

New Testament Manifestations

by John Fletcher

Jesus' manifestations in the New Testament demonstrate His divine nature and purpose, revealing Himself to individuals and groups to bring about salvation and spiritual growth.

Topics: "Personal Encounter with God", "Revelation of Christ"

Description

John Fletcher emphasizes the abundant manifestations of Jesus Christ throughout the New Testament, illustrating how He revealed Himself to various individuals before and after His birth, during His ministry, and even after His resurrection. He highlights the importance of personal revelation, as seen in the experiences of Mary, Simeon, and the disciples, asserting that true knowledge of Christ comes through divine revelation rather than mere observation. Fletcher argues that these manifestations continue even after Christ's ascension, as believers experience His presence through the Holy Spirit. He concludes that Christ's revelations are essential for the conversion and encouragement of all believers, affirming that such experiences are scripturally supported and vital for spiritual growth.

Transcript

As promised, I now hope to prove that the New Testament also abounds with accounts of special revelations of the Son of God.

Before His birth, Jesus manifested Himself to the Virgin Mary by the overshadowing power of the Holy Spirit. She rejoiced in God her Saviour and was more thankful that He had revealed Himself as God in her soul, than she was to find Him conceived as Man in her womb. Soon after, Joseph was assured in a heavenly dream, that the child Mary had conceived was Emmanuel 'God with us'. The Lord revealed Himself next to Elizabeth : when she heard the salutation of Mary, she was filled with the Holy Ghost, and made aware of the fact that Mary, though a virgin, was the mother of her Lord. So powerful was this manifestation that her own unborn son John was affected by it 'The babe leaped in her womb'... and was filled with the Holy Ghost even from his mother's womb !

So important is a personal knowledge of Jesus that an angel directed the shepherds, and a miraculous star the wise men, to the place where He was born and was living. And the Holy Ghost did so reveal Him to their hearts that they did not hesitate to worship the apparently insignificant infant, as the majestic God of heaven and earth!

AFTER HIS BIRTH

Simeon, who waited 'for the consolation of Israel', had it 'revealed unto him, by the Holy Ghost', that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ. The promise was fulfilled; whilst his bodily eyes saw nothing but a poor infant, presented without pomp in the temple, Simeon's spiritual eyes perceived Him to be the Light of Israel, and the Salvation of God. Nor was this extraordinary favour granted only to Simeon, for it is written that 'all flesh shall see the salvation of God' and it is Luke who informs us that Anna shared this sight with the old Israelite, giving thanks to her new-born Lord, speaking of him 'to all that looked for redemption' in Jerusalem.

When Jesus entered upon His ministry, He first manifested Himself to his forerunner, John the Baptist. 'I knew Him not' said John 'but He that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me "Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, the same is He who baptizes with the Holy Ghost". And I saw, and bear record that this is the Son of God.'

Jesus manifested Himself, in a spiritual way, to Nathaniel under a fig tree, and the honest Israelite-being reminded of that divine favour-confessed the author of it : 'Rabbi' he said 'thou art the Son of God, thou art the King of Israel.' Our Lord, pleased with this ready confession, promised that He should see greater things and enjoy brighter manifestations than this; that he should even 'see the heavens open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.'

The plain outward appearance of our Saviour, together with His miracles, tended rather to confound (instead of convert) the beholders. What glorious beams of His Godhead must have pierced through the veil of His mean appearance, when - with supreme authority - He turned the money changers out of the temple; when He entered Jerusalem in triumph, and all the city was moved; and when He said to those who apprehended him in Gethsemane 'I am He' and they fell on the ground ! Nevertheless, we do not learn of anyone being blessed with a saving knowledge of Him on any of these wonderful occasions. The people of Galilee saw most of Him and yet believed least in Him. 'Whence hath this man wisdom, and these mighty works' they said, being astonished. In fact, 'they were offended at him'. Some went so far as to ascribe His miracles to a diabolical power, affirming that He cast out devils by Beelzebub, the prince of devils. So, it appears that if He had not-in some degree-revealed Himself inwardly to the hearts of the disciples, they would not have been ready to forsake all and follow Him immediately. He 'manifested forth his glory' writes John, concerning the Cana miracle 'and His disciples believed on Him', and yet when the manifestation was purely external, how weak was the effect it produced even upon them? Was not our Lord, after all, obliged to upbraid them with their unbelief, their little faith, and on one particular occasion, with their having no faith ! If we know, in a saving way, that Jesus is 'God with us', flesh and blood, mere man-with all his best powers-has not revealed this to us; it has come from our Father who is in heaven. Even as 'no man knoweth the Father save the Son, and He to whom the Son will reveal Him', so no man knoweth the Son but the Father, and those to whom the Spirit (proceeding from the Father) does reveal Him. 'For no man can (in a saving way) say, that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost.' Also, 'He that hath seen me' (by this divine revelation) said Jesus 'hath seen the Father also; for I and the Father are one.'

If our Lord had not revealed Himself in a special manner to sinners, no one would have suspected Him to be 'God manifest in the flesh'. Until he shows Himself to us, in a way that He does not do to the unbelieving world, 'He hath no form nor comeliness; and when we see Him there is no beauty that we should desire Him; we hide as it were our faces from Him; He is despised, and we esteem Him not.' Our Lord was obliged to say to the woman of Samaria 'I that speak unto thee am He' and to say it with power so that it penetrated her heart, before she could believe with her heart unto righteousness. Only then,

having been divinely wrought upon, did she run to inform her neighbours, so that they might draw living water out of the well of salvation which she had so happily found.

If our Lord had not called Zaccheus inwardly, as well as outwardly; if He had not made him come down from the pinnacle of proud nature, as well as from the sycamore tree; if He had not honoured the man's heart with His spiritual presence, just as He did his house with His bodily presence, would the rich publican have received Him gladly? And if not, would the Lord have said 'This day is salvation come to this house, forasmuch as Zaccheus is also a son of Abraham'?

Salvation did not enter into the heart of Simon the Pharisee, who admitted our Lord to his house and table, in the way that He came to Zaccheus. The penitent woman, who kissed His feet and washed them with her tears, obtained a blessing which the self-righteous Pharisee despised. It was to her contrite spirit, and not to his callous heart, that the Lord revealed Himself, as a pardoning God.

The blind man, restored to his bodily sight, did not know his heavenly Benefactor, until a second (and greater) miracle was wrought upon the eyes of his blind understanding. You will recall that Jesus found him, some time after he was cured, and said to him 'Dost thou believe on the Son of God?' The healed man answered 'Who is he, Lord, that I might believe on him?' And Jesus, opening the eyes of his mind, and manifesting Himself to this person, as He does not do to everyone, said 'Thou hast both seen Him, and it is He that talketh with thee'. Then, but not until then, could he say from his heart 'Lord I believe'.

Both of the thieves, who were crucified with Jesus, heard His prayers and strong cries; both saw His patience and His meekness, His wounds and His blood; one of them made sport of His sufferings, as though he had been the worst malefactor of the three; the other thief, blessed with an internal revelation of Christ's Person, implored His mercy, trusted Him with his soul, and confessed Him to be the King of glory, at the very moment when Jesus was dying like a base slave.

Peter wrote so highly of the manifestation with which he and two other disciples were favoured on the mount of transfiguration, that we ought not to omit a reference to it here. They saw the kingdom of God coming with power; they beheld the King in His beauty; 'we were eyewitnesses of His majesty, for He received from God the Father honour and glory, when there came such a voice to Him from the excellent glory "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased". And this voice which came from heaven, we heard.'

AFTER THE RESURRECTION

Nor did our Lord reveal Himself less, after His resurrection. You will remember that Mary sought Him at the grave with tears, and, as she turned around, she saw Him standing there, but did not know that it was Jesus. He said to her 'Why weepest thou? Whom seekest thou?' She, supposing him to be the gardener, inquired after the Object of her love. It was not until Jesus, after calling her by her name, manifested Himself to her as alive from the dead, that she realised that here was her Master. Then, in rapture, she sought to take her old place at His feet, but was restrained.

With equal condescension Jesus appeared to Simon Peter, so that he might not be swallowed up by too much sorrow. True mourners of the Christian faith weep, some for an absent God-as Mary, others for their sins-as Peter, but they cannot be comforted-even by angels; they can only find true joy in Him who is nigh to all that call upon Him, and is health to those who are broken in heart. That One who appeared first to weeping Mary, and next to sorrowing Peter, will shortly visit spiritual mourners with His salvation. He is

already with them, as he was with Mary, even though they do not realise it; He will soon be in them, the sure and comfortable hope of glory.

This observation is further confirmed by the experience of those two disciples who walked to Emmaus, immediately after the Resurrection, and were sad. Jesus drew near, joined, and comforted them; He made their hearts to burn within them as He talked with them along the road, and opened to them the Scriptures. But even so, their eyes were not opened so that they recognised Him; indeed, it was not until He sat down to eat with them 'that their eyes were opened and they knew him' in the breaking of bread. Unfortunately, many professors of religion in these days are satisfied with what did not satisfy the two disciples. They understood the Scriptures, their hearts burned with love and joy, Jesus was with them; but they knew Him not, until the happy moment when He fully opened the eye of their faith, and poured the light of His countenance on their ravished spirits. Happy are those who, like them, constrain an unknown Jesus-by mighty prayers-to tarry with them, until the veil is taken away from their hearts, and until they 'know in whom they have believed'.

The manifestations of Jesus to his disciples, as you will know, were frequent between His Resurrection and His Ascension. An angel appeared to two of the holy mourners and said to them 'Fear not; for I know that ye seek Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; for He is risen.' As they ran with fear and great joy to tell the rest of the disciples, Jesus met them and they held Him by His feet, and worshipped Him. The same day in the evening, when the doors were bolted for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst; they were terrified; He said 'Peace be unto you'. Then He shewed them His hands and His feet, ate with them as He had done of old with Abraham, and -to testify an inward manifestation of the Holy Ghost-He breathed upon them (as the Holy Spirit might breathe upon their minds) and thus He enabled them to understand the Scriptures. Out of condescension to Thomas, He shewed Himself to them a second time in a similar way; a third time at the sea of Tiberias-, and 'after that He was seen of above five hundred brethren at once.'

AFTER THE ASCENSION

You may have held the opinion that these manifestations ceased when Christ had ascended up to heaven. I consider that this is true as far as manifestations of flesh and blood (or those that may be touched with material hands) are concerned. In other words, believers 'know Christ after the flesh no more'. Our Lord, by his gentle reproof to Thomas, discountenanced our looking for carnal manifestations of His person, and I have declared repeatedly that they are not what I contend for.

However, I must deny that spiritual manifestations of Christ ceased at His Ascension, if I am to continue to believe the Scriptures. Rather than ceasing, they became more frequent ! For example, three thousand were 'pricked to the heart' on the day of Pentecost, and felt the need of a visit from the heavenly Physician. He then came to them, revealed in the power of his Spirit, with whom He is one. They received the gift of the Holy Ghost, whose office it is to manifest the Son. For 'the promise' was unto them 'and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.' It was already true, as it has continued to be, that 'I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.'

Time would fail me to recount the stories of the five thousand who were converted some days later, of Cornelius and his household, and of Lydia and her household; in a word, of all who were truly brought to Christ in the early days of Christianity. The Lord 'opened their hearts; the Holy Ghost fell upon them; and they walked in His comforts.' Christ was evidently set forth crucified before their spiritual eyes; He dwelt in

their hearts by faith; it was not they who lived, but Christ lived in them. They agreed with Paul that 'If any man have not the Spirit of Christ' (by whom He is savingly known) 'he is none of His.'

Stephen's experience is surely sufficient to decide the point. When brought before the council, they all saw his face, looking as if it was the face of an angel. Though full of the Holy Ghost, he wrought no miracle, he spoke no new tongue, but 'looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God.' This manifestation was intended only for the private encouragement and comfort of the saintly deacon. However, his response to this revelation enraged the Jews more, and made them consider him to be a greater blasphemer, and a wilder enthusiast, than they had done before. So, stopping their ears, they ran upon him, cast him out of the city, and stoned him. Stephen, under the powerful influence of the private manifestation, kneeled down, called upon God in prayer, and said 'Lord Jesus receive my spirit. Lay not this sin to their charge.' It is obvious, therefore, that nothing appears to be so absurd, to pharisees and formalists, as the doctrine which I here maintain. They lose all patience, when they are told that Christ has manifested Himself to one of His servants. No blasphemy can be compared with this, in the opinion of those who consider themselves to be wise, learned, and prudent. Also, it is obvious that the most exalted saints need fresh manifestations of the glory, love, and presence of Christ, if they are to depart this life with triumphant faith.

FOR ALL BELIEVERS

If you object that Stephen was specially favoured with this revelation because he was about to suffer for Christ, and that it would be a great presumption to expect similar support for all Christians, I reply with the five following observations:

1. We are called to suffer for Christ, as well as Stephen, although perhaps not in the same manner, or to the same degree.
2. We often need as much support from Christ as Stephen received, to stand against those children of men who are set on fire, whose teeth are spears and arrows, and whose tongues are a sharp sword; we need to quench the fiery darts of the devil, just as much as the martyr needed strength to stand against a shower of stones.
3. It is surely as hard to be racked with pain for years, or to burn several days in a fever, as you or I may be forced to do, as to be in a burning furnace for a few minutes, or to feel for a fleeting moment the anguish of a fractured skull, with our triumphant martyr.* No one knows what pangs of body and agonies of soul may accompany the believer through the valley of the shadow of death. If our Lord Himself was not above being strengthened by an angel which came to Him from heaven, surely it is not fanatical to say that feeble creatures like ourselves may stand in need of a divine manifestation, in order to enable us to fight our last battle triumphantly. (*Mr. Fletcher is not saying here that there is any genuine comparison between illness and martyrdom, but that believers have an intimate need of Christ when any form of suffering is inflicted upon them)
4. We betray unbelief, if we suppose that Christ cannot do for us what He did for Stephen; and we betray our presumption if we say that we do not want any assistance.
5. The language of the Church of England makes her position clear : 'Grant' (says the Collect for St. Stephen's day) 'O Lord, that in all our sufferings here upon earth, for the testimony of thy truth, we may steadfastly look up to heaven, and-by faith-behold the glory that shall be revealed; and, being filled with

the Holy Ghost, may learn to love and bless our persecutors, by the example of thy first martyr Saint Stephen, who prayed for his murderers to thee, O blessed Jesus, who standest at the right hand of God to succour all those who suffer for thee, our only Mediator and Advocate.'

You see, I have the suffrage of the Church! And, I believe that I have yours too, if you do not renounce all that Christendom stands for! Can you not see that if I am to be called an enthusiast for expecting myself to be filled with the Holy Spirit, and (by faith) to behold the glory that shall be revealed, just like Stephen, I am (at least) countenanced by a multitude of the finest men who have ever lived !

But, even if you reject the testimony of Stephen, and of all the clergy who testify to the reality and to the necessity of manifestations of our Lord, after His Ascension into heaven, I think that you, at least, accept that of Luke and Paul. They both inform us that whilst Saul of Tarsus was on his way to Damascus, the Lord - even Jesus - appeared to him : Suddenly, there shone round about him a light from heaven (above the brightness of the sun) and he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him 'Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me? And he said `Who art Thou, Lord?' And the Lord said `I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest'. So powerful was the effect of this manifestation of Christ, that the infuriated sinner was converted immediately, and a fierce, blaspheming persecutor became a weeping, praying Apostle.

Do I hear you say `True! Paul became an Apostle; but are all called to be Apostles?' No, we are not, but Christians are called to be converted from sin to holiness, and from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God's dear Son ! Paul's call to the Apostleship cannot be compared to his being made a child of God. Is it not true that Judas was a Christian by profession, an Apostle by his calling, and a devil by nature? And what is Judas compared to the meanest of God's children, or to poor Lazarus in Abraham's bosom? All who go to heaven are first `turned from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God'; this turning begins sometimes by a manifestation of Christ. In fact, I dare advance (upon the authority of one greater than Luke) that no conversion ever was completed without the revelation of the Son of God to the heart. `I am the Way' said Jesus `no man cometh to the Father, but by Me.' So, whilst it is true that we must `look unto Christ' in order to be saved, our looking to Him for salvation will be to little purpose if Christ does not manifest Himself to us; it would be just as hopeless as our looking towards the East for rays of light, if it were true that the sun does not rise*.(Some readers will not grasp this point easily, and some may be confused by the illustration. The author had met countless `converts' who claimed that they had passed through an experience of `looking to Christ' but who knew that they were no different. Mr. Fletcher was unhappy about preaching which left people thinking that they need only `look to Christ' and which did not encourage experimental religion)

The revelation of Christ which resulted in Saul's conversion was not the only one with which the Apostle was favoured. At Corinth, the Lord spoke to him by a vision, in the night : `Be not afraid, but speak and hold not thy peace, for I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee.' On another occasion, apparently in order to wean him more from earth, Christ favoured him with intimate views of heaven. `I knew a man in Christ' he wrote `whether in the body I cannot tell, who was caught up to the third heaven, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.' Then, he informs us that `lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me.' After he had been brought before the Sanhedrin for preaching the Gospel, we are informed that the following night the Lord stood by him, and said `Be of good cheer, Paul, for as thou hast testified of Me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome.' Then, the ship in which he sailed was endangered by a storm, and `the angel of God' stood by him and declared `Fear not Paul'.

However, Paul was not the only one to whom Christ manifested Himself in this manner. Ananias of Damascus was not an Apostle (or even a deacon!) and yet the Lord spoke to him in a vision. After Ananias had replied, like Samuel, 'Behold, I am here, Lord' our Saviour said 'Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and enquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus; for behold he prayeth.' In a similar way, Philip was directed to go near, and join himself, to the Eunuch's chariot; and Peter being informed that three men were looking for him, heard the Holy Spirit say 'Arise, therefore, and get thee down, and go with them, doubting nothing, for I have sent them.'

Whether we place these manifestations in the class of the extraordinary ones or of the mixed ones, we can learn these things from them : First, that the Lord Jesus Christ revealed Himself as much after His Ascension, as He did before. Secondly, that if He does this in order to send His servants with a gospel message to particular persons, He will do it much more in order to make that message effectual, and to bring salvation to those who wait for Him.

REVELATIONS IN REVELATION

As for the revelations which Christ made of Himself to John, there were so many that the last book of the New Testament is called Revelation and chiefly contains an account of them. 'I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day' we read of this Apostle, and he heard behind him a great voice, as of a trumpet, saying 'I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last'. He turned to see who had spoken to him; and, having turned, he saw One like the Son of Man. 'When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as though dead'. Then the Lord laid His right hand upon John and said 'Fear not, I am the first and the last ... write the things which thou hast seen and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter.'

One of the things which our Lord commanded John to write gives a most glorious promise, and informs us that He stands at the door of the human heart, ready to manifest Himself even to lukewarm Laodiceans; and that, if any man hears His voice and opens the door (that is, if people are made conscious of their need of Him, so as to open their hearts by the prayer of faith) He will come in, feast that one with His gracious presence, and give the delicious fruits of His blessed Spirit. Therefore, the most extraordinary of all of the revelations of Christ (which is that of John in Patmos) shows not only that manifestations run parallel to the canon of Scripture, but also it provides a confirmation of the ordinary revelations of Christ, for which I contend.

Having thus led you from Genesis to Revelation, I conclude by two inferences, which appear to me to be undeniable. The first is that it is evident that our Lord, before His Incarnation, during His stay on earth, and after His Ascension into heaven, has been pleased (in a variety of ways) to manifest Himself to the children of men, both for the benefit of the church in general, for the conversion of sinners, and for the establishment of particular saints.

The second inference is that the doctrine I maintain is as old as Adam, as modern as John (the last of the inspired writers) and as scriptural as the Old and New Testaments, which is what I wanted to demonstrate !

I am convinced that the Lord Jesus Christ, for purposes which are worthy of His wisdom, manifests Himself in this life, to all of His sincere followers, sooner or later.

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