
THE CHURCH'S ADVANCE TOWARD FULLNESS

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INTRODUCTION:

The general subject with which we have been dealing in the AFI since 2004 (Spain, Argentina, Thailand, Italy) is: **The Church's Advance Toward Fullness.**

The Holy Spirit has placed this subject before us from the following perspective or vision: Prior to the end times, the church will continue to grow here in the earth until she reaches her fullness in three fundamental dimensions: UNITY, QUALITY AND QUANTITY.

Over the last forty years the Holy Spirit has brought about in the church throughout the world a strong movement of spiritual renewal, of which we are all a part. In many of us the word 'restoration' has been a key word, for it helped us to see that the church needed to recover important truths, ministries and gifts that had been ignored through the centuries. However, the concept of 'restoration,' although we did not realize it, had the effect of conditioning or limiting us as regards the vision of the church's fullness which God has purposed to accomplish here in the earth prior to the end times.

Jesus did not say: "I will restore my church", but rather, "*I will build my church*" (Matthew 16.18). If by "restoration" we mean the recovery of the biblical principles which as a church we had lost or ignored in past centuries, that is quite correct. However, in speaking of the restoration of the church, if we propose to return to the life of the churches in the first century, it is not entirely correct. Let us remember that many of the churches in the times of the New Testament had significant problems. The Corinthians were carnal. The Galatians were returning to the Law. In Ephesus there was a threat of division. Among the seven churches of Asia Minor, few were a good example for us. Even the church of Jerusalem had little interest in moving beyond Jerusalem, and only preached to the Jews.

When we study the first epistles written by Paul, we get the impression that at the beginning of his ministry he had the idea that in his generation the edification of the church would be completed, and that Christ would return quickly. But a study of his later epistles, such as Ephesians, indicates clearly that Paul could see that in the future centuries, and prior to Christ's return, the church would reach a historic fullness:

"...in order than in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus" (2.7).

"...until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (4.13).

"...to present to himself a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" (5.27).

I. OUR TWO ABSOLUTE REFERENCE POINTS FOR THE EDIFICATION OF THE CHURCH

1. God's eternal project (Our first point of reference is in the remote past)

Our absolute reference point for the edification of the church is not the church of ages past, nor even the first century church. Our initial reference is the church before all time, the church that God purposed to have before the foundation of the world. That project God revealed in its fullness to the apostles and prophets of the first century, of which Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians is the most complete exposition (Eph 3.1-11).

This entire eternal project of God can be summed up in one word: CHURCH.

The church was not born in God's mind two thousand years ago when he sent his Son to the world. The church was in God's mind and heart from ages past, *"before the foundation of the world"*.

The church was not God's 'Plan B' following the fall of man. The church is God's 'Plan A' since before the existence of men or demons. The fall was a detour, an attack against God's eternal project. Redemption was simply a return of things to the original plan.

The church is the family that God purposed to have according to his good will and pure love, since before the foundation of the world.

THE FATHER OF JESUS CHRIST PURPOSED TO BE THE FATHER
OF A GREAT FAMILY (**UNITY**)
OF THOUSANDS OF MILLIONS OF CHILDREN (**QUANTITY**)
CONFORMED TO THE IMAGE OF HIS SON (**QUALITY**).
(Ephesians 1.4-5; Romans 8.29)

In truth, God has only one eternal project. The creation of man and woman, the institution of marriage, procreation, the incarnation of the WORD, the redemptive sacrifice of the Son, his resurrection and exaltation, the coming of the Holy Spirit, are all in the same line, pointing to the same objective: the realization of God's eternal purpose.

2. The finished work at the end of time (Our second reference point is in the remote future)

In Revelation 21.9ff, the angel tells John: *"Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb"*. Then he took him to a great and high mountain *"and showed him the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God"*. That extraordinary city which is then described is not heaven, but the church. (Verse 2 of the same chapter confirms this.) It is the concluded project, the church fully edified (or built). It is the promised bride, the wife of the Lamb. Jesus Christ finally presents to himself a glorious and holy church, without spot or wrinkle or any other blemish. Halleluia!

The three characteristics of this church-city:

QUALITY: *"It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal"* (v.11). *"...The city of pure gold, as pure as glass"* (v.18).

The entire description speaks of holiness, purity, light, transparency and glory.

UNITY: It is one city alone, surrounded by a great wall of 65 meters in height. Jesus Christ has only one bride, only one church.

QUANTITY: This city is gigantic, larger than any other city of the world and it is tri-dimensional. It measures 2,160 km. in length, 2,160 km. in width, and 2,160 km. in height (v.16). (Mount Everest is less than 9 km. in height!). It is made up of thousands of millions of persons.

Here we see the end of history. He that said: *"I will build my church"* is seated on the throne of the universe and has all power to bring it about. *"The will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied"*

(Isaiah 53:10-11).

Where and when is the church to be built?

It is here in the world and prior to the coming of Christ. Following that there will be no more evangelism or conversions; that is, no further numerical growth of the church. There will be no more discipleship, nor pastors nor teachers to edify the church.

- According to 1 Corinthians 3, the building of the church with gold, silver and precious stones takes place here on earth.
- Jesus, through the washing of water, which is his word, prepares the church here, so as to present it to himself both glorious and holy (Eph.5.26-27).

II. NATURE AND IDENTITY OF THE CHURCH

What is the church?

- It is not a physical building; but rather men and women who have been redeemed by the Lord.
- It is not a legal institution, but rather a family, God's family.
- It is not made up of clergy alone; but all of God's people.
- It is not a congregation, although the church meets regularly. When we are dispersed during the week, we continue to be the church; we are the church 24 hours of the day, every day of the week. We do not go to the church; we are the church.

The church derives its identity from God's identity, from his character.

- Why should the church be holy? (**Quality**). > Because GOD IS HOLY.
- Why should the church be only one? (**Unity**). > Because GOD IS ONE.

- Why does God want many? (**Quantity**) > Because GOD IS LOVE. He created every human being out of love. All were created by God and for God (Col 1.16). All were included in his eternal project. All men have been created to be adopted as children of God through Jesus Christ. God wants all to be saved and to be a part of his eternal family (1Tim.2.4). Hell was not created for men, but for the devil and his angels (Mt 25.41). Although all will not be saved, for God does not impose his will on anyone.

The church is the expression of God's character: Holiness, Unity and Love.

III. THE CHURCH'S REASON FOR BEING AND ITS MISSION IN THE WORLD

Why is the church in the world?

"...To the praise of his glorious grace" (Eph 1.6).

"...for the praise of his glory" (Eph 1.12).

"...To show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2.8).

The church exists to show God's glory to the world.

What is glory?

In the Bible, the word 'glory' generally has to do with manifestation, revelation, visibility. Thus Psalm 19 states: "*The heavens declare the glory of God*" (19.1).

'Glory' is the visible manifestation of God's invisible attributes. "*Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen*" (Rom 1.20). Creation, in a most eloquent way, reveals to all humanity the existence, the greatness and the power of God.

But the full manifestation of God in the world was in Jesus Christ. The invisible God became visible in the incarnation of his Son. "*He is the image of the invisible God*" (Col 1.15). John tells us: "*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth*" (John 1.14). And Hebrews 1.3 affirms that Christ "*is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being*".

But today Jesus Christ is not present in the earth physically and visibly, but rather through his body, which is the church.

Through the Holy Spirit, Christ is today present in the church.

Jesus said to the Father: "*I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one*" (Jn 17.22).

Paul declares: "*For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ*" (Col 2.9,10). All the Father's attributes and virtues are in him.

And Christ, filled with the Father's fullness, is in us: "*Christ in you, the hope of glory*" (Col 1.27).

Paul explodes in praise because the Father "*blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ*" (Eph 1.3). In his prayer he does not request more blessing, but rather greater revelation that we might know fully what are "*the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints*" and what is "*his incomparably great power for us who believe*" (Eph 1.18-19).

Why did God place such glory, blessings and power in us? So that his glory might be known in the earth through his church.

Prophecy tells us: "*For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea*" (Hab 2.14; Isa 11.9). How will that happen? Through the manifestation of Christ in his church.

The invisible God became visible in Jesus Christ two thousand years ago; and today, the glory of Jesus Christ is made visible in the world through the quality of the church.

1. The church will manifest to the world the glory of God through her UNITY

The church as a community reconciled with God and with men, is God's visible proposal before all the divisions of humanity: as salt and light, the model of what God proposes to all the nations.

In a divided world in conflict, where individualism, selfishness, injustice, competition and wars reign, the church is that part of humanity which is again united with Christ in God and with their brothers and sisters. In its essential nature, the church is synonymous with forgiveness, peace, reconciliation, love and service. The church is the end of individualism, of divisions and wars, of the unjust distribution of riches.

The church is God's "Shalom" installed among men to show to the world the greatest of all miracles: that Jews and Arabs are one in the Messiah. (At this moment, Jewish Christians in the north of Israel have provided lodging in their homes to Arab believers from southern Lebanon, whose homes were destroyed in the recent war.)

When the nations that call themselves Christian understand what it means to be Christian, instead of killing, dominating and exploiting the poorer nations, they will place their riches and all their capacity for service at the disposition of the poorer nations. They will understand that to be Christian is to be like Jesus Christ who, being rich, made himself poor to enrich many. That day will come, and the world will see the glory of God through his church. "*The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed*" (Rom 8.19).

2. The church will reveal God's glory to the world through its HOLINESS

The term "holy" is used some sixty times in the NT with reference to all the redeemed, the children of God.

HOLY means separate from sin and consecrated to God.

In practice, to be holy means to not lie or pronounce evil words, to not insult anyone, to not steal or take home anything that does not belong to us, to neither give nor receive bribes, to not speak evil of our neighbor nor complain, to not have sexual relations

outside of marriage nor before marriage, to not harbor revenge, to not be greedy or selfish.

Holy is the employer who pays the best wages he can, it is the worker or employee that works with diligence and excellence, it is the one who governs but is not corrupted, the legislator or judge who does not sell his services for a sealed envelope, it is the business man or professional that uses his ability to promote development and progress of all persons and families.

Holiness means families that live in peace and harmony. Wise and loving husbands. Submissive wives, who are loving and peaceable. Respectful and obedient children. Boys and girls that reach marriage as chaste and virgins. Older people who are respected and venerated by the younger generation. Children raised in love and the fear of the Lord. Responsible, diligent and faithful workers. Virtuous women, who are happy and full of good deeds.

A glorious church means a people made up of disciples that learn to be humble, patient, kind, generous, sincere, good, happy and honest. Disciples whose life style is loving, forgiving, serving, confessing their sins, obeying, being subject to the authorities, paying their taxes. Men and women that trust in God, that love their neighbor, that help others, that weep with those who weep, that rejoice with those who are happy, that are united with their brothers and sisters. Disciples that return good for evil, that stand firm under injustice, that give thanks to God for all things, that overcome temptation, that live in the joy of the Lord, that pray without ceasing, that bear witness to Jesus, that make disciples, that make their money available to serve their brothers and, above all, that love God with all their heart.

To be holy does not mean to be perfect, but to desire perfection. If one who is holy sins, he confesses it; if he offends, he requests forgiveness; if he is offended, he forgives; when he is wrong, he recognizes it; if he steals, he repents and returns what has been stolen.

Holy is the person who loves God and obeys him out of love. He loves his neighbor as himself. He helps the needy. He shares his possessions with those who lack. He feels the pain of others as his own. He comforts the sad. He does not mock others, and certainly not those who are less fortunate. Holy is the one who in life most wants to be and live like Jesus.

THIS IS THE CHURCH THAT GOD WANTS, A HOLY CHURCH WITHOUT STAIN OR WRINKLE, NOR ANY OTHER BLEMISH, A CHURCH THAT SHOWS TO THE WORLD THROUGH ITS LIFE AND BEHAVIOR THE LOVE AND HOLINESS OF GOD.

This is the kind of church that God is calling us to be and to labor with him to build.

3. The church will show the world God's glory through its NUMERICAL GROWTH

- The promise of Abraham: Gen 12.1-3;

- The vision of Habakkuk: Hab.2.14
- The prophecy of Joel: Joel 2
- **The vision of Isaiah and Amos: Isaiah 2**
- **The affirmation of Jesus Mt 24:14**
- **Jesus' command: Mt 28.18-20**
- **World revival as the root of Israel's conversion Rom 11**

HOW WILL WE ACHIEVE THIS QUALITY?

The answer is in Ephesians 5.25-27:

"Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, to present her to himself as A RADIANT CHURCH, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but HOLY and blameless."

1. The redemptive sacrifice of Christ
2. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon all flesh
3. The integral fulfillment of the Great Commission: Mt 28.18-20
4. The powerful action of the word of God: Kerygma and Didache.
5. The functioning of the church and of all the ministries in a single body, in each city – nation – region – world.
6. The consecration and mobilization of all the members of the church in the fulfillment of their mission
7. The sovereign action of Jesus Christ among the nations as the Lord of history
8. Persecution as an instrument of God's sovereignty to sanctify, unite and empower the church for the fulfillment of its mission.

(All Scripture quotations are from the NIV.)