2, 9, 11-12, 20.
  3. The golden lampstands signify the churches as the embodiment and expression of the Triune God shining forth, with the sevenfold intensified Spirit of God as the lamps, to be the testimony of Jesus—v. 20; 4:5:
    - a. The local churches as lampstands bear the testimony of Jesus Christ in separate cities, shining locally yet collectively—1:2, 9, 20; 20:4.
    - b. Every local church is a golden lampstand, having the sevenfold intensified Spirit of God as the lamps and shining the testimony of Jesus from its locality in this dark age—2:1, 5.

### **IV. The local churches are the stepping stones to the New Jerusalem—1:11-12; 21:2, 9:<sup>9</sup>**

- A. In the first chapter of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, we see seven local churches; then in the last two chapters we see the New Jerusalem in the new heaven and the new earth.
- B. The local churches may be considered as the gates into the unique church, which consummates in the new Jerusalem; we are in the churches with the goal that one day we will be the New Jerusalem.<sup>10</sup>