

‘The Nature of The Church In The New Testament’

1. Introduction: The Fact of The Church

The church is an historical fact or happening. It has been in existence for nearly two millenniums. However it may be liked or disliked it is a very powerful factor in the world, and has been to varying degrees in the time of its existence. There are, however, theological questions which have to be asked, such as, ‘Is the church a viable institution, that is does it have a right to exist? Is it indeed God's appointed fellowship or community for His purposes, or has it happened fortuitously? Is it some accident of history, or has it merely come into being because some people chose to divert from Judaism, and enlarged their sect known as ‘the Way’?’ These are reasonable questions and at least awaken us from the conditioning some of us have had, namely the idea that since the church has always been there it is authentic, and its existence must be accepted.

Some of the points we will have to consider are, ‘Did Christ actually form the church? Is it in accordance with Jewish prophecies, or apart from them, and even opposed to them? Was it in fact a sect of the apostles at Jerusalem, or the brain-child of a man like Paul? If valid, does it have continuity with the old Jewish congregation? If viable, then what is its real reason for being, and what is its function or functions?’

2. The Church Before The New Testament Church

Was there in fact a church before the New Testament church? In Acts 7:38 Stephen speaks of ‘the church in the desert’, i.e. the ekklesia or ‘congregation’. The word for ‘congregation’ meaning ‘the assembled company’ is, in Hebrew qahal. This is often used, but generally for an assembly called together. Another word edah also means the congregation, but not necessarily called together.¹ It means the assembly, either called together or not, having its representative heads or elders. Qahal denotes the actual assembling. Whilst edah is used liberally in the Pentateuch it is rarely used later, qahal being the common word. Qahal is translated ekklesia in the Greek LXX. It does not, however, mean that qahal and ekklesia are identical, since the term ekklesia or church has its own use by the Christians, which does not necessarily flow from the Old Testament or LXX version.

The term ekklesia current in the Greek world was used for regular assemblages of a particular social group, or even the whole population, but never for religious gatherings, or indeed for anything religious. It seems most probable

¹ For a full treatment of the words edah and qahal see Article ‘Church’ in Dictionary of New Testament Theology’ (Vol. 1), pp.291-296.

that since ekklesia is a group called together, and since the qahal was ‘called together’, namely by God, that ekklesia was a good word to bring across qahal into the common usage of the day. Incidentally, so far as the English word church is concerned, it derives from the Greek adjective kuriakon, used first of the house of the Lord, and then of the people.

At this point what we need to note is that the congregation (whether we use the terms edah or qahal does not matter, and their use anyway is often interchangeable) of Israel was the people of God. This is deeply significant. What we will see is that in the N.T. the ekklesia is the people of God. The word ekklesia derives from ek-kaleo. Kaleo = ‘to call’ and ek = ‘out of’. People were called together, rather than called away, or out, from others. We say this because it has been claimed by some that the N.T. church is a group of people ‘called out of’ the secular situation. Whilst this may happen to be the case it is not the essential meaning of the word.

What then of the **edah** or **qahal** or **ekklesia** preceding the N.T. (Christian) ekklesia? As we have said, it is the people of God. This was really constituted as an assembly at Sinai and assembled before the Lord in the annual feasts in the persons of its representative males. The interesting thing is that a people in this world could be called especially ‘the people of God’. They seemed to be this, over and against other peoples, although the Abrahamic covenant pointed to a time when all the peoples of the earth would be blessed by relating to Abraham, and the Psalms indicate that those of Israel understood God to be the King of all the earth, and that all nations were subject to Him. However, in a unique sense the O.T. describes them as the special people of God (cf. Deut. 7:6, Exodus 19:5-6, etc.).

Why then should this qahal, edah or congregation (ekklesia) not, as a whole, become the true ekklesia of the N.T.?

3. Transition To The N.T. Church

By the time we reach the N.T. we see there is worship at the Temple, particularly at the annual feasts, but such worship must have been limited because of the geographical distances. Throughout Palestine small worship situations had grown up called synagogues and indeed the word ‘synagogue’ was the word used to translate qahal in the Pentateuch. Meaning on the one hand ‘the place of assembly’ and on the other, ‘the people who assembled’ it certainly posed a local worship situation so that people did not have far to travel, although the synagogue did not, of course, have to do with offerings or sacrifices. The term synagogue did not come to be Christian usage for churches, although James uses it once (2:2). However, the pattern of local assemblies certainly influenced the pattern of Christian assemblies.

We also know from the Dead Sea Scrolls that there were actual Jewish communities who lived in expectation of Messiah's coming, trusting to be his people when he came. Already the prophets had taught about the ‘holy seed’ and ‘the remnant’, a small group of the people who would look eagerly for ‘the hope of Israel’ as against the larger group who had secular intentions, or were simply Jewish traditionalists.

The Ministry of John

John came as the Messianic messenger, the precursor to the Messiah. He gathered about him a group of disciples. The group closest to him seemed to constitute a regular and intense community, whilst many more were his disciples in a looser sense. See John 3:25-30, 4:1-3, Acts 19:1f, etc. However, there was a group, and technically speaking this group should have transferred, as a

man, to Jesus, when he came. Not all transferred. At the same time Jesus began to gather around him a group of near disciples and then a larger group which could, generally speaking, be called his disciples or followers.

From the Gospel accounts it appears at first simply a fact that both John and Jesus attracted followers. These were at the same time Jews and members of the congregation of Israel. There was no explicit rejection of this congregation, or of the leadership of the hierarchy. At the same time the congregation of Israel must be understood not as God's favourite people but as His chosen people, and chosen to do His will. They are to be the priest nation amongst all the nations according to one interpretation of Exodus 19:5-6. Passages such as that of Ezekiel 36:22f show that according to the pattern of life Israel follows God is either profaned or made holy in the eyes of the Gentiles. Israel has the privilege of being God's people but the responsibility to be holy before the nations. Failure to do so brings judgement, such as the nations do not have in the same manner. What is more, this was known by Israel.

In Joshua 8:35 we read, 'There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded which Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them.' In other words, all Israel knew what it was about. Yet Israel sinned, was judged, was exiled, was purified, and remained committed to what God demanded. Israel was to reject idols, worship the living God and serve Him.

The prophets predicted the days when the people of God would be restored to their land, renewed in holiness, made a Kingdom, and given a new covenant. So they would be the true kingdom-people, and the covenant-people, the holy remnant, the true Israel of God.

When John the Baptist came he demanded repentance because of the Kingdom which was near. He promised the new days of forgiveness (the new covenant, Jer. 31:31-34), of the Spirit, and of the Kingdom. It was as though he were saying, 'Old Israel must repent and be renewed'. Many of the leaders objected to a saying which was tantamount to the accusation of apostasy. In any case, all Israel should have repented. When Jesus came, his was the same message. They were to repent and believe the Gospel of the Kingdom. The ministry of John was very significant and tied in with that of Jesus. It carried the burden of the prophets.

The Ministry of Jesus

It is true that Israel had no evangel to preach. They were to carry the message of God's holiness by their own lives. Yet the prophets spoke of the three things - forgiveness, the Spirit and the Kingdom, and many of their prophecies carried the thrust of a day when the Gentiles would come to the people of God for blessing. The Suffering Servant was to preach judgement to the nations. Hence when he came a group grew up around him. Some came, were baptised, and followed him, but hearing the hardness of his message again left him.

Yet there was that people. Jesus lifted no finger to form them into an organised body. He and they continued in the festivals and worship of Israel, loyal to the Temple and its rituals. Yet Jesus taught of the Kingdom to come, and called out disciples to preach the Kingdom. Finally he gave them, deliberately, the commission to evangelise the earth with the message of repentance and forgiveness based on his Lordship. This means that Jesus must have a people with an aim, a people carrying out his work. This people should have been Israel, and Israel in its entirety. All that was latent in its charge to be the people of God should have become actuated in its committal to Jesus, so

taking salvation to the ends of the earth.

Yet none of this would have had validity had not the prophets foretold such. Daniel 7:13f speaks of the Son of Man, and his people, the saints, receiving the Kingdom, and Jesus certainly fulfilled this in appointing the Kingdom to the disciples (Luke 22:28-30). Moreover, in Acts this is what they do - preach the Kingdom to others. Also Jesus told of the New Covenant being fulfilled in his death (Matt. 26:28) which was why repentance and remission of sins could be preached (Luke 24:44ff). It was after his resurrection, in fact at Pentecost, when the Spirit came that Peter disclosed from Joel 2 that these were the last days, and that the Spirit was being poured out for prophecy which was to come from men and women who belonged to God.

It is surprising, therefore, that Jesus did not speak a lot about the church. In fact he says hardly anything. A close study of his words indicates that he knew he would be crucified, rise and enter into his glory. Also he had trained the disciples so that they could go out. Both the 12 and another 70 had trial runs, so to speak, within Palestine during the time of his ministry (cf. Luke chs. 9 and 10). Yet he gave little instruction about a society he would form.

At the same time he taught concerning the flock. This is seen in John ch.10, and repeated in John 21. The flock was a term from Ezekiel 34 where God is shepherd, and it is repeated in the latter part of Ezekiel 37. Jesus used this term 'shepherd' for himself inferring he was head of the flock. The term of 'the vine' is also used, not only In John 15, but in parabolic teaching. In John 11:51-52 the idea of 'family' is present, and this is rounded out in the sermon on the mount. It is implicit in the Lord's Prayer.

There is a somewhat obscure teaching as to the Temple. Christ will be the new Temple. This was probably not obscure to the hearers for they knew the Temple represented Israel as the people of God. A new temple would mean a new people of God. We know the leaders looked on such claims as dangerous and pressed them against him at his trial.

Jesus' Purpose in Forming No Church

Jesus said, 'I will build my church'. This statement of Matthew 16:16ff, as also the other reference to the church in Matt. 18:15-20 are discounted by many scholars as not being authentic words of Jesus. They say that even early in Acts there is no explicit Idea of a church. Hence these words are redactions or later interpolations. The reasoning is mainly subjective. In every other way Jesus was pointing to a people, indeed raising them up, so the idea of a church was not foreign to him. However he was not about forming a church as such, and certainly not over and against Israel.

He was giving all Israel the opportunity to receive him, his message, and his Father. This, if anything, should be the true church, i.e. Israel. We have seen that terms compatible with 'church' are used for old Israel, in the wilderness and in Canaan. Israel then should turn to the Son, accept him and become 'the new (i.e. the renewed) Israel'. They fail to do this. In Luke 10 and Matthew 11 Jesus addresses the cities which virtually rejected him. He hastens to Jerusalem saying they must go there for it is not possible that a prophet should perish outside Jerusalem. He weeps over the city which will not hear him. Whatever Palestine may say, it cannot say he did not give it opportunity. Israel, represented by its Sanhedrin puts Jesus in a deficient trial and has him killed.

Will Israel then be convinced by the resurrection? To them it is as though it had never happened. Acts 4 and 5 show that the ministry of Jesus is rejected. The true people of God are not co-terminal with the members of the Jewish community in Palestine. For the most part they reject Jesus as Messiah.

4. Jesus' Teaching Concerning The Church

We see that had Jesus taught strongly concerning the church he would have predetermined the response, that is the reaction against him of Israel, especially its official reaction. He taught little explicitly about the church. His two mentions are significant but still somewhat obscure. The first shows his determination to build his church, and to build it upon the rock of his Sonship of the Father. The second shows that the church acts under the authority of the Father and the Son in matters which need judgement in matters of relationships.

However we have to understand the whole teaching of Jesus, and not just that of the realities of the vine and branches, the family, the Temple, the flock. It is his whole mission which matters, and that is the preaching of the Kingdom. If there is going to be a church it is not going to be the kingdom. The church will be the means by which the Kingdom is proclaimed. The Kingdom is not just a grouping of people, or even God's people. The Kingdom is the reign and rule of God coming upon people. The Kingdom comes, but not the church. We cannot pray, 'Thy church come'.

Thus, if we wish to find Jesus' teaching on the church it must be compounded from all that he says in regard to the service those who follow him will give. It must be in regard to relationships with God and fellow-man. It must be concerned with the message of the Gospel, and with the outworking of God's plan for history. Also it must be in line with the prophetic Scriptures. For example, in Luke 24:46f Jesus says, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead', and he does not end here, but continues 'and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name to all nations beginning at Jerusalem'. He means that preaching of repentance and remission of sins has also been written, i.e. prophesied. How then can the Gospel be preached to all nations and to every person, and how can those who follow Jesus be witnesses to him from Jerusalem to the end of the earth except there be some group, some body, some arrangement of persons whereby this can happen? Again, having done this, what of the teaching and nature which he requires of his followers for those who believe on his name?

It soon becomes evident that either within the larger qahal or ekklesia of Judaism, or apart from that, there must be some body. Since the commands given are too large to allow them to be handled in a sectarian way we can come to no other conclusion than there must be a special people. Since also the message is for the people of God, as well as to further form the people of God, we are forced to see something in the nature of the church.

Add to all this the fact that the official ruling body, the Sanhedrin rejected Christ, thus putting themselves outside 'the holy seed' or 'the elect remnant', and another group is essential to do the work, and to be the true people of God.

This, then, presupposes the church, even if Jesus had never given it a name.

5. Pentecost and The Birth of The Church

We know that on the last night of his life Jesus talked very seriously to his disciples. He had taught them the truth of the Kingdom, had demonstrated the modes of the Kingdom, and on that night he appointed them the Kingdom. He spoke of his relationship with the Father, and theirs with him, and through him with the Father. He spoke of the work they would do, and the coming of the Spirit to teach them, bring what he had said to (dynamic) remembrance. He had spoken of the power of the Spirit to convict, not them, but the world. Then he had prayed for his disciples, and those who would believe on their word, asking for a oneness and a unity such as he, Jesus, and the Father had always had. He spoke of the church formed, the church militant, the church unified, the church in action, and then the church glorified. He said he did not wish to keep these from the world, but to send them into the world. Prior to this he had told them the world would hate them, not understanding Jesus and his people, but they would have the Spirit who would witness to Jesus and assist them to do so.

This was ‘the little flock’ and they were to be sent as ‘lambs among wolves’, but they would have power, and the truth would come to God's elect people. Yet none of this could happen apart from the Spirit.

Pentecost

When the Spirit came at Pentecost he came as prophesied. In this way John the Baptist had come, and in this way Jesus. Now the Spirit fulfilled all the prophecies concerning himself. With him also was to come the restoration of the Kingdom to Israel, and the people upon whom he would come would be anointed to prophesy and proclaim the Kingdom, which is what they did.

We know that with the coming of the Spirit they had brilliant revelation of the truth, so much so that their doctrine was formed that day (Acts 2:42). They so preached, and Peter so proclaimed that 3,000 people repented, believed, had the forgiveness of their sins, and received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Just as the baptised of John had to be related to John and his teaching, and those baptised under Christ, so these now had to belong somewhere. In tradition they belonged to the corpus of Israel. Now in addition they belonged to Jesus. In fact they formed under his leadership, for now ‘Jesus is Lord!’ was their faith and cry.

It is interesting to note that Pentecost at once spells out continuity and discontinuity with the qahal of Israel. It is continuity in that it was natural for every Jew to acclaim and follow Messiah. It was discontinuity in that Peter said, ‘Save yourselves from this crooked generation’. That is ‘Do not ally yourselves with those who reject Jesus as Lord and Messiah’. Whilst they continued to worship at the temple and in the synagogues, the time would have to come when the break would be evident and effected.

The New People of God

Whilst the AV. (King James' Version) has in Acts 2:47, ‘The Lord added to the church daily, such as should be saved’, yet the word church is not in the oldest of manuscripts. The word church does not come up until chapter five. They are called ‘all who believed’, ‘the company of those who believed’ and speaks of them as ‘gathered together’. Only after the judgement upon Ananias and Sapphira is the term ‘church’ used. Even then it may have not been an

actual term used at that time, but one known to Luke as he recounts the story. Even in chapter six they are spoken of as 'the number of the disciples'. At other times they are simply spoken of as 'the brethren'. However, what is interesting is that they are all about the business of proclaiming Jesus as Lord. When the apostles are persecuted by the Sanhedrin and forbidden to preach in the name of Jesus the whole church, or fellowship, or whatever it may be called is concerned, and comes together for listening to the apostles' report, and immediately prays, and with great power, so that in fact the word is preached with tremendous effects.

It is also interesting to know that when the fellowship of those that believe comes into being, there is immediate love, one for the other, and a great sense of fellowship, and a deep sharing, not only of heart and mind, but of possessions, so that no one is left in need. Again there is immediate care for the widows. This is not to say that there was no care amongst the Jews prior to Pentecost, but we are not told that. Nor would we be told of its being amongst the believers except for an administration difficulty which arose. Again, somewhat later we read of the new church at Antioch being concerned, through prophecy, for the church at Jerusalem.

In other words, without calling this fellowship by any name it has arisen, through the Spirit, grown organically, and become a vital and dynamic unit in Jerusalem and the other places to which it has spread its good news. Here is no mere social group, no mutual-help society, no religious sect with a fierce opposition to all but itself, but an entirely new entity. This is the group which begins to use the old term qahal in its Greek form ekklesia. It is the ekklesia of Christ. In no sense is it a sect.

It has arisen out of the message of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. It is the body which has sprung from the Word and the Spirit into its being as an entity. In it the Spirit and the Word work, and through it the Spirit and the Word go on working. It is clear, now, why Christ did not have to speak much about it, especially in the term 'church', and why he did not have to define its form. Already this group had gathered around him, intuitively aware that although they did not understand all that he said, that they knew he was from God, and that he had the words of eternal life. It needed only the revelation by the Spirit at Pentecost, and the gifts which the Spirit brought, especially the gift of apostleship to bring the church into true being. It was impossible from that point that the church should not be, that is should not be the church, the true and viable form of God's people.

The Gift of Apostleship

Even before Pentecost the eleven apostles knew that their office was very significant. That is why, in the first chapter of Acts they seek to fill up the apostolate, the vacancy left by Judas' defection and death. It is faintly possible from Hebrews 3:1-2 that Moses is regarded as an apostle, but in fact no such office was really possible in the O.T. Israel was not a 'going' nation.

Christ is certainly spoken of as an apostle (Heb. 3:1), as also he is spoken of as a prophet. We are driven to acknowledge that apostleship is a new office, and belongs in the church uniquely. Ephes. 4:7-11 places the gift of an apostle first. What, then, was an apostle, and what was apostleship?

The answer is that an apostle is one who is sent. In the N.T. he is one who has been called in by Christ, has accompanied with him, has witnessed his death and resurrection, and then has been sent out to make disciples of all nations. Evangelists also had to go and proclaim the Gospel. However the apostle was given apostleship, that is he held the deposit of apostolic truth.

The proclamation was not simply, 'Believe on Jesus and be saved', but it held all the elements of the past of Israel, the covenant promise, the coming of Messiah in accordance with the prophets, and then his fulfilment of those prophecies and so the significance of his death and resurrection. In this proclamation there was certainly the personal offer of salvation, but it went wider than that. It was, in fact, a demand for men and women to believe the Gospel of the Kingdom, and so become part of the people of God.

Who, then, could be entrusted with this word, but those, primarily, who were apostles? They uniquely had been commissioned by Christ, then led into all the truth by the Holy Spirit and so were able to tell of the events of Christ in the light of the O.T., and the teaching of the O.T. in the light of the events of Christ. In this sense they had a unique ministry. They did not form the truth for it already was, but they were able to share that formulation of the truth which was authentic, coming from Christ and the Spirit.

Thus the truth (the apostolic truth) was something which was not as such given in the O.T. and not as such formulated in the Gospels. It awaited the completion of the events described in the Gospels, the coming of the Spirit, and the formation of the church. We can see then that such persons as the apostles were indispensable to the true nature of the church, especially at its formation. Once formed, and once the truth had been given, the need for apostles was not indispensable. Whilst it may well be true that a second order of apostles can be found in the N.T., this order does not equal that of the twelve, and of course the thirteen as we include St. Paul.

What, then, do we mean by a second order of apostles? Some scholars point out that men like Barnabas, and even James the elder seem to be called apostles. Others too have been spoken of as 'messengers' from other churches, and might be included as apostles. The original apostle was one who knew the truth, and proclaimed it, and basically proclaimed it where it had not previously been proclaimed. In this sense he opened up a new furrow. Whilst the message of the evangelist did not differ greatly (if at all) from that of the apostle, yet his authority was of a different order. The apostle's statements were accepted, by the new church as the truth. Indeed the whole church was built upon the doctrine of the apostles, as well as the (prior) prophecies of the prophets. The two came together in one. Thus we have the most valuable deposit of truth which would never change. The modes of proclaiming it might change, and the gifts whereby it was shared might be many and varied, but the deposit would be invariable. We saw that with the coming of the Spirit, the apostles received, immediately, this truth, and that they proclaimed.

It follows then, that the church is authentic, because it is now the body by which the truth is proclaimed, and people hear and respond, and are incorporated into the same body. Nevertheless, as we have said, this does not exclude a second or different order of apostles, for these men would also go into new areas, proclaiming the exact same message as the twelve, but although they founded churches, and sought to build them up, none would look to them as being the ones having authority in regard to the truth. Rather they would proclaim the very truth which the original apostles had formulated. Had there been a necessity to have such as the original apostles, then doubtless each would have been replaced upon his death.

The Church in the Times of Its Birth

We have seen that the church came into being at Pentecost, having both continuity and discontinuity with the church of the Jewish people. We saw that it went to the temple at the hours of prayer, and yet had a fellowship of its

own as its people 'ate their food from house to house'. Also they shared what they had in order to fulfil the needs of all. We also gather that in the very early stages they had 'favour with all the people' (Acts 2:47). Whilst this did not include the Sanhedrin, yet it meant there was no basic alienation from others, nor were they met with hostility.

However, from John 11, following the raising of Lazarus, we gather that the use of supernatural powers deeply troubled the Sanhedrin and when these were again used by the apostles, thereby causing a stir among the people, the Sanhedrin tried to forbid this use, demanding that they preach not in the name of Jesus. In spite of persecution they did this, and so the breach between the church and the Sanhedrin widened. Indeed the Sanhedrin officially rejected the message of the Gospel, and so the church was further freed from its original moorings.

We have seen that the church cared for its members. At Jerusalem the needs of all were met from a common fund. Widows were cared for, and the proclamation of the Gospel flourished. We have little account of the nature of the church, but we can see that love was mutually exercised. Also we can see that the Gospel of the Kingdom was proclaimed, primarily under the announcement of the Lordship of Christ (cf. Acts 2:36, 3:15f, 4:30-31, 10:36, cf. Romans 10:9). What we gather most is that the church at Jerusalem was seeking to share the proclamation of the Messiah with the people of Israel. It would have gone on, presumably, doing this, but an event took place which precipitated a change. It was the persecution of Stephen.

6. The Church On The Move

Christ had said that when the Spirit came they would be witnesses to him in Jerusalem, all Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (i.e. to the Gentiles). Up to almost the end of the 6th chapter of Acts the scene is Jerusalem only. Stephen is at first one who serves at tables for the widows' arrangement. Then he is seen as a powerful controversialist. He is a man 'full of faith and the Holy Spirit'. He also does signs and wonders, which was anathema to many who opposed him. Having argued powerfully with many he is indicted before the Sanhedrin, and in making his defence stirs them to such anger that they kill him by stoning.

At that point much of the underlying hatred of the church suddenly came to the surface and the church was strongly persecuted, especially by Saul of Tarsus. The effect of this was to cause many to move out 'preaching the word' (Acts 8:4). This causes the evangelisation of Samaria by Philip, another man full of faith and the Holy Spirit who has likewise served at tables. In Acts 11:19ff we read of others who went as far as Antioch in Syria, and a church is commenced there, amazingly of both Jews and Gentiles. Acts 10 and 11 speak of Peter's preaching to the Gentiles at Caesarea, and their acceptance by the Jewish church as being part of the new people of God.

Acts 9 speaks of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, and he is called by Barnabas, an apostle, to help with the church at Antioch. After a period of time this church, sensing the mind of the Holy Spirit, sent out Barnabas and Saul (or, Paul) into Asia Minor, and eventually, after some time, Paul with Silas made his way into Europe. Acts 1:8 was being fulfilled in every area!

The real point we want to make here is that the church preached Christ as Lord, and in this sense it preached the Gospel of the Kingdom. It was not the Kingdom itself, but preached the Kingdom. It was the church, vital and alive,

and whilst on the one hand it was concerned with its own members and their needs, on the other hand it was concerned with its task, to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth. This is what it existed for as the people of God. From the time Paul moved out of Antioch, the church has, generally speaking, been moving onwards to 'the ends Of the earth'. When It has not done that it has denied its true purpose of being. Whilst being the people of God in this era, it must also be the proclaiming people of God. We must not forget that it is always the new qahal, the eschatological assembly, the people of Messiah, the proclaiming people of God. If we seek to examine the nature of the church, its internal life, and even its external actions without keeping this in mind then we cannot rightly assess the true nature of the church. As we have said before, it can only be the authentic people of God, the true outcome of the old qahal if it is this under Messiah. To be the church it must always be dynamic. That is, it must always be on the move.

7. The Nature of The Church

The materials which lie at our disposal in determining the true nature of the church are the Gospels, the Acts, the writings of Paul, John and Peter, as also the book of the Revelation. Since writers do not all use the same terms, nor write from an identical vantage point we have to work at an understanding of the materials. We have seen, to some degree, the nature of the church in Acts, and now we will look at Paul's view of the church.

(i) Paul and the Church

Paul, as Saul of Tarsus was present in the very early days of the church at Jerusalem. Until the persecution of Stephen he must have seen much of its action, and at the point where Stephen debated with Hellenists (Greek-cultured Jews), he was able to commence his open persecution of the Christians. We know that he later claimed to have pressured these Christians to blaspheme. We cannot be sure whether they did, but we can be sure he knew (a) Their doctrine and (h) Their practice. In other words, he knew the church at Jerusalem. Admittedly he saw it through biased eyes, but he knew what there was to be known of them. Later, when he came back to Jerusalem and Judea he ministered amongst these churches. So, then, we conclude he knew them.

(a) The Church at Jerusalem and in Judea

On the day of Pentecost only Jews repented, were baptised and became part of the ekklesia, the new people of God. However, among these Jews were many from other countries and they have been part of their culture as well as being Jews. It seems that the Jews of Jerusalem had a more defined Judaism. Stephen, by his speech before the Sanhedrin seemed (as a Christian) to sit very lightly to the Temple and the law, and it was because of this they finally stoned him. Jerusalem Christians seemed for the most part to be accepted by the Jerusalem Jews. In chapter six we can detect a mild division between widows from outside Palestine and those from within. The Book of Acts shows that in the case of the baptism of Gentiles (chs. 10 and 11) the Jerusalem church was anxious to know why it had been done. The Jewish-Gentile church at Antioch was also looked on a little suspiciously until Barnabas reported well of it. In Acts 15 the whole question of the Gentiles was reopened, and although settled the Jerusalem church continued to have a group of Judaising Christians. Some of these, we gather, were converted Pharisees.

Some time after his conversion, when Paul returned to Jerusalem and Judea he was at first met with suspicion, but then accepted. At that time the church

in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria had ceased being persecuted, and was able to grow and develop.

Paul's next experience was of the church at Antioch, and here was a 'hybrid' church so far as its members were concerned. They were Jews and Gentiles. Paul ministered to the church, but he must have learned a lot from the nature of this group. It would have prepared him for his ministry in Asia Minor and Europe.

(b) Paul the Founder of churches

There is no doubt that Paul had a doctrine of the church, and this we will see. We understand it from his action of founding churches, and then his writings in his epistles. We know that Barnabas basically led the first journey into Asia Minor, to Antioch (in Pisidia), Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. They preached in the synagogues, that is in the old qahal situation, and those who responded were incorporated into the new qahal, the Christian ekklesia. The act of baptism is not mentioned by word, although the making of disciples is (14:22) and the mode for making disciples of John and Jesus was by baptism. Jews and Gentiles were both incorporated into the church. We have later evidence both from the Acts and the Epistles that new converts were baptised.

We should note that Paul preached the same Gospel as the apostles had preached (I Cor. 15:11, Gal. 1:17), and we have every reason to believe it was accepted as such by the Christians at Jerusalem. We know from Acts and the pastoral epistles that it was Pauline custom to ordain elders, with prayer and fasting and the laying on of hands. We will see the significance of these 'elders' or 'bishops' or 'overseers' later.²

We know that Paul revisited many of the churches, and to many of them he wrote letters. He also wrote to at least one church he had not seen or visited at that time (cf. Rome and Colossae).

(c) Paul's View and Teaching Concerning the church

The epistle to the Romans reveals Paul's view of the ministry of proclamation. At least three times he says it is to bring about the obedience of (or, to the faith of) the nations (i.e. the Gentiles). This is said in Romans 1:5, 15:18 and 16:25-26. This accords with the teaching he gives of the Kingdom, as we saw. He sees the church, or the Messianic people as one. Whilst he uses the term 'churches' he sees the church as one, which accords with the usage in Acts. The best attested text of Acts 9:31 says, 'the church throughout all Judea and Galilee'. In Acts 20:28 (cf. I Cor. 1:2, I Peter 5:2, I Cor. 12:27) it is 'the church of God which he hath purchased with his own blood'. Of course in Ephesians it is the bride, the temple, and the family, all single entities. In I Cor. 12 to 14 it is the body. This is also found in Ephesians. Paul can also use the term 'the church of God which is at Corinth' (I Cor. 1:2). At the same time he can speak of 'the churches of God' (I Thess. 2:14, Gal. 1:22, I Cor. 16:1, II Cor. 8:1). He can speak of the churches as being in particular places (Romans 16:1, I Thess. 1:1), and as being the church in a house, and so on. Yet this plural sense still does not mean there is more than one church, but rather that there are many realisations of the church in different places. It is still the one church.

² For a detailed treatment of this subject see Living Faith Study No. 22 'Eldership in the Scriptures'.

How then does Paul see (a) The church as the whole church of God, and (b) As the local church? If the latter is a realisation of the former then he will not really see any great difference. Hence when Paul gives teaching on the general view of the church, as, say, in Ephesians, he also gives particular instruction in regard to the life of the local church. At the same time, he sees a complete structure for the church in any locality (the local church) It has elders, deacons, and all members have gifts, ministries, and operations. However, it is when we come to what may be called 'ministry gifts' that we see these cannot all be contained within the local church, and probably are not intended to do so.

Paul 's View of the Ministry Gifts

In Ephesians 4:7-11 Paul says that Christ 'led captivity captive and gave gifts to men'. He nominates these are 'apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher'. We have seen the work of an apostle, and we know that the evangelist proclaimed the Gospel. The prophet had a ministry of exhortation, encouragement, comfort, and sometimes had a ministry of prediction. The pastor and teacher seem to be the one, i.e. pastor-teacher. His would be very much a local ministry. The evangelist may or may not remain in the one locality. We find in Acts that prophets travelled, and certainly the apostle was not confined to any local church. This does not mean that all did not have ministry from time to time in local churches. Paul speaks in I Cor. 12:28 of 'first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles... etc.' This seems to imply some order, perhaps hierarchical, of degree of operations, or order of ministries, that is the apostle must minister first, then the prophet, and so on. What is clear is that these gifts are indispensable to the church at some time or another. Paul, in Ephesians 4:12 says that these gifts are for 'the equipment of the saints for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ'. He then goes on to show that by the mutual contributions of all, the Body upbuilds itself in love. Thus all gifts of love are orientated.

Paul's View of the Body and the Charismata

Paul sees the church as the body of Christ, and every believer as a member of that body, and all members both inter-related and inter-dependent. Each member (every member) is given a gift. The gift is at the same time a manifestation of the Spirit, and such are for 'the common good', i.e. not just for the good of the one who has it. Yet, again, all the gifts are for the good of all the body. They may be exercised personally, but in fact they have their corporate effect, and therefore all are to be used for all. He sees a variety of Gifts, but these given by the One(ness) Spirit. He sees a variety of services but these are by the one(ness) Lord (Jesus Christ), and there is a variety of operations or 'workings' but these by the one(ness) God (the Father). Hence the body is a (ontological) oneness.

It is the unity of the body which Paul sees as its essential nature, and calls it 'the unity of the Spirit' or being 'all one in Christ Jesus' and stresses that in this body there is 'neither Jew nor Gentile, neither male nor female, neither slave nor freedman'. He means that the whole body is essentially one, and the 'accidents' of race, sex and vocation do not impair that unity. His famous statement of I Cor. 12:12-13 makes this clear. 'For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptised into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and all were made to drink of one(ness) Spirit'.

It is evident, then, that the church is a basic (ontological) unity, and

that the gifts are for unity, and the members for function, and the ministry of the gifts keeps the church alive, growing, healthy. In fact the primary purpose of the gifts is love, and if the gifts are used for any other purpose then they are useless, sterile and a contradiction in meaning.

Paul's View of the Spiritual Weapons

Paul is aware that the people of God are in conflict with the powers of darkness. In Ephes. 6:10-18 he speaks of having battle with powers of darkness, and using weapons both offensive and defensive to defeat them. He requires constant prayer for all the saints, and no less for himself. In II Cor. 10:3f he speaks of spiritual weapons which can pull down mighty strongholds. The battle is carried into the enemy's territory. The church, then, is martial. This is indicated in Phil. 1:27-28 where the unity of the fighting force is terrifying to evil opponents. Christians are those who have the victory through Christ (I Cor. 15:57, II Cor. 2:14, etc.).

Paul 's View of the ask of the Church

The task of proclamation is one in which Paul was involved, and speaks often of that involvement. He may simply have seen it as his ministry, and in particular as the ministry of an apostle. However, he speaks of the work of Christ in I Cor. 15:24-28 as putting down all the enemies. He gives constant advice to the members of the church to walk worthy of their calling and to have an eye to those outside the church. His discussion of the Gospel in I Corinthians I shows that he sees it as the only means of redeeming man. In I Cor. 9 he speaks of his responsibility to preach the Gospel, and it is inferred that this is for all. His advice to Timothy and Titus cannot be limited to them. Paul sees the members of the Church as co-workers and co-sufferers with Christ. He sees them as responsible for the proclamation of the Gospel, for doing good to all men. He sees them as ministering fully within the body (e.g. Romans 12:3ff). His advice to the elders of the Ephesian church (given at Miletus) is indeed moving. They are to tend the flock of God, and to watch for the wolves that will arise, defending the flock against them.

The pastoral epistles are filled with sound advice for the ministry of elders and deacons, for those who teach and do the work of an evangelist, such as Timothy and Titus, whilst he is constantly emphasising the need for good teaching, and for training more teachers.

When it comes to the internal life of the church it is evident that Paul sees this as one of constant vigilance against the world, the flesh and Satan. The children of God must walk in light, they must walk in love, they must be holy. Their lives which have commenced in the Spirit must go on in the Spirit, so that they must be led by the Spirit, walk in the Spirit, be aglow with the Spirit. This is because they are new creations, having been transferred from the powers of darkness into the Kingdom of God.

Put in another way, Paul sees this people of God, these Jews and Gentiles who have believed as the true Israel, the true handiwork of God, 'created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them'. These works are the plan of God working out through His church.

This is evident from Ephesians 3:10-12 where it is said that heavenly powers watch the church for the outworking of God's will, i.e. His plan. Paul also shows that the church is the fulness of Christ by which he will fill all things.

It is difficult for us to stand back and see that the figures of the church in the N.T. are simply those of the Old, and so are the fulfilment of the prophecies. They outline very strongly the fact that the church is the

people of God, the Messianic people, under Messiah and his Spirit, working in obedience to God and His plan. This principle is seen very clearly in Peter's understanding of the church.

(ii) Peter and the Church

On the day of Pentecost Peter addressed the Jews as 'the house of Israel'. He was not thinking of having 'another house' but exhorted the believers to separate themselves from this crooked generation, i.e. those who refused to be the true house of Israel, which was now the new (renewed) people of God. In Acts 15:14 James the elder describes Peter's idea, 'Brethren, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his own name.' He then refers it to Amos 9:11-12 where it is referred to as a rebuilding of the house of David. In I Peter 4:17 Peter refers to the church as 'the household of God'. In 1:17 he has said they call on God as Father, and later speaks of them being living stones, built into a spiritual house. This is the true (spiritual) house of God, His true tabernacle. Again he sees the church as the new people of God. In 2:9-10 he says, 'You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were no people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy.'

Adding to the concept of the house, and the household, which is really the family, he also speaks of the brotherhood, saying 'love the brotherhood' and 'have unity of Spirit, sympathy, love of the brethren, a tender heart and a humble mind.'

Peter sees the church as a suffering people. Indeed his first epistle is primarily on this theme. However, that is what Christ was - the suffering servant, and his people can scarcely expect less. Let them suffer as he did, not reviling, and let them know the end is a glorious one when Christ shall appear. Already they have joy which is full of (that coming) glory, and in their very suffering the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon them. This does not mean the people of God are ineffective or defeated. Satan flees from them when they resist him. They are able to tell the wonderful works of Him who called them out of darkness into His marvellous light. The church is livingly 'on the move'.

In the second Petrine epistle there is a call for holiness by the people of God and an anticipation of the new heavens and the new earth, which in the O.T. is the ultimate glory for the people of God (Isaiah 65, 66). If in the first epistle they have suffered, in the second they are assured God is not tardy in bringing about the end, but it is His long-suffering that causes the delay they are sensing. His long-suffering is that many might come to repentance, and so represents for these salvation itself. This explanation is salutary because when we compare some of the prophecies in the O.T. it does seem that the people of God are seeing little of that Messianic victory. The Petrine teaching is that this victory is carried out through, and in the midst of, suffering. Such a view is the view of the Book of the Revelation which really gives a powerful rationale of suffering, especially the suffering of the people of God.

(iii) John and the Church

John's Gospel is filled with figures and teaching regarding the church, and we have seen some of this - the Vine and the branches, the Flock and the fold, the Family and the Father, and perhaps even the net and the fishes. The

beautiful 17th chapter speaks of the intimate unity of the church - 'That they may be one, even as we are one, Thou in me and I in Thee, that they may be one, in us. ..'

John's first two epistles do not mention the church as such except under the idea of the brethren, and that is very strong. He also speaks of the 'children of God' as against 'the children of the devil', as though these are both families. Perhaps 'the elect lady' is a church in the second epistle, but again love is enjoined in the sense of the church being the family. The third epistle does mention a local church. This is equated with 'the brethren' and so, again, the family. The family is always then the people of God, the children of the Father. John's three letters have a very high view and demand of how the children must love one another. This is the very life of the church - obedience to God and love of the brethren. To love is to obey, and to obey is to love.

In the Book of the Revelation the church is shown in many and powerful ways. John as a servant of God is in exile 'for the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus'. This term 'the testimony of Jesus' is a significant one in the book, because it is 'the spirit of prophecy' and accords closely with what began when the Spirit was poured out at Pentecost 'and they shall prophesy' and with Acts 1:8 (giving the testimony of Jesus when the Spirit comes upon them). The church is seen in many passages such as the martyrs in 6:9f, the accused and persecuted brethren of, in the persecution of those who would not follow the beast in ch. 13. In chapter 19 the people of God follow the triumphant Word, the Lamb. At one point they are at the wedding of the Bride and the Lamb, and at the next doing battle with the powers of evil. In chapter 21 the Bride, the church, the Holy City, the New Jerusalem descends out of heaven. For the most part then the church is involved in conflict or seen in glory. At the end of time she anticipates - with the Spirit - the coming of the Bridegroom.

In chs. 2 and 3 there are remarkable letters, teaching much about the church. These are represented as seven churches in Asia, and their localities given, but it is the state of these churches and the rebukes they receive which teach us much as to how true churches (or the true church) should be. It also shows the eschatological outcome of true victory, and the rewards which shall come to the true churches.

(iv) Hebrews and the Church

In this epistle the concept of 'house' and 'sons' is prominent. In 2:9-14 we see that the Father brings many sons into glory by the work of the Cross. The Son is not ashamed to call those he sanctifies 'brethren', and he liberates them from fear of death. In Jesus is compared with Moses. Moses is a servant in 'the house' but Jesus is the Son 'over it'. The passage then goes on to say 'we are His house....' Thus the Pauline and Pertain idea is again present, stemming as it does from the O.T. where the house of God is the house of Israel, or better still the true sons of God are the sons of (faithful) Abraham. Chapters 8 to 10 speak of the old Israel and its covenant, and then the new covenant, and the new people of God who, because of the sacrifice of Christ can have access to God through the new and living way. It is implicit that if there were old covenant people, then there are new covenant people.

Often the writer refers to how these believers had lived earnestly, and he exhorts them to go on doing so. In chapter 11 they are to be encouraged by the old church, the people of God down through past history who witness to them of faith. In chapter 12 they are to remember as sons that the Father often disciplines, and they are not to faint under that discipline. In 28 there is a brilliant passage which contrasts the old covenant people coming to Mt. Sinai

and the new covenant people coming to Mt. Zion. The first tremble, the second come with joy. In the last chapter (13) we see what the church should be in action, in giving hospitality to the needy, being subject to the leaders (elders), and remembering that they are seeking a (the) city to come. Verse 20 presents the picture of the church being brought up out of death into eternal life by the blood of the eternal covenant, i.e. Christ's blood.

What is remarkable is that the writer uses all O.T. terms, figures and patterns to refer to the new people of God, so that in fact he employs only those terms which will be both understood and accepted by Hebrews.

(v) General Conclusion on the Nature of the Church

When we think about the birth and progress of the church in the N.T. it is quite amazing. Without doubt the apostles and others who followed Christ thought in terms of the church being the people of God and the true Israel. They dared to think beyond the Sanhedrin, the whole cultus of worship at the temple, to see themselves - in Jerusalem, all Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the world - as the people planned and prophesied to do the will of God. They saw themselves as carrying through the prophecies under the terms of

- (a) The people of God, that is the children of the Father, and so
- (b) The family of God. Time and again in the O.T. the prophetic promise was, 'I will be their God, and they shall be my people', and 'I will dwell in their midst'. As people they are now the sons and daughters of the living God.
- (c) They are the people who belong to and proclaim the Kingdom of God, or of the Father. They are the true sons of the Kingdom. Not even the whole weight of the Jewish people deters them, or makes them think again whether they be the people of God or not. They stay in Jerusalem, seeing themselves as the true successors of old Israel.
- (d) They are the true vineyard, for in Christ's words the vineyard of Israel was to be taken away from those who had killed the Owner's servants (the prophets) and His Son (Jesus) and be given to others, just as the sons of Abraham would be cast out of the Kingdom (the vineyard) in favour of those who come from other places than Palestine (Israel).
- (e) In Paul's terms they are the true olive tree. No doubt the Gentiles are the wild olive branch grafted in, but what does that matter? Sure God will re-engraft Israel at the right time, but at the moment Israel is not, herself, the olive tree.

Other matters which are quite stunning are that Israel is not regarded as having the blessing of God as His people, and the Gentiles, being as it were, beneficiaries who are permitted some of the blessings without being one with Israel. In other words, Paul is saying that they are full beneficiaries, and this equally with Israel, '...the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.' Doubtless there is a battle to convince all within the church of this for the thought that the Jews are primary is still there amongst some. However the battle was won, hence the teaching of the 'one body' was not 'one as against two' but 'absolutely one within itself', i.e. the body is one so that being Jew or Gentile (or any other category) makes no difference. This is because all are holy that is they are saints, and in Daniel 7 the Kingdom is given to

the Son of man and the saints - his saints. Those of the church are 'called to be saints'. The mystery of the Body is a mystery even beyond old Israel after the flesh, so much one are they. They fellowship in the breaking of bread - that feast which remembers the past, shows forth his death in the present, and looks to the eschatological fulfilment - 'Till I come' when they shall drink the new wine afresh in the Messianic banquet, the Kingdom of God. When all of these things are put together it can then be seen how wonderful a thing is the church of God upon the earth, with its members in heaven, and its members to come, all of whom will form the ultimate redeemed community in heaven, the multitude such as no man can number out of every nation and people and kindred and tribe and tongue. This will be the glorified community, the full family of the Father. This is because it is the new humanity a term which we now wish to look at on its own.

The New Humanity

In Ephesians 2:11-22 Paul speaks of the alienation of the Gentiles from the Kingdom of Israel, its covenants, and (if we add in Romans 9:4) 'the glory, the sonship, the worship and the promises'. There is inherent hostility against Israel and God within the Gentiles, but the Cross has broken down this enmity. The temple courtyard where the sacrifices were made was denied to the Gentiles, but now the wall that prevented them sharing has been taken away. In the Cross Christ has made Jew and Gentile one. He has minted an entirely new humanity which is not merely an amalgam of Jew and Gentile but a humanity which is neither Jew nor Gentile. This is the import of Peter's saying that he has sanctified their (the Gentiles') hearts by faith, through the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:9) and his statement that all are one people, many of whom had been 'no people'. They are a 'holy nation, a kingdom of priests'.

This is the people 'called to be saints'. In Christ's Cross all have died (Rom. 6:6), their old humanity being crucified there with its flesh (Gal. 5:24) and the world to which it belonged (Gal. 6:14), together with its sins (Gal. 1:4, I Peter 2:24, etc.), for Christ was made sin for that old humanity (II Cor. 5:21), and all have been through the crucible of that death, even down into the grave and up into life (II Cor. 5:14-15, Col. 3:1-5, Ephes.2:5-6). This new humanity has been renewed 'in the spirit of its mind' and 'is being renewed after the image of Him who created it'. This is the miracle: the church is the new humanity, corporately, for each member participates in him who is the New Man himself, that is Christ the head from whom flows, in practice, this humanity.

It is this humanity which walks as sons of God, and brethren of the Elder Brother, being led as it is by the Spirit of Sonship (Rom. 8:14, Gal. 5:16, 18, 25). This is the humanity which has 'been washed, been sanctified, been justified, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Spirit of our God'. It is this cleansing which has made them saints, it is this sanctification which has set them apart for God, and this justification which has released them from the fear of judgement, and the power of sin. As the new humanity they live together in the new community, the miracle of all time - the church!

8. The Order and Organisation of The Church

(i) Introduction

Whilst the church constitutes the people of God, and is particularly so when they are gathered together (Matt. 18:20, I Cor. 11:20, Acts 4:24f), yet it is not an unstructured body. Indeed the very term 'Body' as also the term 'sons of the covenant' and other similar terms suggest a structured society or

community of God. And this is how we find it. We have seen that in a remarkably short time there was a group under the immediate leadership of the apostles and elders, and caring for the widows and the poor, and making those decisions which affected the life of all its members. Whilst there must have been problems concerning 'faith and order' at the beginning it is remarkable how well-structured was the church, and we will seek to see something of this structure.

(ii) Christ the Head

In Ephesians 1:19ff it is stated that God has raised Christ up 'far above all rule and authority, and power and dominion and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come'. This means that Christ is Lord of all history and all eternity. It adds, 'has made him head over all things for the church'. It then adds the church is his body 'the fulness of him who is filling all in all'. In Col. 3:1 Paul directs believers to look to Christ, seated at the right hand of God. Christ then is the Head of the Church, and so in control of his Body. In Ephesians 5 and other places Christ is depicted as the Husband who is head of his wife, the Bride, i.e. the church. She must obey him, and be subject to him. The N.T. cry 'Jesus is Lord!' is also for the church.

In the commission passages at the end of the Gospels, and Acts 1:3-8 we see Christ saying that he will be with the church in its labours of preaching the Gospel, proclaiming the Kingdom, and making disciples of the nations (Gentiles). It is clear from the Acts that the church sees him as Lord, and the Epistles major on his commands, and his patterns which he has given for the life of the Church. Where the church meets he is present, in the midst. The church is 'in Christ' and he in them, i.e. 'Christ in them the hope of glory'. He is also Lord in a personal way to each member.

When it comes to the outworking of the commission it is 'the Spirit of Jesus' who directs. This term, found in Acts 16:7 indicates that the Spirit brings the mind of Christ to his people. Through the Spirit Christ is ever present with his people, hence the unifying 'one Lord' of Ephesians 4:5.

(iii) The Lord the Spirit

It is clear that the church was born of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and it is also clear that it is led by the Spirit (Rom. 8:14, Gal. 5:16, 18, 25) and empowered by the Spirit, and through the Spirit has the mind of Christ. He is 'the Lord the Spirit' and must be obeyed. By him all have been sealed unto the day of redemption (Ephes. 1:13-14, 4:30). Hence they must not grieve or quench him, but be filled with him, and receive from him.

In Acts it is the Spirit who brings truth to the church, empowers it, guides it, and protects its unity in so many ways. Ananias and Sapphira are really disciplined by the Holy Spirit to whom they have lied. The offices and gifts of the church come through the ministry of the Spirit. In fact there is nothing the church has which is not from the Spirit such as gifts, ministries, love, fellowship, prayer, knowing the will of God, its weapons of spiritual warfare and so on. It is the Spirit then who is the immediate Guide, Counsellor and Leader of the Church. This work of the Spirit is lived out in the use of the ministry, the gifts and the oversight of elders and deacons.

(iv) The Ministry Gifts

We have already seen that there is an order of precedence or hierarchy in the gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher. It is clear that Paul demands submission to his apostolic authority. However this ministry is not magisterial but ministerial, that is one of servanthip. The one who would be greatest must be servant. There is no imposition of tyranny, and no personal lordship over others in any of the ministries. At the same time there must be order, or there will be confusion.

It is obvious that where a certain ministry is exercised, say that of an apostle or prophet, that the order of the ministry will be observed within the church. Paul and John point to members who oppose their authority, but their opposition is exceptional, and not the true order of things. The regulations Paul issues for the use of gifts such as those of prophecy and tongues tell us that there was no haphazard use of the gifts. Within the worship must have been those who led and controlled that worship. Who, for example, insisted that no more than three speak in tongues, and that the spirits of the prophets be subject to the prophets? It may well be that the ministry gifts were exercised in a collegiate rather than a hierarchical manner, but discipline must have been there.

(v) The Leadership of the Churches

It cannot be doubted that there was an order of authority within the churches, even beyond that of the ministry of apostles, prophets and so on. In Hebrews (13:7, 17) these are called 'leaders' or 'they that have the rule over you'. In I Thess. 5:12 they are called 'those who labour among you, and are over you in the Lord'. I Timothy 5:17 says, 'Let the elders who rule well...' The words of I Peter 5:1-4 speak of the elders tending the flock 'not as domineering over those in your charge'. At the same time it exhorts the younger to be subject to the elders. From these passages we see that authority was exercised within the church by the elders.

The example of this in Acts is at Jerusalem where James, the brother of Jesus is an elder ('the elder'?) of the church, and in the deliberations of Acts 15 it is James who presides rather than Peter or other apostles. The elders are to be men of experience, especially in married and family life. They are to be men of sober character, but also fatherly persons who can lead the church. In Acts 20 Paul gives them very solemn charges regarding their ministry. Some scholars see in the constant references to teaching and pastoring that the office of an elder is at the same time the gift of a pastor-teacher this could well be so. However, it can be seen that the elders have charge of the flock, are called upon to heal the sick, teach, and minister to relational needs within the community. They are to do this under the guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit for they are anointed by him for the task.

With elders are also deacons (servants). They doubtless had much of the administration of widow-care, and care for the poor, but would have worked along with the elders, supplementing their ministry. They too had to be godly men, who understood the mystery of the faith. They were not merely 'organisation men'. They also had to live godly lives.

Given in this leadership, every member of the body had a gift, and so all shared in the life of the church. Romans 12:3ff shows them all about their tasks and ministries so that the whole body was helped and healthy. We find no hard authoritarian spirit within the church, since the order of the day was love, unity and fellowship. In the context of 'one Spirit', 'one Lord', 'one

God and Father of all who is above all, through all and in all' the Church was a working unit, and whilst doubtless this unity was attacked, they could work at maintaining the unity already given and so wisely structured within the gifts and offices.

(vi) The Worship of the Church

There are two aspects of worship, namely the embodied worship in which prayer, the exercise of gifts and the sharing of the Lord's Supper are included, and also that service of life lived to God by which can be seen that the people of God worship their God.

I Cor. 12 - 14 gives us an excellent view of public worship. Paul gives many helpful instructions and admonitions. In I Cor. 14:26 Paul says, 'When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation'. This is true corporate worship. He adds, 'Let all things be done for edification'. He requests that the use of tongues and prophecies be limited. In fact he has already said that the excessive use of tongues would be a stumbling block to any stranger who might enter, whereas the use of prophecy would cause a stranger to fall on his face and say, 'Surely God is present here, among you!'

Paul also gives instructions regarding the Lord's Supper, and this linked mainly to the love feast, and the attitudes of believers towards one another as they celebrate the death of Christ. He also gives instructions in regard to the way women should conduct themselves, but his instructions are not confined only to women.

The second order of worship is outlined in Romans 12:1-2 where the surrender of the body, and its daily use in every avenue of life is seen as true spiritual worship. This is the equivalent, almost, of Matt. 5:16 where to let one's light shine by means of good works is to glorify the Father in heaven. All members have works to do, and God is seen by means of these. However, it is only when one's conscience is 'purged from dead works' that one can 'serve the living God'. As it is we are the circumcision, not of the flesh, but who through the Spirit worship God (Phil. 3:3). The worship life of the church, both in embodied and practical forms, is the expression of the true people of God, the holy humanity who express the true praise of the Creator-Redeemer-Father.

9. The Community of Love and Holiness

The church is nothing, if not the community of those who love God and one another, and who care deeply for each other. This is seen in the immediate warmth of expression of fellowship on the day of Pentecost and following. It is seen in their being 'of one soul and one mind'. This heart love expressed itself in the sharing of all the goods they possessed. The move to do this was spontaneous, triggered off no doubt by the release found in forgiveness. We see that the poor and the widows were cared for, and later James said that true religion and undefiled was to visit the fatherless and widows.

In every way this love is expressed. Paul's famous chapter on love (I Cor. 13) and John's whole first epistle are magnificent expositions of love. Peter says in his first epistle that the real purpose of conversion is 'to love one another from the heart, fervently'. John even points out that when the brethren love one another then God is seen through that loving (I John 4:12).

This love is to work itself out in every way in the community. Husbands

are to love their wives, parents their children, and the church is to do good unto all men, even if primarily the church.

At the same time there must be holy love. 'Called to be saints' is no mere saying. The new people of God are not to walk as the Gentiles walked, being morally callous, having their consciences hard or seared. They are to walk in love, yes, but to walk in light, in fact to walk in the light as he (Christ) Is in the light (of the Father). Peter says that if they call on God as Father, they must be obedient in every part of their lives. He has just said that they are to be holy because God who called them is holy (see I Peter 1:13-21). This is equivalent to the Lord's prayer, where to call God Father is also to pray that His name be hallowed, i.e. His people reverence it in holiness of living. After all, as Peter points out the new community is a 'holy nation, God's own people'. II Peter urges holiness in the light of imminent renovation of the heavens and the earth, whilst John says that if our hope is to be like him then we will purify ourselves (now) even as he is pure.

This holiness is to penetrate every part of life. I Thessalonians 4 speaks of it in regard to marriage, as also does Hebrews 13:4. The walk, life and conversation of the people of God is to be Holy, and even their speech edifying. It is not as though such advice had not been given to 'old Israel'. Indeed they were to be the pure people of God, but for the most part failed. The new people of God must not fail. They have all the motivation of forgiveness and cleansing. They have been through the crucible of the Cross and purified, and so they must live consonant with their holy calling.

Certainly it was seen that they did not walk as the Gentiles walked. At the same time, the seven letters in the Revelation are a salutary reminder of how the churches, too, can deteriorate.

10. The Eschatological Community

Finally the people of God were a people who looked to, and moved towards the end-time. The church, at Pentecost, was born in the climate of the eschaton. Peter quoted the prophecy of Joel as referring to 'the last days'. He pointed to the new mode of prophecy, and the events and signs which would follow before 'that great and eventful day of the Lord'. Many scholars have speculated that the church expected an almost immediate coming of Christ. This may or may not be, according to how one looks at it, but they certainly were the community of hope.

They were first of all the community of the eschaton because they believed they were the new covenant and Kingdom people of God, and that by their proclamation the nations would be told of Christ and his salvation, after which Messiah would return, and the final events of judgement, resurrection and the new heavens and new earth would take place. They were the community of the end-time because they believed that in the now-time Christ was working out the plan of God through His people. Christ was putting down all rule, authority, and power, and destroying every enemy. They were with him in this task, with spiritual weapons which were mighty to the pulling down of many strongholds. They were proclaiming not only the Gospel of salvation but the defeat of the evil enemy. They were wrestling with principalities and powers, and defeating them in the conflict.

They were the community of the last days because they lived in hope of the

consummation of time.³ From Abel and Enoch (see Jude 14) onwards the people of God have looked to the eschaton. This is part of the thrust of Gen. 3:15 and of Gen. 49:10. The theme we saw in Romans regarding the 'obedience to (or, of) the faith amongst all nations' Paul says has been 'kept secret for long ages'. Rev. 7:1-10 speaks of its consummation. The people of God - Israel - looked for the Day of the Lord, and the Israel of God looks for exactly the same thing. Hebrews 11:39-40 says we both - those of old and those of these days - will converge upon the consummation simultaneously. All through the O.T. and the N.T. it is the coming of the eschaton that stimulates to godly living. God's promises are sure and certain, and hope is squarely based upon them. Time has always been eschatological in that the end has always been coming towards us as we have been travelling towards it.

The hope is of course in sharing in the glory of God (Rom. 5:2) and inheriting the promises, the Kingdom, the world, and 'all things', i.e. eternity. That is why the church is waiting, and also preparing itself for that great day. Then, as she with the Spirit cries, 'Come, Lord Jesus!' she will be ready for the great event, the marriage of the Bride and the Lamb. Then will be that great multitude which is numberless, the whole family of God, the sons of the eternal Father, the glorified ones, the redeemed and cleansed ones, all before the Father and the Lamb and in the presence of the Spirit.

This is, and this will be, and this will be, for ever, the living church of the Living God!

APPENDIX

Note On The Sacraments

1. INTRODUCTION

It would be impossible to make a study of the Church in the New Testament, and to ignore the sacraments, or, as they are often known, the ordinances, that is the Lord's Supper (or, Holy Communion, the Eucharist, etc.). We have of course mentioned them in passing. For this reason we will devote a whole study to them, for their origins, significance and practice have very deep roots back in the history of mankind. The term 'sacrament' comes from the Greek word *mysterion* which was often given the Latin translation *sacramentum*. Baptism and the Lord's Supper were the visible aspects of the living power manifested when the *kerugma* (Gospel) was proclaimed, for it was generally associated with the miracles and powers generally evident at the time of proclamation. It was these sacraments which covered the mystery of Christ and his church.

Later the term sacrament took on a more technical meaning. Often it simply meant the element such as bread or wine or water, and was called (by Augustine) a 'visible word'. It was sometimes called 'the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace'. However this need not, here, concern us. We will look at the two sacraments which relate to the church, namely baptism and the Lord's Supper.

³ For a full treatment of this subject see Living Faith Study No. 26 'The Biblical Doctrine of Hope' (N.C.P.I., 1978).

2. BAPTISM

Baptism in the N.T. is first met with John the Baptist. He baptised and those who were baptised were called his disciples. Baptism is certainly linked with discipleship as we see in John 4:1-2. This is again emphasised in Matt. 28:18-20 where Jesus says, 'Make disciples of all nations, baptising them into the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit'. A disciple of course is a learner, one submitted in trust to his teacher. Baptism identified men and women with John or Jesus. Whilst we are told that proselytes were baptised, thus becoming Jews, this is difficult to trace before the first century. Certainly it obtained in the first century and perhaps existed before. The Ebionites and Essenes (sectarian Jewish communities) used many lustrations, and baptism would not have been difficult for contemporary Jews to understand. John's demand for baptism was linked with the coming Kingdom, forgiveness of sins, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It seemed tantamount to calling on Jews to become converted to God!

At Pentecost baptism was called for and here it related to the forgiveness of sins, but also it signified incorporation into the (new) people of God. This is certainly the idea elsewhere. In Romans 6:1-6 (assuming that passage refers to the rite of baptism, as well as its spiritual significance) it is incorporation into the death and burial of Christ and also signifies rising. In Gal. 3:26-29 it is to put on Christ. In Acts 22:16 it is to wash away one's sins. Col. 2:9-13 it is almost the equivalent of circumcision with its covenant significance and the cutting away of the life of the flesh (cf. Deut. 30:6). As circumcision was the sign and seal of the Abrahamic Covenant (Rom. 4: 9-12) so baptism corresponds to this in the New Covenant which is itself the eschatological fulfilment of the Abrahamic Covenant (cf. Luke 1:72-73).

Baptism also relates to the gift of the Holy Spirit as John had promised (John 1:32-33). At Pentecost Peter promised this gift, contingent upon baptism (Acts 2:38). At the same time the Spirit works in baptism, effecting the spiritual washing and renewal which is the promise and fruit of baptism (John 3:5, Acts 9:17f, 10:47, 22:16, II Cor. 1:22, Ephes. 1:13, Titus 3:5, I Pet. 3:21). In II Cor. 3:6 and Romans 8:1-3 this work of the Spirit is to bring life. In Col. 1:13-14 the forgiveness of sins associated with baptism also brings us into the Kingdom of God.

The requirements for baptism are repentance (Acts 2:38, cf. Mark 1:4, Acts 3:19) and faith (Mark 16:16, Acts 10:43-48, 16:31-33). The fruits of baptism are from God's grace forgiveness, cleansing, justification, incorporation into Christ's Body, the church, and the initial act of regeneration followed by the process of regeneration, sanctification, all leading to ultimate glory. The demands made by baptism are renunciation of sin, the world, the flesh, and evil powers. The will is required to render obedience, be led by the Spirit, produce his fruits, live the life of love, service, and proclamation of the Gospel in the context of the whole body. By baptism one is incorporated, relationally, into the Trinity, i.e. 'the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit' (Matt. 28:18-20). One has the gift of sonship (adoption) and the gift of the Holy Spirit, particularly as the Spirit of the Son, for one has 'put on Christ'. In this obedience is rendered to God as Father, and to the Son as Lord.

The ritual act of baptism signifies what God has done, as also His promises accompanying this sacrament. It does not, however, *ex opere operato*, accomplish this, since both faith and repentance are required in the one baptism. Although both repentance and faith are gifts, they must also be exercised. Again, baptism bring incorporation into the church, the new people of God, and is with a view to the vertical and horizontal life of that body, since it is

unto discipleship.

The modes of baptism, and the requirements of this relating to infants and adults will not be here discussed, but outlined in our later study.

3. THE LORD'S SUPPER

In Christian history this has been known under various heads, e.g. 'Holy Communion', 'Eucharist' ('The Thanksgiving'), 'breaking of bread' and others. Each of these titles has its right and special significance.

The actual institution of the meal, it is argued, was at the precise time of the Passover. The synoptic Gospels and John's Gospel seem to point to different datings, and it may well be that there were two different traditions which may be harmonised. However, we do know that it was in the context of the Passover that the meal was instituted, and that is enough. It points back to the old Exodus, and forward to the new Exodus. In the transfiguration Elijah and Moses spoke with Jesus concerning his exodus which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem. The meal was also related to the matter of the kingdom of God. Luke 22:28-30 speaks of the disciples being appointed the Kingdom as the Father had appointed the Kingdom to the Son (cf. Luke 12:32). In Luke 22:18 Jesus says, 'I tell you that from now on I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until the Kingdom of God comes'. In Matt. 26:29 he speaks about drinking it new with his disciples in his Father's Kingdom. In this sense the meal has an eschatological connotation. The 'until he comes' of the Pauline statement concerning eating the supper (I Cor. 11:26) is also eschatological. The new Exodus and 'Christ our Passover' (I Cor. 5:7) point to the ultimate, the endtime when all the people of God shall know 'the glorious liberty of the sons of God'. The drinking of wine, new, in the Kingdom refers to the Messianic banquet of victory to which Jesus adverts in his parables of the feast. He is really saying, 'This feast is with a view to that feast, the feast within the Kingdom at the end of time, in eternity'.

There are many interpretations of the use of bread and wine, and the references to 'my body' and 'my blood'. However it is best to see them covenant ally, since Jesus was referring back to the Mosaic covenant as the old, and the establishing of the new covenant 'in my blood'. That is, as Israel was delivered from Egypt (bondage) and released to Canaan (liberty) so the giving of his body and the shedding of his blood will bring the freedom promised in the remarkable words of Jer. 31:31-34. Hence Jesus says, 'This is the new covenant in my blood which is shed for you and for many for the remission of sins'. Thus his death is for forgiveness. The paschal victim of the Passover set the Israelite free. The blood of this (new) Passover sets the new people of God free.

The early church certainly shared in 'the breaking of bread' (Acts 2:46, cf. 2:42) which may have been the sharing of meals, and yet with a view to sharing the commemoration of the Supper, believing also that the invisible Lord was present in that meal. In Paul's exposition (I Cor. 11:20-34) the sharing of the meal is showing forth (exhibiting) the Lord's death until he comes. At the same time it is a communion (fellowship) with the Lord in his death and resurrection. This means the unity of the members since they share together one loaf as they sit down as the body of Christ. This means they must 'discern the body', and not be at variance or this will spell sickness or even death.

Briefly summing it up we can say that the Supper has a backward look to the death and all its significance. The death is there; the feast reminds dynamically of that. 'Dynamically' because in the present we are assured (or, reassured) of the total forgiveness of sins. Hence the note of thanksgiving (rather than petition) for what has been done. In the present there is a dynamic participation in forgiveness, as also the full unity of the body, as the body is one with its head. The future look is towards the eschatological fulfilment, when the Kingdom, the new age, and the freedom of the sons will be consummated.

Again, this sacrament does not *ex opere operato* effect forgiveness, liberty, fellowship and hope. Faith and repentance, as in baptism are essential. We speak of initial faith and repentance, and the life of the church consonant with them, worked out in fellowship and obedience.

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