Progress of Revelation

It is not clear exactly when all the disciples realized the full identity of Jesus as the divine Son of God from eternity who put aside his equality with the Father and became human, to die for our sins. It is quite clear that the various disciples came to this realization at different times. Cleopas and his friend, in their encounter with the Lord after his resurrection for example, did not even recognize Jesus at first. This is noteworthy. Then, their eyes were opened, by the Spirit, in the breaking of bread (Luke 24:30-31). But how much did Cleopas and his friend know about Jesus at that point? The text indicates that they only finally recognized him. Notice that at the end of Luke 24 the disciples worshipped Jesus (Luke 24:51) after he appeared to them again and opened their minds to understand the scriptures (Luke 24:45), but Matthew also indicates that the disciples worshipped Jesus in the incident where he walked on water (Matt. 14:32). Do the disciples worship Jesus with a knowledge of his full identity at either point?

Prior to the resurrection, it is quite clear that none of the disciples understood the identity of Jesus as the divine Son of God who had become human; they believed in him at that time as the promised Messiah who was understood from the scripture as the great Davidic descendant who would save Israel. Peter confesses this in Luke 9:20. Peter's concept of the Messiah, however, was an incomplete picture of who Jesus really is and what was really going on in Gethsemane (John 18:11). The Lord lived his entire life incognito, right up to his death on the cross. Jesus' words on the cross show this, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Jesus' full identity was hidden not only from the disciples and everybody else, but it was also hidden even from the devil. When Satan entered Judas, the devil thought that he was killing the Messiah, the man who would save Israel, and he wished to put Messiah to death. But the devil was deceived by the ultimate trick, and received a big taste of his own medicine, just as he had deceived Eve in the Garden (Genesis 3:13). The tables were turned on him by the Lord's obedience to the plan of God Almighty because the Lord's death provided the basis for the forgiveness of sins (Luke 22:14-23; John 12:23-33; John 18:10-11; John 19:28-30). After the devil thought that he had gained victory in hanging the Lord on a Roman cross, he received a big surprise. God Almighty, and the Lord, used the serpent's own tactic of deception to defeat him. Consequently, God's curse of the devil in the Garden (Genesis 3:14-15) went into full effect, but only after the Lord died and was then raised from the dead. This is the stunning significance of Jesus' incognito.

Much earlier than the Gethsemane episode of John's Gospel, in the Gospel of Luke, the disciples' knowledge of Jesus' identity seems very rudimentary because, after Jesus calmed a storm on the Sea of Galilee, his disciples exclaimed, "Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him" (Luke 8:25).

The Gospel writers did understand Jesus' full identity by the time they wrote their Gospels. John is emphatic in his prologue about Jesus' preexistent divinity and equality with God the Father. Matthew and Luke's accounts of the miraculous conception of Jesus within Mary indicate that, by the time they wrote their Gospels, they both knew the Lord's actual identity. Mark's inclusion of his account of the crucifixion indicates his understanding of Jesus' death as an atoning sacrifice that accomplished our salvation, an understanding that is evident in all the Gospels and which assumes the preexistent divinity of the Lord. Paul was also very clear about Jesus' identity as the divine Son of God who became human to die for us (Philippians 2:5-11). But when did this realization take place? At Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was given to the believers? As the disciples conversed together after his ascension? As Jesus' mother reported to the disciples how

Jesus' conception occurred? It is impossible to say; the disciples realized the truth at some point as they were led by the Holy Spirit. Nobody can put their finger on just exactly how or when this occurred for most of the disciples; such revelation seems to have occurred at different times and in different ways for different disciples. We have a specific record in the case of Thomas (John 20:28). As we have already indicated, it may have been the case that John realized the full identity of Jesus after he heard Thomas' confession. Perhaps some of the other apostles understood at that time also. We cannot know for certain. The Apostle Paul was encountered by the Lord soon after the death of Stephen (Acts 9), and it might seem that he would have understood fully at that time who Jesus really is, but perhaps he did not until later. The Spirit is free to teach men and women in His own way and in His own time. The Spirit's revelation is progressive. It begins for each person at a point in time and unfolds as time goes on. Our understanding of the Lord increases through time as Jesus Christ is revealed, by the Spirit, to us. Does it not happen like this in our own experience? The experience of the disciples was similar. Notice, for example, how Matthew provides an instructive perspective that, on a mountain in Galilee after the resurrection, the eleven apostles worshipped Jesus, but some were still doubting (Matt. 28:17). The understanding of Jesus was uneven among the apostles. It is this way for all believers. The Lord treats each one as his friend and each one is in a different place in his relationship with his Lord. The apostles' understanding of Jesus' identity unfolded through time, both while he was with them and after his ascension. The Gospels must be read as dramatic records of the unfolding revelation of Jesus Christ to men and women, just as he continues to be revealed through the Spirit to men and women in our own day. So, we see that the freedom of God and the work of the Spirit are the great realities of our existence.

In case anyone is unclear about what our true concern in the churches ought to be, that will be made explicit now. Our concern ought to go far beyond our doctrines of God and of Christ. Those doctrines are only a starting point. We need to start somewhere, but everything needs to be purified. The Reformation should continue. The Reformation of the 16th century was only a start. The doctrine of justification was purified. The Reformation of the 16th century made it clear that we are justified by faith; the actual victory belongs to Jesus Christ because of his work for us on the cross. By his death, he purchased for us the forgiveness of sin and won our victory over our enemy, who is the devil. So, the recovery of a proper doctrine of justification by faith was a good start. But the churches need an overhaul.

We should not be deluded, however, into thinking that we can fix the churches entirely. That is not the model that we see in scripture, and that is not what is being suggested here. In Malachi 3:16-4:5, the Hebrew scriptures end with an instructive image of what can really be expected in the churches, just as it happened also in the history of Israel. In the face of God's rebuke in the Book of Malachi, a fraction of the Israelites talked together. The Lord God noticed this and declared that they would be spared from the ruin that was coming upon the wicked. Jude speaks of a similar situation in the early churches. He says that the apostles have already warned believers that there will be scoffers who will divide the churches because they follow their own desires and do not have the Spirit of Christ (Jude 17-18). Very early on therefore, the churches were already polluted by individuals who were not spiritual at all, although these individuals exercised considerable influence. They had slipped in secretly (Jude 4). Within the churches, there are believers and there are unbelievers. Furthermore, it is not always easy to distinguish between them because there are also believers within the churches who are doubting (Jude 22). Matthew indicates that even some of the disciples were doubting Jesus after the resurrection as they met with him on a mountain in Galilee (Matthew 28:17). And Jude himself had doubted his own brother for a considerable length of time before he came to believe in him. Jude admonishes believers to be merciful to those who are doubting. But those who divide the churches because of their unbelief have been cursed, according to Jude (Jude 11). So, churches are complex organisms indeed. We should not imagine

that we will be able to completely purify them. The wicked, even within the churches, will continue to mark themselves by their propensity to divide the churches. It is only God Himself, and the Lamb, who will fix things completely (Revelation 21-22).

Unbelief is not easy to characterize in terms of what it looks like. It takes many different forms and is always adapting itself to its environment. Unbelief is a chameleon. When it expresses itself explicitly, it is easily recognized. Anyone who demotes faith to a position beneath reason and feeling would be an example of such explicit unbelief. Historically, we have seen many such theologies, and many of them persist in our day. But other forms of unbelief are more sinister. It was Judas who betrayed the Lord with a kiss. Some in the churches betray Jesus with a pat on the back and a lot of polite talk. These are the Pharisees who claim to be the guardians of the faith, but who have denied the power of God. Jesus warned his disciples about the ones like this.

The interminable splintering of the churches is indicative of how serious the confusion is, but that splintering is only the surface of the problem. The depth of the problem is unfathomable. The churches have underestimated the attack under which they suffer. The churches have underestimated their suffering. A hundred different ecclesiastical gangs take up their respective positions, entrench themselves, stick their heads in the sand, and cry out from under the ground to each other and to the world that their positions are inviolable. All these different gangs have failed to perceive in their confusion that their tails are sticking up as easy targets for the predators that simply prowl around the whole world and pick off their easy prey, one at a time. Predators have never had it so good. They are fat on the blood of countless ostriches. This is the true position of the churches. We need to open our eyes.

Churches can start purifying themselves by attending to the doctrines of God and Christ, but then they must move through the entire range of Christian doctrine and purify all of it. It is all polluted and needs to be cleaned up. The way to do this is to stick our noses into the text of scripture and open our ears to what the Spirit of Christ is saying to the churches (Revelation 3). We need to lay aside our dusty books and make sure that we are rooted in what the Spirit is saying through the scripture (Ecclesiastes 12:11-12). While the churches are working on this, they should also purify their practice. The churches need to recover the Christian practices and stop conducting themselves as shops, peddling their wares.

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