



## Ephesians 4:1-3 THE GOAL: Unity in the Body of Christ

**4** I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, <sup>2</sup> with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, <sup>3</sup> endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.<sup>1</sup>

### In Week 1: PO outlined a big picture:

- Background on the town of Ephesus
  - Port city, 200K+, hub going either N, S, E or W.
  - Idol worship & the significance of Artemis/Diana and Imperial worship
- Perspective about Paul:
  - His timeline with the Ephesians & how that fit in with his missionary journeys
  - He was writing this letter from Rome while imprisoned with a Centurian, which whom he'd spent quite a bit of time
  - His colleagues-Tychicus, Epaphras
- And we began surmising what issues he might have heard from Epaphras that prompted this letter by looking at the TOPICS Paul addresses in Ephesians:
  - UNITY
  - LOVE
  - REDEMPTION
  - DIVINE INTENTION for the human race
  - GRACE
  - PREDESTINATION
  - RECONCILIATION
  - UNION WITH CHRIST
- We learned that Ephesians:
  - begins with love, Eph 1:4-6
  - Ends with love, Eph 6:23-24
  - And 10-15 years later, when John shares the Revelation he receives, is chastised for leaving their first love, Rev 2:1-7
- **What did the Ephesian Church overlook or not protect in those years in between?**

Basic Hermeneutics principles:

1. Start with this book-what is the author saying to the original audience?
2. Look up other books by the same author to see what is said regarding these topics to those original audiences.
3. Look up what other biblical authors say on those topics.
4. What principles are revealed?
5. How can we apply those principles today in our current time & culture.

More extensive exploration could be done. ☺

I see Paul as the leader of a multi-site church of various stages of maturity in their communities. In a sense, this group of believers is wrestling with sanctification.

[sanctification means holy & set apart TO God and separated FROM evil.]

<sup>1</sup> [The New King James Version](#) (Eph 4:1–3). (1982). Thomas Nelson.



They've been INSTANTLY sanctified through salvation and are figuring out their PROGRESSIVE sanctification as a community and individuals within that community.

**Last week, we explored the framework Paul was reminding them of:**

1.
  - WHO they were,
  - WHOSE they were and how each Ephesian fit in with the whole of their group,
  - WHERE they were,
  - And the context, WHEN they were—in the timeline of history,
  - Then WHERE were they headed,
  - And to WHOM were they trying to reach,
  - Once there, WHAT WERE THEY SUPPOSED TO DO?

Paul is writing to people he loves, instruction FOR the good of the community they were a part of and would result in their good as well. Growing in godliness with all the power of the Holy Spirit enabling them.

2. The Collectivist Mindset versus the Individualistic Mindset-we not me
3. Principles: What principles can we glean from what Paul instructed the Ephesians are timeless truths that we can apply today?
4. We concluded:
  - He has given us a position, [the authority]
  - His grace enables us to function in this position, [the ability]
  - He's given us the mission, which is facilitating unity/the ministry of reconciliation, [the focus]
  - He's given us and will give us the resource & equipping we need for this mission [the resource]
  - A result of our trusting Him, we have been sealed with the Holy Spirit, to be able to walk in a manner worth of His calling.

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**This session, we'll be reviewing Paul's prayer in Ch 1:15-23 & touching on the truths that holds:**

[appreciating The Message of Ephesians by John R. W. Stott, in The Bible Speaks Today series.]



**Ephesians 1:15-23 [READ THE WHOLE SEGMENT]**

15 Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, 16 do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: 17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, 18 the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power 20 which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. 22 And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, 23 which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all

Later in Chapter 2, Paul tells them:

2:19 Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

**Parsing Scripture by Scripture:**

**Ephesians 1:15-23**

***15 Therefore***

After all that he just shared and based on those truths:

***I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints,***

The testimony of their devotion to Jesus and how it worked out through their love for other believers had reached Paul...

Every Christian both believes and loves. Faith and love are basic Christian graces, as also is hope, the third member of the triad, which has already been mentioned in verse 12 and occurs again in verse 18. It is impossible to be in Christ and not to find oneself drawn both to him in trust and to his people in love (to all of them too, in this case Jews and Gentiles without distinction).

**16 do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers:**

Expresses gratitude to the Father for them, and devotes himself to praying for them, [Paul reveals a bit of his prayer life, what does he pray? Again a 'we' not just 'me']

***17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you:***

- *the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him,*
- *18 the eyes of your understanding being enlightened;*



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**First**, he blesses God for having blessed them in Christ; then he prays that God will open their eyes to grasp the fullness of this blessing.

What Paul does in Ephesians 1, and therefore encourages us to copy, is both to keep praising God that in Christ all spiritual blessings are ours and to keep praying that we may know the fullness of what he has given us. If we keep together praise and prayer, benediction and petition, we are unlikely to lose our spiritual equilibrium.

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- *that you may know what is the hope of His calling,*
  - The call of God takes us back to the very beginning of our Christian lives.
    - **Romans 8:30** 'Those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified.' True, we called on him to save us,<sup>6</sup> but our call was a response to his.
  - The question now is: what did God call us for? His call was not a random or purposeless thing. He had some object in view when he called us. He called us to something and for something. And it is this that is meant by '**the hope of his call**' (**verse 18, literally**) which in **Eph 4:4 is referred to as the 'hope of your call'**. It is the expectation which we enjoy as a result of the fact that God has called us.
  - What this the rest of the New Testament tells us. It is a rich and varied expectation. For God has called us 'to belong to Jesus Christ' and 'into the fellowship of ... Jesus Christ.'<sup>7</sup> **Rom 1:6; 1 Cor 1:9** He has called us 'to be saints' or 'called us with a holy calling', since he who has called us is holy himself and says to us 'you shall be holy, for I am holy'.<sup>8</sup> **Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 tim 1:9; 1 Pet 1:15; cf 1 Thess 4:7**
  - One of the characteristics of the 'holy' or special people of God is liberation from the judgment of God's law. So we are not to lapse into slavery again, for we were 'called to freedom'. **Gal 5:1, 13** Another characteristic is harmonious fellowship across the barriers of race and class, for we 'were called in the one body' to enjoy 'the peace of Christ', and must live a life that is 'worthy of the calling to which we have been called ... forbearing one another in love'.<sup>1</sup> **Col 3:15; Eph 4:1-2** At the same time, though we may enjoy peace within the Christian community, we are bound to experience opposition from the unbelieving world. Yet we must not retaliate: 'For to this (this unjust suffering and this patient endurance) you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.'<sup>2</sup> **1 Pet 2:21** Besides, we know that beyond the suffering lies the glory. For God has also called us 'into his own kingdom and glory' or 'to his eternal glory in Christ'. This is what Paul calls 'the upward call of God in Christ Jesus', for the sake of which he presses on in the Christian race towards the goal.<sup>3</sup> **1 Thess 2:12; 1 Peter 5:10, Phil 3:14**
  - All this was in God's mind when he called us. He called us to Christ and holiness, to freedom and peace, to suffering and glory. More simply, it was a call to an altogether new life in which we know, love, obey and serve Christ, enjoy fellowship with him and with each other, and look beyond our present suffering to the glory which will one day



be revealed. This is *the hope to which he has called you*. Paul prays that our eyes may be opened to know it.

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- *what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints,*
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- *19 and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe,*
    - *according to the working of His mighty power*
    - *20 which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and*
    - *seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places,*
    - *21 far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, [Jesus Christ's enthronement over evil]*
- 
- Col 2:15* Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.
- 
- *not only in this age but also in that which is to come.*
  - *22 And He put all things under His feet,*
  - *and gave Him to be head over all things to the church,*  
*[Jesus Christ's headship of the church]*
- 
- *23 which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all*
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#### **Later in Chapter 2, Paul tells them:**

- 2:19 Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,
- 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets,
- Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone,
- 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord,
- 22 in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

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*[so much similar information in the letter to the Ephesian church and the letter to the Colossians.]*

#### **Jesus as the head of the church: SLIDE**

- Jesus Christ rules and governs his people and directs them towards the fulfillment of God's purposes. All power and authority within the church derive from Jesus Christ as the head.
- Jesus Christ rules the universe in the interest of the church  
Eph 1:22-23 *See also* Eph 1:10; Col 1:18
- All power and authority within the church derive from Jesus Christ as the head  
Jesus Christ is recognised as head of the church Eph 4:15 *See also* Eph 5:23; Col 2:19



- Within the church Jesus Christ alone rules with authority Mt 23:8-10 *See also* Jn 13:13; 2Co 4:5
- The church owes obedience to its head Jn 14:15 *See also* Jn 14:21,23; Eph 5:24; 1Jn 3:24
- All human authority in the church derives from its head Eph 4:11 *See also* Gal 1:1
- Jesus Christ is the cornerstone and builder of the church Eph 2:20-22 *See also* Mt 16:18; Ac 4:11; Ps 118:22; 1Pe 2:4-6

### Jesus Christ's role as head of the church: **SLIDE**

- He loves the church Eph 5:25 *See also* Jn 10:11; Eph 5:2,23; 1Jn 3:16
- He cares for the church Rev 7:17 *See also* Jn 10:14-15,27-28; 17:12; Eph 5:29-30
- He provides for the growth of the church Col 2:19 *See also* Eph 4:15-16
- He prays for the church Jn 17:20-26; Ro 8:34; Heb 7:25
- He judges the church Rev 2:23 *See also* Ro 14:10-12; 2Co 5:10; Eph 6:8
- He will present the church blameless before God Eph 5:27 *See also* 2Co 4:14; Col 1:22; Jude 24

### Relation Between Christ and the Church. Seven NT figures set forth this relation:

- (1) the Shepherd and the Sheep (John 10);
- (2) the Vine and the Branches (John 15);
- (3) the Cornerstone and the Stones of the Building (1 Cor. 3:9; Eph. 2:19–22; 1 Pet. 2:5);
- (4) High Priest and the Kingdom of Priests (Heb. 5:1–10; 6:13–8:6; 1 Pet. 2:5–9; Rev. 1:6);
- (5) the Head and the Many-Membered Body (1 Cor. 12:12–13, 27; Eph. 4:4);
- (6) the Last Adam and the New Creation (1 Cor. 15:22, 45; 2 Cor. 5:17);
- (7) the Bridegroom and the Bride (John 3:29; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25–33; Rev. 19:7–8).<sup>2</sup>

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### Key Passages. **SLIDE**

#### Mt 16:18–19

And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock [the church, emphasis mine] I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever...

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<sup>2</sup> Unger, M. F. (1988). [Church](#). In R. K. Harrison (Ed.), *The new Unger's Bible dictionary* (Rev. and updated ed.). Chicago: Moody Press.



**Act 20:28**

Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

**Eph 1:22-23**

And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

**Eph 2:19-22**

Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the...

**Col 1:18**

And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.

**1 Pe 2:9**

But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;

***What is the Church?, R. C. Sproul, 2013, Ch9, The Marks of a True Church***

**READ THIS:**

3) Church discipline. We have seen through church history that church discipline has been somewhat variable. There have been times in the past where church discipline has manifested itself in ways that were harsh. During the sixteenth century, there was fierce persecution not only from the Roman Catholic Church against Protestants, but also Protestants against Catholics. We know that people were subjected to torture and all manner of punishments as a means of church discipline. From our vantage point in the twenty first century, this seems to be cruel, unusual, and barbaric. Perhaps it is, but I want us to understand this: the leaders of the church in the sixteenth century really believed in hell. They believed that there was no worse fate that could befall a human being than to be cast into hell. The church really believed that it was justifiable to use almost any means necessary to rebuke and discipline its members in order to keep them out of the jaws of hell. If it took a torture chamber, the rack, even the threat of being burned at the stake to rescue a person from the jaws of hell, it was considered legitimate. I'm not defending that, but I am trying to help us understand the mindset of people in the sixteenth century who took hell seriously. Today, we seem to have an attitude that we don't need to discipline people



at all because it doesn't matter. That may be because many people don't believe in the threat of divine judgment.

The pendulum tends to swing to extremes in church history when it comes to discipline. Sometimes the church gets involved in harsh and severe forms of discipline. At other times, the church is marked by an extraordinary form of latitudinarianism. This is where no discipline is imposed upon the people. A few years ago, one of the mainline denominations in America had a controversy in the church when a group of pastors and scholars put together a paper in which they completely redefined the Christian sexual ethic of one man and one woman for life in marriage. This report was introduced as legislation for the church amidst much opposition from those who were more orthodox. A showdown came at the annual meeting of this denomination and when the vote was taken, the proposal was defeated.

But what took place after was perhaps more strange. Though the church did not adopt this particular position on sexual behavior, it also did not censure or discipline those who advocated the position. The church was in effect saying, "This is not our official position, but if you want to be a minister in our denomination and hold and teach these things, we're not going to do anything about it." There was a failure of discipline at that point. This happens all the time in the modern-day church.

**rcb addition within this paragraph:**

**Heb 12: 11** No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

Prov 3:12. For the LORD corrects those he loves, just as a father corrects a child in whom he delights.

**This also raises a question.** If a church fails in a significant way to discipline its members with respect to gross, heinous, and egregious sins, is that institution still a church? When does the church become apostate? That is not an easy question to answer because it's very rare in church history that an institution will admit it doesn't believe in the atonement of Christ or the deity of Christ or other essential truths. It's not always very clear cut. Often, the church plays loosely with essential truths of the Christian faith.

We make a distinction between *de facto* apostasy and *de jure* apostasy, between *formal* and *material* apostasy. Formal apostasy is when the church clearly and unequivocally denies an essential truth of the Christian faith. ***De facto* apostasy is apostasy at a material or practical level, where the creeds are still intact but the church doesn't believe the creeds anymore. The church undermines the very creeds that they say that they believe.**

That brings us to a practical application. **When should one leave a church and go to another?** First, I would say that this is not a decision anyone should make lightly. It's a serious matter. Almost always, when we join a church, we do it with a solemn vow before God. To remove oneself from a group before whom one has made a sacred vow requires serious reasons. This must be justified on solid grounds.



Today, people move from one church to another without a second thought. When we leave a church over silly reasons like paint colors or an offending remark, we fail to see the sacred nature of the church itself.

We should not leave when there's no just reason. We ought to honor our commitment to a church to the best of our ability as long as we possibly can unless we are not able to be nurtured and nourished as a Christian there. When the church is apostate, a Christian must leave. You may think you should stay within the church and try to work for its change and recovery, but if the church is in fact apostate, you're not allowed to be there. Consider the showdown between the prophets of Baal and Elijah at Mount Carmel. After God displayed his power over Baal can you imagine somebody saying, "Well, I see now that Yahweh is God, but I'm going to stay here in the house of Baal as salt and light and try to work for its reform"? We're not allowed to do that. If the institution we are in commits apostasy, it is our duty to leave it.

No matter what, we should always look carefully at the marks of the church. Is the gospel preached? Are the sacraments duly administered? Is there a biblical form of church government and discipline? If those three things are present, you ought not to leave. You ought to work to be an edifying part of that section of the body of Christ.

In these few chapters we have glimpsed the nature and scope of God's bride, the church of Jesus Christ. It is only when we understand our true purpose that the church will shine in all of her beauty. United in truth as we hold to the Apostolic faith, we will declare and demonstrate to an onlooking world that our triune God is worthy to be worshiped and served. As the called-out ones of the Father, this is our greatest joy. This is the church: a people for His own possession who live together to glorify Him.<sup>3</sup>

Unity and Diversity in One Body

(cf. Eph. 4:1–16)

### **1 Corin 12:12-27**

12 For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. 13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. 14 For in fact the body is not one member but many.

15 If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? 16 And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling?

**SLIDE 18** *But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased.*

19 And if they were all one member, where would the body be?

20 But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. 21 And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." 22 No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. 23 And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor; and our unrepresentable parts have greater modesty, 24 but our presentable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, 25 that there

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<sup>3</sup> Sproul, R. C. (2013). [\*What Is the Church?\*](#) (First edition, pp. 61–69). Reformation Trust.



should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. 26 And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.

27 Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.

**Scripture assumes we will be a functioning part of the local body of Christ: SLIDE**

**Heb 10:25** And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.

**Questions PM suggests we ask: SLIDE**

Is it biblical?

Do you believe that pastor has been called to pastor that church?

Do you like the culture? Ministry philosophy.

## Conclusion:

**Ephesians 4:1-3 THE GOAL: Unity in the Body of Christ**

**4** I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, <sup>2</sup>with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, <sup>3</sup>endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Thoughts to consider in our quiet time this week:

- Would the testimony someone shared about me be about faith & love?
- As we glimpse a bit of Paul's prayer life-what part does intercessory prayer have in my own?  
[wisdom, revelation, understanding, what are the riches of the inheritance, what is the exceeding greatness of His power?]
- We have been called, by Someone, for someone, to do something-does my life reveal the evidence of that?
- Jesus' position as head of the church:
  - Do my attitude and actions reveal that I believe Jesus to be the head of the church, including me or do I go through life as if I was the head?
  - How well am I relating to the body of believers I'm a part of?  
[praying-asking direction for any changes He would bring to our attention.]



## Notes:

## 2. A prayer for knowledge

### 1:15–23

Although Paul is naturally thinking of his Asian readers to whom he is writing, yet throughout the first chapter of his letter he addresses himself rather to God than to them. He begins with a great benediction (1:3–14) and continues with a great intercession (1:15–23). Ephesians 1 is, in fact, divided into these two sections. **First, he blesses God for having blessed us in Christ; then he prays that God will open our eyes to grasp the fullness of this blessing.**

For a healthy Christian life today it is of the utmost importance to follow Paul's example and keep Christian praise and Christian prayer together. Yet many do not manage to preserve this balance. Some Christians seem to do little but pray for new spiritual blessings, apparently oblivious of the fact that God has already blessed them in Christ with every spiritual blessing. Others lay such emphasis on the undoubted truth that everything is already theirs in Christ, that they become complacent and appear to have no appetite to know or experience their Christian privileges more deeply. Both these groups must be declared unbalanced. They have created a polarization which Scripture will not tolerate. What Paul does in Ephesians 1, and therefore encourages us to copy, is both to keep praising God that in Christ all spiritual blessings are ours and to keep praying that we may know the fullness of what he has given us. If we keep together praise and prayer, benediction and petition, we are unlikely to lose our spiritual equilibrium.

As we continue to compare the two halves of Ephesians 1, another feature of them strikes us: both are essentially trinitarian. For both are addressed to God the Father, the benediction to 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (verse 3) and the intercession to 'the God of our Lord Jesus Christ' (verse 17), who is also called 'the Father of glory' or (NEB) 'the all-glorious Father'. Next, both refer specifically to God's work in and through Christ, for on the one hand he 'has blessed us in Christ' (verse 3) and on the other he 'accomplished in Christ' a mighty act of power when he resurrected and enthroned him (verse 20). And thirdly both sections of the chapter allude—even if obliquely—to the work of the Holy Spirit, since the blessings God bestows on us in Christ are 'spiritual' blessings (verse 3), and it is only 'by a spirit (or Spirit) of wisdom and of revelation' that we can come to know them (verse 17). I do not think it is far-fetched to discern this trinitarian structure. Christian faith and Christian life are both fundamentally trinitarian. And the one is a response to the other. It is because the Father has approached us in blessing through the Son and by the Spirit that we approach him in prayer through the Son and by the Spirit also (cf. 2:18).

What prompts Paul to launch into prayer for his readers is something he had heard about them. In the previous paragraph he has written in fairly general terms how he and his fellow



Jewish Christians had 'first hoped in Christ' (verse 12) and how his readers as Gentile believers had 'heard the word of truth ... and believed in' Christ (verse 13). Now he becomes more personal: *I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints*. Strangely, the best manuscripts omit the words 'your love'. Without them 'the Lord Jesus' and 'all the saints' become bracketed as the object of the Ephesians' faith. So unusual is this notion of faith in Christians as well as in Christ, and so unlike anything Paul writes elsewhere, that we are faced with a choice. Either we must follow Markus Barth in translating 'faith' as 'faithfulness' or 'loyalty', which is 'something similar to love' and could conceivably be directed to both Christ and Christians, or we must conclude, even against the strong manuscript evidence, that the words 'your love' were indeed dictated by Paul but somehow got dropped out by an early copyist. In the latter case we have the familiar couplet of faith in Christ and love for his people, which is exactly paralleled in Colossians 1:4. Every Christian both believes and loves. Faith and love are basic Christian graces, as also is hope, the third member of the triad, which has already been mentioned in verse 12 and occurs again in verse 18. It is impossible to be in Christ and not to find oneself drawn both to him in trust and to his people in love (to all of them too, in this case Jews and Gentiles without distinction).

Having heard of their Christian faith and love, Paul says he continuously thanks God for them (acknowledging him as the author of both qualities), and then encompasses them with his prayers. For despite his unceasing gratitude to God for them, he is still not satisfied with them. So what is his request? It is not that they may receive a 'second blessing', but rather that they may appreciate to the fullest possible extent the implications of the blessing they have already received. So the essence of his prayer for them is *that you may know* (verse 18). Although his other recorded prayers range more widely than this, they all include a similar petition either for 'power to comprehend' (3:18) or for 'the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and understanding' or for 'knowledge and all discernment'.<sup>3</sup> We must not overlook this emphasis. Growth in knowledge is indispensable to growth in holiness. Indeed, knowledge and holiness are even more intimately linked than as means and end. For the 'knowledge' for which Paul prays is more Hebrew than Greek in concept; it adds the knowledge of experience to the knowledge of understanding. More than this, it emphasizes *the knowledge of him* (verse 17), of God himself personally, as the context within which we *may know what is ...* (verse 18), that is, may come to know truths about him. There is no higher knowledge than the knowledge of God himself. As Adolphe Monod expressed it: 'Philosophy taking man for its centre says *know thyself*; only the inspired word which proceeds from God has been able to say *know God*.'

Such knowledge is impossible without revelation. So Paul prays that God *may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him* (verse 17). Although RSV writes 'spirit' with a small 's', the reference is likely to be to the Holy Spirit, since Scripture speaks of him as 'the Spirit of truth', the agent of revelation, and the teacher of the people of God. Not that we can ask God to 'give' the Holy Spirit himself to those who have already received him and been 'sealed' with him (verse 13), but rather that we may and should pray for his ministry of illumination. It is because of his confidence in this ministry of the Spirit that Paul can continue his prayer: *having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know ...* In biblical usage the heart is the whole



inward self, comprising mind as well as emotion. So 'the eyes of the heart' are simply our 'inner eyes', which need to be opened or 'enlightened' before we can grasp God's truth.

The apostle now brings together three great truths which he wants his readers (through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit) to know in mind and experience. They concern God's call, inheritance and power. More particularly, he prays that they may know the 'hope' of God's call, the 'glory' (indeed 'the riches of the glory') of his inheritance, and the 'greatness' (indeed 'the immeasurable greatness') of his power.

## 1. The hope of God's call

The call of God takes us back to the very beginning of our Christian lives. 'Those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified.' True, we called on him to save us,<sup>6</sup> but our call was a response to his.

The question now is: what did God call us for? His call was not a random or purposeless thing. He had some object in view when he called us. He called us to something and for something. And it is this that is meant by 'the hope of his call' (verse 18, literally) which in 4:4 is referred to as the 'hope of *your* call'. It is the expectation which we enjoy as a result of the fact that God has called us.

What this is the rest of the New Testament tells us. It is a rich and varied expectation. For God has called us 'to belong to Jesus Christ' and 'into the fellowship of ... Jesus Christ.' He has called us 'to be saints' or 'called us with a holy calling', since he who has called us is holy himself and says to us 'you shall be holy, for I am holy'.<sup>8</sup> One of the characteristics of the 'holy' or special people of God is liberation from the judgment of God's law. So we are not to lapse into slavery again, for we were 'called to freedom'. Another characteristic is harmonious fellowship across the barriers of race and class, for we 'were called in the one body' to enjoy 'the peace of Christ', and must live a life that is 'worthy of the calling to which we have been called ... forbearing one another in love'.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, though we may enjoy peace within the Christian community, we are bound to experience opposition from the unbelieving world. Yet we must not retaliate: 'For to this (this unjust suffering and this patient endurance) you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.' Besides, we know that beyond the suffering lies the glory. For God has also called us 'into his own kingdom and glory' or 'to his eternal glory in Christ'. This is what Paul calls 'the upward call of God in Christ Jesus', for the sake of which he presses on in the Christian race towards the goal.<sup>3</sup>

All this was in God's mind when he called us. He called us to Christ and holiness, to freedom and peace, to suffering and glory. More simply, it was a call to an altogether new life in which we know, love, obey and serve Christ, enjoy fellowship with him and with each other, and look beyond our present suffering to the glory which will one day be revealed. This is *the hope to which he has called you*. Paul prays that our eyes may be opened to know it.

## 2. The glory of God's inheritance



The apostle's second prayer to God is that we may know *what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints* (verse 18b). The Greek expression, like the English, could mean either God's inheritance or ours, that is, either the inheritance he receives or the inheritance he bestows. Some commentators take it in the former sense and understand it to refer to the inheritance which God possesses among his people. Certainly the Old Testament authors taught consistently that God's people were his 'inheritance' or 'possession', and in the last chapter we found a reference to this truth in verses 12 and 14. But the parallel passage in Colossians 1:12 strongly suggests the other interpretation here, namely that 'God's inheritance' refers to what he will give us, for we are to give thanks to the Father, 'who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light'.

In this case, if God's 'call' points back to the beginning of our Christian life, God's 'inheritance' points on to its end, to that final inheritance of which the Holy Spirit is the guarantee (verse 14) and which Peter describes as 'imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you'. For God's children are God's heirs, in fact 'fellow heirs with Christ',<sup>5</sup> and one day by his grace the inheritance will be ours. Exactly what it will be like is beyond our capacity to imagine. So we shall be wise not to be too dogmatic about it. Nevertheless certain aspects of it have been revealed in the New Testament, and we shall not go wrong if we hold fast to these. We are told that we shall 'see' God and his Christ, and worship him; that this 'beatific' vision will be a transforming vision, for 'when he appears we shall be like him', not only in body but in character; and that we shall enjoy perfect fellowship with each other. For God's inheritance (the inheritance he gives us) will not be a little private party for each individual but rather 'among the saints' as we join that 'great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb'.

Paul does not regard it as presumptuous that we should think about our heavenly inheritance or even anticipate it with joy and gratitude. On the contrary, he prays that we may 'know it', the 'glory' of it, indeed, 'the riches of the glory' of it.

### 3. The greatness of God's power

If God's 'call' looks back to the beginning, and God's 'inheritance' looks on to the end, then surely God's 'power' spans the interim period in between. It is on this that the apostle concentrates, for only God's power can fulfil the expectation which belongs to his call and bring us safely to the riches of the glory of the final inheritance he will give us in heaven. Paul is convinced that God's power is sufficient, and he accumulates words to convince us. He writes not only of God's 'power', but also of 'the energy of the might of his strength' (a literal rendering of *the working of his great might*, verse 19), and he prays that we may know *the greatness* of it, indeed the *immeasurable* greatness of it *in* (better 'for' or 'towards') *us who believe*.

How shall we come to know the surpassing greatness of the power of God? Because he has given a public demonstration of it in the resurrection and exaltation of Christ (verses 20–23). Paul actually refers to three successive events: first, *he raised him from the dead* (verse 20a); secondly, *he made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places*, far above all competitors (verses 20b, 21), and *has put all things under his feet* (verse 22a); and thirdly, *he has made him the head over*



*all things for the church, which is his body ...* (verses 22b, 23). These three belong together. It is because of Christ's resurrection from the dead and enthronement over the powers of evil that he has been given headship over the church. The resurrection and ascension were a decisive demonstration of divine power. For if there are two powers which man cannot control, but which hold him in bondage, they are death and evil. Man is mortal; he cannot avoid death. Man is fallen; he cannot overcome evil. But God in Christ has conquered both, and therefore can rescue us from both.

*a. Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead*

Death is a bitter and relentless enemy. It will come to all of us one day. A few years ago I was summoned to a London hospital to visit a parishioner who had been admitted as an emergency. I expected to find her at death's door, but instead she was sitting up in bed and smiling. 'When I was brought in', she said, 'the doctors and nurses all gathered round me as if I was going to die. But I decided I wasn't going to die!' It was a spirited remark, but not an entirely accurate one. That lady has, in fact, since died. For we may succeed in postponing death; we cannot escape it. And after death nothing can stop the process of decay and decomposition. Even the most sophisticated embalming techniques of modern American morticians cannot preserve the body for ever. No. We are dust, and to dust we shall inevitably return. No human power can prevent this, let alone bring a dead person back to life.

But God has done what man cannot do. He raised Jesus Christ from the dead. First, he arrested the natural process of decay, refusing to allow his Holy One to see corruption. Then he did not just reverse the process, restoring the dead Jesus to this life, but transcended it. He raised Jesus to an altogether new life (immortal, glorious and free), which nobody had ever experienced before, and which nobody has experienced since—or not yet.

This was the first part of the public display of God's power. He raised Jesus from the dead to a new dimension of human experience. The empty tomb and the resurrection appearances were the evidence. It would be quite impossible, therefore, to square Paul's teaching in this passage with the attempted reconstructions of the demythologizers. Rudolph Bultmann will always be remembered for his thesis that 'Christ has risen into the *kerygma*'. That is, he did not rise in any objective historical or physical sense, but only in the recovered faith and in the triumphant proclamation (*kerygma*) of his disciples. But what Paul sets forth here as a demonstration of divine power is what *he accomplished in Christ*, not in his followers.

*b. Jesus Christ's enthronement over evil*

Having raised Jesus from among the dead and out of the domain of death, God *made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places* (verse 20). That is, he promoted him to the place of supreme honour and executive authority. In doing so, he fulfilled the messianic promise of Psalm 110:1: 'The Lord says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool."' Reminiscences of this verse are to be found not only in the references to God's 'right hand' and to Christ's being made to 'sit' there, but also in the later statement that God has put all things



'under his feet', thus making them his 'footstool'. In Psalm 110 his footstool consists of his 'enemies'. It seems safe to assume, therefore, that the 'principalities and powers' above which he has been exalted (*all rule and authority and power and dominion*) are here not angels but demons, those 'world rulers of this present darkness' or 'spiritual hosts of wickedness' against which Paul later summons us to fight, although, to be sure, they have not yet finally conceded Christ's victory.<sup>1</sup> The more general expression which follows, *every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come* (verse 21b), may be added in order to include angels as well, indeed every conceivable intelligent being, over whom Christ reigns in absolute supremacy.

That all things are now under the feet of Jesus is probably also an allusion to another strand of biblical teaching. Adam made in God's likeness was given dominion over the earth and its creatures, and did not altogether forfeit it when he fell into disobedience. On the contrary, the Psalmist in his meditation on the record of man's creation in Genesis 1 addresses God in these words: 'Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea ...' Yet man's dominion has been limited by the fall, and is distorted whenever he exploits or pollutes the environment, whose responsible steward he was originally appointed to be. So the full dominion which God intended man to enjoy is now exercised only by the man Christ Jesus: 'We do not yet see everything in subjection to him (*sc.* man). But we see Jesus ... crowned with glory and honour ...' Already Jesus has dethroned death, and one day this 'last enemy' will be finally destroyed.<sup>4</sup>

### c. *Jesus Christ's headship of the church*

Still Paul has not finished his account of the sovereign exaltation of Jesus. He has written of his resurrection *from the dead* (verse 20) and of his enthronement *far above all rule* (verse 21); but now he goes on to relate the meaning of this double triumph *for the church* (verse 22). This further truth he outlines in two pregnant expressions, both of which have caused much trouble to commentators. The first is that God *made Jesus the head over all things for the church which is his body* (verses 22–23a), and the second is the phrase *the fullness of him who fills all in all* (23b). Difficult as these clauses are, they are so important that we must spend a little time seeking to fathom them.

The first speaks of Jesus as 'head', and assigns him a headship which extends over 'all things'. 'All things' are mentioned twice in verse 22, and in the context embrace not only the material universe but also and especially all intelligent beings good and evil, angelic and demonic, who people it. This universe and these beings Christ rules. Since 'all things' have been put under his feet by God, he is thereby 'the head over all things'. The 'head' and the 'feet', the 'over' and the 'under', are obviously complementary.

But Paul goes further than this. His point is not just that God made Jesus head over all things but that he 'gave' (*edōke*) him as head-over-all-things *to the church which is his body*. For he whom God gave to the church to be its head was already head of the universe. Thus both universe and church have in Jesus Christ the same head.



The other puzzling expression, on the elucidation of which gallons of printer's ink have been expended, is the final one, *the fullness of him who fills all in all*. All readers of Ephesians ought to be aware of the three main alternative explanations of these words. As far as grammar and language are concerned all three are possible, and all three have had distinguished advocates. If I tentatively opt for the third, it is on consideration of context and the analogy of Scripture, rather than of grammar and vocabulary. But the reader must make up his own mind.

The first explanation takes the phrase as a description not of the church (the body) but of Christ (the head), *i.e.* '... the church, which is the body of him who is the fullness of him who fills all in all'. In this case Paul is saying not that the church is the fullness of Christ, but that Christ is the fullness of God, who fills Christ as indeed he fills all things. At first sight this is an attractive interpretation. It fits the context of Christ's supremacy. It also has parallels in Scripture, for God is said elsewhere to 'fill heaven and earth', and in Colossians the fullness of the Godhead is said to dwell in Christ.<sup>6</sup> Also this interpretation has had learned proponents, including among the fathers Theodoret, and in modern times C. F. D. Moule of Cambridge and G. B. Caird of Oxford.<sup>8</sup> Yet the difficulties are considerable. For one thing the syntax is awkward, requiring God to be both subject and object of the same sentence ('God ... gave as head to the church Christ who is the fullness of God'). For another the parallels are not exact. Colossians indeed says that God's fullness dwells 'in Christ', but stops short of identifying Christ with God's fullness. Hodge goes so far as to say that the latter identification is 'unscriptural': 'The fullness of the Godhead is said to be in Christ; but Christ is never said to be the fullness of God.' And there is another inexact parallel. In both Ephesians and Colossians it is Christ, not God, who 'fills all things'.<sup>1</sup>

If, then, we hesitatingly reject this first explanation, we move on to two more, both of which take 'the fullness' as being a description of the church rather than of Christ. These verses do in fact contain the first use of the word 'church' in Ephesians. It is first identified as Christ's 'body', and then as his 'fullness', *the fullness of him who fills all in all*. The difficulty here is that the noun 'fullness' (*plērōma*) can have either an active or a passive meaning. Actively, it means 'that which fills' or the 'contents' of something; passively it means 'that which is filled or full', not the contents but the container. Both senses have been applied to the text we are considering.

Take the active sense first: 'that which fills or completes'. Scholars are agreed that this is the commoner use of *plērōma*. In classical Greek it was used of the contents of a bowl or basin, and of either a ship's cargo or a ship's crew. And this active meaning is frequent in the New Testament. Thus, the fragments of loaves and fishes which filled the baskets are *plērōmata*. *Plērōma* is the word used for a 'patch' of new, unshrunk cloth which when sewn on to an old garment fills up the hole or tear. Again, in the quotation from Psalm 24:1, 'the earth is the Lord's', the Greek for 'and everything in it' is 'and its fullness', *i.e.* its contents. And we have already seen that God's fullness dwells in Christ, meaning that whatever fills the Father also fills the Son.<sup>5</sup>

If this is the sense of *plērōma* in Ephesians 1:23, then the church is said to 'fill' or to 'complete' Christ, and Christ is represented as incomplete without it. One cannot deny that this sense is compatible with the head-body metaphor which Paul has just employed. Thus, the church is 'the complement of Christ who is the head' (AG), 'just as the body is the necessary complement of the head in order to make up a complete man'.<sup>6</sup> Startling as this thought is, notable commentators of the past and the present have embraced it. Calvin took this view: 'By this word



“fullness” he means that our Lord Jesus Christ and even God his Father account themselves imperfect, unless we are joined to him ... as if a father should say, My house seems empty to me when I do not see my child in it. A husband will say, I seem to be only half a man when my wife is not with me. After the same manner God says that he does not consider himself full and perfect, except by gathering us to himself and by making us all one with himself.’ Rather similarly William Hendriksen writes of Christ: ‘As bridegroom he is incomplete without the bride; as vine he cannot be thought of without the branches; as shepherd he is not seen without his sheep; and so also as head he finds his full expression in his body, the church.’<sup>8</sup> In the same reformed tradition Charles Hodge leans to this interpretation, and bases his decision on the linguistic evidence: ‘In every other case in which it occurs in the New Testament it (*sc. plērōma*) is used actively—*that which doth fill* ... The common usage of the word in the New Testament is ... clearly in favour of its being taken in an active sense here.’

Further, the following participle can be translated in such a way as to support this explanation. True, *plēroumenou* could be in the middle voice and so have an active sense. It is so taken by AV and RSV, ‘him who fills’. But it could equally be passive (‘who is being filled’). So the ancient versions (*e.g.* Latin, Syriac and Egyptian) took it, and the great Greek commentators Origen and Chrysostom. Then the active noun and the passive verb fit neatly into each other, and the church is ‘that which fills Christ who is being filled by it’. Of the more modern commentators it is Armitage Robinson who has been the most successful in popularizing this interpretation. Affirming that this is ‘perhaps the most remarkable expression in the whole epistle’, he goes on to explain it: ‘In some mysterious sense the church is that without which the Christ is not complete, but with which he is or will be complete. That is to say, he (*sc.* Paul) looks upon the Christ as in a sense waiting for completeness, and destined in the purpose of God to find completeness in the church.’ So he paraphrases: ‘The Head finds completeness in the Body: the Church is the completion of the Christ: for the Christ is being *all in all fulfilled*, is moving towards a completeness absolute and all-inclusive.’

Now we come to the third alternative, which takes *plērōma* in its passive sense, not as ‘that which fills’ but as ‘that which is filled’, not the contents but the filled container. According to AG this is ‘much more probably the meaning here’. If so, then the church is the fullness of Christ not because it fills him, but because he fills it. And he who fills it is described either as filling ‘all things’, ‘the whole creation’ (JB), which is precisely what he is said to do in 4:9, 10, or as himself being filled, *i.e.* by God as in Colossians 1:19 and 2:9. Putting the two parts of the clause together, it will then mean either that Christ who fills the church fills the universe also, or that Christ who fills the church is himself filled by God. The former is the more natural because God is not mentioned by name. But in either case the church is Christ’s ‘fullness’ in the sense that it fills it.

After considerable reflection on the whole passage and on the expositions of many commentators, I have come to think that this last alternative is the most likely to be the correct interpretation, for three reasons. First, because of the analogy of Scripture. The safest of all principles of biblical interpretation is to allow Scripture to explain Scripture. Certainly nowhere else in Scripture is the church explicitly said to ‘fill’ or ‘complete’ Christ, whereas constantly Christ is said to indwell and fill his church. For the church is God’s temple (2:21–22). As his glory filled the Jerusalem temple, so today Jesus Christ who is the glory of God fills the church by his Spirit.



Next, the context confirms this. In the latter part of Ephesians 1 Paul refers to the resurrection and enthronement of Jesus as the outstanding historical display of God's power. His emphasis throughout is on the lordship and the sovereignty of Jesus over all things. For him to go on to say that the church somehow 'completes' this supreme Christ would seem very incongruous. A more appropriate conclusion would surely be to stress how this supreme Christ fills his church, as he also fills the universe.

The third argument concerns the bracketing in verse 23 of his 'body' and his 'fullness' as successive descriptions of the church. Being in apposition to one another it would be natural to expect both pictures to illustrate at least a similar truth, namely Christ's rule over his church. The church is his 'body' (he directs it); the church is his 'fullness' (he fills it). Further, both teach Christ's double rule over universe and church. For on the one hand God gave Christ to the church as head-over-all-things (verse 22), and on the other the church is filled by Christ who also fills all things (verse 23). It is this which leads Markus Barth to go further and propose an actual fusion of the metaphors. Pointing out that the 'body' and the 'fullness' images come together in Ephesians 4:13–16 and Colossians 1:18–19 as well as here, and that medical writers of approximately Paul's time, like Hippocrates and Galen, thought of the head or brain as controlling and coordinating the functions of the body, Dr Barth summarizes Paul's understanding that 'the head fills the body with powers of movement and perception, and thereby inspires the whole body with life and direction'.

## Conclusion

It is time now to step back from the detailed questions which have necessarily been occupying us and survey the sweep of Paul's prayer for his readers. To me one of its most impressive features is his emphasis on the importance for Christian maturity of 'knowledge' (*that you may know*), together with his teaching on how knowledge is attained and how it is related to faith. For in this apostolic instruction he unites what we moderns, with disastrous consequences, too often separate.

### *a. Enlightenment and thought*

The whole thrust of Paul's prayer is that his readers may have a thorough knowledge of God's call, inheritance and power, especially the latter. But how did he expect his prayer to be answered? How do Christians grow in understanding? Some will reply that knowledge depends on the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. And they are right, at least in part. For Paul prays that 'the Spirit of wisdom and revelation' may increase their knowledge of God and enlighten the eyes of their hearts. We have no liberty to infer from this, however, that our responsibility is solely to pray and to wait for illumination, and not at all to think. Others make the opposite mistake: they use their minds and think, but leave little room for the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit.

The apostle Paul brings the two together. First he prays that the eyes of his readers' hearts may be enlightened to know God's power. Then he teaches that God has already supplied historical evidence of his power by raising and exalting Jesus. Thus, God has revealed his power



objectively in Jesus Christ, and now illumines our minds by his Spirit to grasp this revelation. Divine illumination and human thought belong together. All our thinking is unproductive without the Spirit of truth; yet his enlightenment is not intended to save us the trouble of using our minds. It is precisely as we ponder what God has done in Christ that the Spirit will open our eyes to grasp its implications.

*b. Knowledge and faith*

It is commonly assumed that faith and reason are incompatible. This is not so. The two are never contrasted in Scripture, as if we had to choose between them. Faith goes beyond reason, but rests on it. Knowledge is the ladder by which faith climbs higher, the springboard from which it leaps further.

So Paul prayed: 'that you may know ... what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in (better, 'for' or 'towards') us who *believe* ... which he accomplished in Christ ...' It is vital to see how Paul brings together the verbs 'to know' and 'to believe'. The very same resurrection power which God exhibited in Christ is now available for us. First we are to know its surpassing greatness as demonstrated in Christ's resurrection and enthronement, and then we are to lay hold of it experimentally for ourselves by faith. Of course we are already believers. Our faith has already been mentioned in verses 1, 13 and 15. But now the present participle *pisteuontas* (verse 19) emphasizes the need for the continuing exercise of faith in the apprehension of God's power. Thus knowledge and faith need each other. Faith cannot grow without a firm basis of knowledge; knowledge is sterile if it does not bring forth faith.

How much do we know of the power of God, which raised Jesus from death and enthroned him over evil? True, the very same power of God has raised us with Jesus from spiritual death, and enthroned us with Jesus in heavenly places, as Paul will go on to show in 2:1–10. But how much of this is theory, and how much is experience? It is not difficult to think of our human weakness: our tongue or our temper, malice, greed, lust, jealousy or pride. These things are certainly beyond our power to control. And we have to humble ourselves to admit it. 'The words the apostle uses here are so many thunderclaps and lightnings, to beat down and subdue all the pride of man.' But are our weaknesses beyond the power of God? Paul will soon assure us that God is able far to surpass our thoughts and prayers 'by the power at work within us' (3:20), and he will go on to exhort us to 'be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might' (6:10). This is the power of God which raised Jesus from the dead, and raised us with him. It has put all things under his feet; it can put all evil under ours.

### **3. Resurrected with Christ**

#### **2:1–10**



I sometimes wonder if good and thoughtful people have ever been more depressed about the human predicament than they are today. Of course every age is bound to have a blurred vision of its own problems, because it is too close to them to get them into focus. And every generation breeds new prophets of doom. Nevertheless, the media enable us to grasp the worldwide extent of contemporary evil, and it is this which makes the modern scene look so dark. It is partly the escalating economic problem (population growth, the spoliation of natural resources, inflation, unemployment, hunger), partly the spread of social conflict (racism, tribalism, the class struggle, disintegrating family life) and partly the absence of accepted moral guidelines (leading to violence, dishonesty and sexual promiscuity). Man seems incapable of managing his own affairs or of creating a just, free, humane and tranquil society. For man himself is askew.

Against the sombre background of our world today Ephesians 2:1–10 stands out in striking relevance. Paul first plumbs the depths of pessimism about man, and then rises to the heights of optimism about God. It is this combination of pessimism and optimism, of despair and faith, which constitutes the refreshing realism of the Bible. For what Paul does in this passage is to paint a vivid contrast between what man is by nature and what he can become by grace.

*And you he made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup> in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. <sup>3</sup> Among these we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. <sup>4</sup> But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, <sup>5</sup> even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), <sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup> not because of works, lest any man should boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*

It is important to set this paragraph in its context. We have been considering Paul's prayer (1:15–23) that his readers' inward eyes might be enlightened by the Holy Spirit to know the implications of God's call to them, the wealth of his inheritance which awaits them in heaven and above all the surpassing greatness of his power which is available for them meanwhile. Of this power God has given a supreme historical demonstration by raising Christ from the dead and exalting him over all the powers of evil. But he has given a further demonstration of it by raising and exalting us with Christ, and so delivering us from the bondage of death and evil. This paragraph, then, is really a part of Paul's prayer that they (and we) might know how powerful God is. Its first few words emphasize this: 'And you being dead ...' In the Greek sentence there is no main verb portraying God's action until verse 5 ('He made us alive with Christ'); the English versions bring it forward to verse 1 simply in order to ease the awkward suspense of waiting for



it so long. In any case the sequence of thought is clear: 'Jesus Christ was dead, but God raised and exalted him. And you also were dead, but God raised and exalted you with Christ.'<sup>4</sup>

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**The New King James Version (Eph 1:15–3:4). (1982). Thomas Nelson.**

## Chapter Nine

### THE MARKS OF A TRUE CHURCH

When is a church not a church? I frequently get letters from people who pour out their souls and say: "I'm very unhappy in the church I attend. I'm not happy with what's preached or the activities that are going on in the church." This is a very serious question. It was paramount in the sixteenth century at the time of the Reformation, when we saw the greatest fragmentation of the visible church that ever took place. After the Protestant reformers broke with Rome, all kinds of divergent groups arose. They had different creeds, different confessions, different forms of government, and different liturgies. They all claimed to be Christian churches, and many of them claimed to be the only true church. Thus, the people of that day asked: "How can we tell? What are the marks of an authentic church?"

The Reformers wrestled with that question, since Rome did not recognize the Protestant churches as authentic. Rome said in the past that the church can be defined this way: where the bishop is, there is the church, and if there is no authorization by a Roman bishop, then whatever societies spring up are not valid churches. The Protestant Reformers took a different view of the matter. They sought to isolate and delineate the marks of a valid church and they settled on three distinctive characteristics. First, they said a church is a true church when the gospel is preached faithfully. Second, a true church is one where the sacraments are rightly administered. Third, they said a true church practices authentic discipline of its people. A corollary of the third point is ecclesiastical government, which exists for the nurture and the discipline of the people. Of all the different elements that make up a church, these are the three non-negotiables that the Reformers pinpointed as essential marks of a true church. Let's consider these marks in more detail:

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<sup>4</sup> Stott, J. R. W. (1979). *God's new society: the message of Ephesians* (pp. 51–70). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.



1) Where the gospel is proclaimed faithfully. What the Reformers meant by this was not simply the announcement of the good news of Jesus' death and the atonement, but rather the faithful proclamation of the essential truths of Christianity. If a church denied an essential aspect of the Christian faith, that institution would no longer be considered a church. Historic Protestantism would not recognize Mormonism as an authentic Christian church because the Mormon faith has denied the eternal deity of Christ.

2) Where the sacraments are administered. According to the Reformers, if there are no sacraments—the Lord's Supper and baptism—it's not a church. That becomes significant today because we have parachurch groups like Young Life, Campus Crusade, and InterVarsity that are engaged on a daily basis in various elements of Christian outreach and ministry. Their calling is to work alongside the church. Ligonier Ministries may also be called a parachurch ministry. We're an educational institution and we are not a church. Ligonier Ministries doesn't administer the sacraments. We don't have church membership whereby we impart discipline to people who are part of the constituency of Ligonier. That's not our function. We're called to assist the church educationally, but we have a very narrow focus at that point and don't claim to be a church. Nobody's a member of Ligonier in that sense. We don't baptize people and have them enter the Ligonier church, for there isn't one. The serving of the sacraments is a task for the church.

**READ THIS:**

3) Church discipline. We have seen through church history that church discipline has been somewhat variable. There have been times in the past where church discipline has manifested itself in ways that were harsh. During the sixteenth century, there was fierce persecution not only from the Roman Catholic Church against Protestants, but also Protestants against Catholics. We know that people were subjected to torture and all manner of punishments as a means of church discipline. From our vantage point in the twenty first century, this seems to be cruel, unusual, and barbaric. Perhaps it is, but I want us to understand this: the leaders of the church in the sixteenth century really believed in hell. They believed that there was no worse fate that could befall a human being than to be cast into hell. The church really believed that it was justifiable to use almost any means necessary to rebuke and discipline its members in order to keep them out of the jaws of hell. If it took a torture chamber, the rack, even the threat of being burned at the stake to rescue a person from the jaws of hell, it was considered legitimate. I'm not defending that, but I am trying to help us understand the mindset of people in the sixteenth century who took hell seriously. Today, we seem to have an attitude that we don't need to discipline people at all because it doesn't matter. That may be because many people don't believe in the threat of divine judgment.

The pendulum tends to swing to extremes in church history when it comes to discipline. Sometimes the church gets involved in harsh and severe forms of discipline. At other times, the church is marked by an extraordinary form of latitudinarianism. This is where no discipline is imposed upon the people. A few years ago, one of the mainline denominations in America had a controversy in the church when a group of pastors and scholars put together a paper in which they completely redefined the Christian sexual ethic of one man and one woman for life in marriage. This report was introduced as legislation for the church amidst much opposition from



those who were more orthodox. A showdown came at the annual meeting of this denomination and when the vote was taken, the proposal was defeated.

But what took place after was perhaps more strange. Though the church did not adopt this particular position on sexual behavior, it also did not censure or discipline those who advocated the position. The church was in effect saying, "This is not our official position, but if you want to be a minister in our denomination and hold and teach these things, we're not going to do anything about it." There was a failure of discipline at that point. This happens all the time in the modern-day church.

**This also raises a question.** If a church fails in a significant way to discipline its members with respect to gross, heinous, and egregious sins, is that institution still a church? When does the church become apostate? That is not an easy question to answer because it's very rare in church history that an institution will admit it doesn't believe in the atonement of Christ or the deity of Christ or other essential truths. It's not always very clear cut. Often, the church plays loosely with essential truths of the Christian faith.

We make a distinction between *de facto* apostasy and *de jure* apostasy, between *formal* and *material* apostasy. Formal apostasy is when the church clearly and unequivocally denies an essential truth of the Christian faith. ***De facto* apostasy is apostasy at a material or practical level, where the creeds are still intact but the church doesn't believe the creeds anymore. The church undermines the very creeds that they say that they believe.**

That brings us to a practical application. **When should one leave a church and go to another?** First, I would say that this is not a decision anyone should make lightly. It's a serious matter. Almost always, when we join a church, we do it with a solemn vow before God. To remove oneself from a group before whom one has made a sacred vow requires serious reasons. This must be justified on solid grounds.

Today, people move from one church to another without a second thought. When we leave a church over silly reasons like paint colors or an offending remark, we fail to see the sacred nature of the church itself.

We should not leave when there's no just reason. We ought to honor our commitment to a church to the best of our ability as long as we possibly can unless we are not able to be nurtured and nourished as a Christian there. When the church is apostate, a Christian must leave. You may think you should stay within the church and try to work for its change and recovery, but if the church is in fact apostate, you're not allowed to be there. Consider the showdown between the prophets of Baal and Elijah at Mount Carmel. After God displayed his power over Baal can you imagine somebody saying, "Well, I see now that Yahweh is God, but I'm going to stay here in the house of Baal as salt and light and try to work for its reform"? We're not allowed to do that. If the institution we are in commits apostasy, it is our duty to leave it.

No matter what, we should always look carefully at the marks of the church. Is the gospel preached? Are the sacraments duly administered? Is there a biblical form of church government and discipline? If those three things are present, you ought not to leave. You ought to work to be an edifying part of that section of the body of Christ.

In these few chapters we have glimpsed the nature and scope of God's bride, the church of Jesus Christ. It is only when we understand our true purpose that the church will shine in all of



her beauty. United in truth as we hold to the Apostolic faith, we will declare and demonstrate to an onlooking world that our triune God is worthy to be worshiped and served. As the called-out ones of the Father, this is our greatest joy. This is the church: a people for His own possession who live together to glorify Him.<sup>5</sup>

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2212

Jesus Christ, head of the church

Jesus Christ rules and governs his people and directs them towards the fulfillment of God's purposes. All power and authority within the church derive from Jesus Christ as the head.

Jesus Christ rules the universe in the interest of the church

Eph 1:22-23 *See also* Eph 1:10; Col 1:18

All power and authority within the church derive from Jesus Christ as the head

Jesus Christ is recognised as head of the church Eph 4:15 *See also* Eph 5:23; Col 2:19

Within the church Jesus Christ alone rules with authority Mt 23:8-10 *See also* Jn 13:13; 2Co 4:5

The church owes obedience to its head Jn 14:15 *See also* Jn 14:21,23; Eph 5:24; 1Jn 3:24

All human authority in the church derives from its head Eph 4:11 *See also* Gal 1:1

### **Jesus Christ is the cornerstone and builder of the church**

**Eph 2:20-22** *See also* Mt 16:18; Ac 4:11; Ps 118:22; 1Pe 2:4-6

### **Jesus Christ's role as head of the church**

**He loves the church Eph 5:25** *See also* Jn 10:11; Eph 5:2,23; 1Jn 3:16

**He cares for the church Rev 7:17** *See also* Jn 10:14-15,27-28; 17:12; Eph 5:29-30

**He provides for the growth of the church Col 2:19** *See also* Eph 4:15-16

**He prays for the church Jn 17:20-26; Ro 8:34; Heb 7:25**

**He judges the church Rev 2:23** *See also* Ro 14:10-12; 2Co 5:10; Eph 6:8

**He will present the church blameless before God Eph 5:27** *See also* 2Co 4:14; Col 1:22; Jude 24

*See also*

2012 Christ, authority

2048 Christ, love of

2066 Christ, power of

2069 Christ, pre-eminence

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<sup>5</sup> Sproul, R. C. (2013). [\*What Is the Church?\*](#) (First edition, pp. 61–69). Reformation Trust.



2224 Christ, the Lord  
2309 Christ as judge  
2330 Christ as shepherd  
5217 authority in church  
5700 headship  
6754 union with Christ  
7020 church, the  
7110 body of Christ

1:15–23 After elaborately praising God for His blessings (vv. 3–14), Paul expresses thankfulness for the believers. The prayer in vv. 15–23 is the first of two prayers in the letter (compare 3:14–21) that, together, enclose Paul’s discussions on God’s work of reconciliation (2:1–22) and his own role within God’s plan (3:1–13).

The first prayer has three parts: a thanksgiving to God for the Ephesians’ maturity in the faith (vv. 15–16); an intercessory prayer on behalf of the Ephesians, asking God to give them wisdom and knowledge to comprehend the riches of His blessings (vv. 17–19); and a digression on the “power of God” that guided God’s plan of salvation, raised Jesus from the dead, and seated Him at God’s right hand to rule over all powers (vv. 20–23).

Barry, J. D., Mangum, D., Brown, D. R., Heiser, M. S., Custis, M., Ritzema, E., Whitehead, M. M., Grigoni, M. R., & Bomar, D. (2012, 2016). *Faithlife Study Bible* (Eph 1:14–23). Lexham Press.

### **Requirements of the people of God**

**To obey God’s word** Dt 5:1 *See also* Ex 24:3; Dt 6:1-3; 13:4; Jos 1:7; 1Sa 15:22

**To remember their redemption** Dt 5:15 *See also* Dt 7:18; 15:15; 16:12; Ps 105:5

**To commemorate their redemption** Ex 12:25-27 *The focus of Israel’s commemoration of their redemption was the Passover, which is one of the ceremonies lying behind the Lord’s Supper. See also* Nu 9:2-3; Dt 16:1; Lk 22:14-20

**To love God wholeheartedly** Dt 6:5 *See also* Dt 10:12; 11:1; 19:9; Jos 23:11

### **The marks of the people of God**

**Circumcision as a mark of God’s people** Ge 17:10-14; Lev 12:3

*Circumcision had to be internal as well as external, as a sign of spiritual commitment to God:* Dt 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4; Ro 2:27; Col 2:11

**The presence of God** Ex 25:8; 33:15-16; 40:35; Nu 10:33-36; 2Ch 5:14<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Manser, M. H. (2009). [\*Dictionary of Bible Themes: The Accessible and Comprehensive Tool for Topical Studies\*](#). Martin Manser.



**CHURCH**, place of worship. Called COURTS, Psa. 65:4; 84:2, 10; 92:13; 96:8; 100:4; 116:19; Isa. 1:12; 62:9; Zech. 3:7; HOUSE OF GOD, Gen. 28:17, 22; Josh. 9:23; Judg. 18:31; 20:18, 26; 21:2; 1 Chr. 9:11; 24:5; 2 Chr. 5:14; 22:12; 24:13; 33:7; 36:19; Ezra 5:8, 15; 7:20, 23; Neh. 6:10; 11:11; 13:11; Psa. 42:4; 52:8; 55:14; 84:10; Eccl. 5:1; Isa. 2:3; Hos. 9:8; Joel 1:16; Mic. 4:2; Zech. 7:2; Matt. 12:4; 1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 10:21; 1 Pet. 4:17; HOUSE OF THE LORD, Ex. 23:19; 34:26; Deut. 23:18; Josh. 6:24; Judg. 19:18; 1 Sam. 1:7, 24; 2 Sam. 12:20; 1 Kin. 3:1; 6:37; 7:40; 8:10, 63; 10:5; 2 Kin. 11:3, 4, 15, 18, 19; 12:4, 9, 10, 13, 16; 16:18; 20:8; 23:2, 7, 11; 25:9; 1 Chr. 6:31; 22:1, 11, 14; 23:4; 26:12; 2 Chr. 8:16; 26:21; 29:5, 15; 33:15; 34:15; 36:14; Ezra 7:27; Psa. 23:6; 27:4; 92:13; 116:19; 118:26; 122:1, 9; 134:1; Isa. 2:2; 37:14; Jer. 17:26; 20:1, 2; 26:2, 7; 28:1, 5; 29:26; 35:2; 36:5, 6; 38:14; 41:5; 51:51; Lam. 2:7; Ezek. 44:4; Hag. 1:2; Zech. 8:9; SANCTUARY, Ex. 25:8; Lev. 19:30; 21:12; Num. 3:28; 4:12; 7:9; 8:19; 10:21; 18:1, 5; 19:20; 1 Chr. 9:29; 22:19; 24:5; 28:10; 2 Chr. 20:8; 26:18; 29:21; 30:8, 19; Neh. 10:39; Psa. 20:2; 28:2; 63:2; 68:24; 73:17; 74:3, 7; 77:13; 78:69; 150:1; Isa. 16:12; 63:18; Lam. 2:7, 20; 4:1; Ezek. 5:11; 42:20; 44:5, 27; 45:3; 48:8, 21; Dan. 8:11, 13, 14; 9:17, 26; 11:31; Heb. 8:2; 9:1, 2; HOUSE OF PRAYER, Isa. 56:7; Matt. 21:13; TABERNACLE, Ex. 26:1; Lev. 26:11; Josh. 22:19; Psa. 15:1; 61:4; 76:2; Heb. 8:2, 5; 9:2, 11; Rev. 13:6; 21:3; TEMPLE, 1 Sam. 1:9; 3:3; 2 Kin. 11:10, 13; Ezra 4:1; Psa. 5:7; 11:4; 27:4; 29:9; 48:9; 68:29; Isa. 6:1; Mal. 3:1; Matt. 4:5; 23:16; Luke 18:10; 24:53; ZION, Psa. 9:11; 48:11; 74:2; 132:13; 137:1; Isa. 35:10; Jer. 31:6; 50:5; Joel 2:1, 15; HOLY PLACE, Ex. 28:29; 38:24; Lev. 6:16; 10:17; 14:13; 16:2–24; Josh. 5:15; 1 Kin. 8:8; 1 Chr. 23:32; 2 Chr. 29:5; 30:27; 35:5; Ezra 9:8; Psa. 24:3; 46:4; 68:17; Eccl. 8:10; Isa. 57:15; Ezek. 41:4; 42:13; 45:4; Matt. 24:15; Acts 6:13; 21:28; Heb. 9:12, 25; HOLY TEMPLE, Psa. 5:7; 11:4; 65:4; 79:1; 138:2; Jonah 2:4, 7; Mic. 1:2; Hab. 2:20; Eph. 2:21; 3:17; MY FATHER'S HOUSE, John 2:16; 14:2.

**Holy:** Ex. 30:26–29; Ex. 40:9; Lev. 8:10, 11; Lev. 16:33; Lev. 19:30; Lev. 21:12; Num. 7:1; 1 Kin. 9:3; 1 Chr. 29:3; 2 Chr. 3:8; Isa. 64:11; Ezek. 23:39; 1 Cor. 3:17

**Edifices.** See **SYNAGOGUE**; **TABERNACLE**; **TEMPLE**.

**CHURCH**, the collective body of believers.

**Miscellany of Minor Sub-Topics:** Called in the O.T., THE CONGREGATION, Ex. 12:3, 6, 19, 47; 16:1, 2, 9, 10, 22; Lev. 4:13, 15; 10:17; 24:14. Called in the N.T., CHURCH, Matt. 16:18; 18:17; Acts 2:47; 1 Cor. 11:18; 14:19, 23, 28, 33, 34; 15:9; Gal. 1:13. Called also ASSEMBLY OF THE SAINTS, Psa. 89:7; ASSEMBLY OF THE UPRIGHT, Psa. 111:1; BODY OF CHRIST, Eph. 1:22, 23; Col. 1:24; BRANCH OF GOD'S PLANTING, Isa. 60:21; BRIDE OF CHRIST, Rev. 21:9; CHURCH OF GOD, Acts 20:28; CHURCH OF THE LIVING GOD, 1 Tim. 3:15; CHURCH OF THE FIRSTBORN, Heb. 12:23; CITY OF THE LIVING GOD, Heb. 12:22; CONGREGATION OF SAINTS, Psa. 149:1; CONGREGATION OF THE LORD'S POOR, Psa. 74:19; DOVE, Song 2:14; 5:2; FAMILY IN HEAVEN AND EARTH, Eph. 3:15; FLOCK OF GOD, Ezek. 34:15; 1 Pet. 5:2; FOLD OF CHRIST, John 10:16; GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE FIRSTBORN, Heb. 12:23; GOLDEN LAMPSTAND, Rev. 1:20; GOD'S BUILDING, 1 Cor. 3:9; GOD'S HUSBANDRY, 1 Cor. 3:9; GOD'S HERITAGE, Joel 3:2; 1 Pet. 5:3; HABITATION OF GOD, Eph. 2:22; HEAVENLY JERUSALEM, Gal. 4:26; Heb. 12:22; HOLY CITY, Rev. 21:2; HOLY MOUNTAIN, Zech. 8:3; HOLY HILL, Psa. 2:6; 15:1; HOUSE OF GOD, 1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 10:21; THE GOD OF JACOB, Isa. 2:3; HOUSE OF CHRIST, Heb. 3:6; HOUSEHOLD OF GOD, Eph. 2:19; INHERITANCE, Psa. 28:9; Isa. 19:25; ISRAEL OF GOD, Gal. 6:16; KING'S DAUGHTER, Psa. 45:13; KINGDOM OF GOD, Matt. 6:33; 12:28; 19:24; 21:31; KINGDOM OF HEAVEN, Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 10:7; 5:3, 10, 19, 20; HIS KINGDOM, Psa. 103:19;



145:12; Matt. 16:28; Luke 1:33; MY KINGDOM, John 18:36; YOUR KINGDOM, Psa. 45:6; 145:11, 13; Matt. 6:10; Luke 23:43; LAMB'S BRIDE, Eph. 5:22–32; Rev. 22:17; LAMB'S WIFE, Rev. 19:7–9; 21:9; LOT OF GOD'S INHERITANCE, Deut. 32:9; MOUNT ZION, Heb. 12:22; MOUNTAIN OF THE LORD'S HOUSE, Isa. 2:2; NEW JERUSALEM, Rev. 21:2; PILLAR AND GROUND OF THE TRUTH, 1 Tim. 3:15; PLACE OF GOD'S THRONE, Ezek. 43:7; PLEASANT PORTION, Jer. 12:10; SANCTUARY OF GOD, Psa. 114:2; SISTER OF CHRIST, Song 4:12; 5:2; SPIRITUAL HOUSE, 1 Pet. 2:5; SPOUSE OF CHRIST, Song 4:12; 5:1; STRENGTH AND GLORY OF GOD, Psa. 78:61; SOUGHT OUT, A CITY NOT FORSAKEN, Isa. 62:12; THE LORD'S PORTION, Deut. 32:9; TEMPLE OF GOD, 1 Cor. 3:16, 17; TEMPLE OF THE LIVING GOD, 2 Cor. 6:16; VINEYARD, Jer. 12:10; Matt. 21:41. Christ's love for, John 10:8, 11, 12; Eph. 5:25–32; Rev. 3:9. Loved by believers, Psa. 87:7; 137:5; 1 Cor. 12:25; 1 Thess. 4:9; is prayed for, Psa. 122:6; Isa. 62:6; dear to God, Isa. 43:4; safe under his care, Psa. 46:1, 2, 5; salt and light of the world, Matt. 5:13. Militant, Song 6:10; Phil. 2:24; 2 Tim. 2:3; 4:7; Philem. 2. God defends, Psa. 89:18; Isa. 4:5; 49:25; Matt. 16:18. God provides ministers for, Jer. 3:15; Eph. 4:11, 12. Is glorious, Psa. 45:13; Eph. 5:27. Is clothed in righteousness, Rev. 19:8. Believers continually added to, by the Lord, Acts 2:47; 5:14; 11:24. Unity of, Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 10:17; 12:12; Gal. 3:28; Eph. 4:4. Privileges of, Psa. 36:8; 87:5. Worship of, to be attended, Heb. 10:25. Harmonious fellowship of, Psa. 133; John 13:34; Acts 4:32; Phil. 1:4; 2:1; 1 John 3, 4. Divisions in, to be shunned, Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 1:10; 3:3. Baptized into by one Spirit, 1 Cor. 12:13. Ministers commanded to feed, Acts 20:28. Is edified by the word, Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 14:4, 13; Eph. 4:15, 16; Col. 3:16. The wicked persecute, Acts 8:1–3; 1 Thess. 2:14, 15. Not to be despised, 1 Cor. 11:22. Defiling of, will be punished, 1 Cor. 3:17. Extent of, predicted, Isa. 2:2; Ezek. 17:22–24; Dan. 2:34, 35. See **ECCLESIASTICISM**; **JESUS, KING OF**; **MINISTERS**; **USURPATION, IN ECCLESIASTICAL AFFAIRS**.

**Unclassified Scriptures Relating to:** Deut. 32:9; Psa. 2:6; Psa. 9:11, 14; Psa. 14:7; Psa. 53:6. Psa. 20:2; Psa. 46:4, 5; Psa. 48:1, 2, 11–13; Psa. 50:2; Psa. 51:18; Psa. 65:1; Psa. 69:35, 36; Psa. 74:2; Psa. 84:1–10; Psa. 87:1–6; Psa. 99:2; Psa. 102:13, 14, 16, 19–21; Psa. 110:2; Psa. 111:1; Psa. 114:2; Psa. 125:1; Psa. 126:1, 2; Psa. 129:5; Psa. 132:13–16; Psa. 133:1–3; Psa. 134:1–3; Psa. 137:1–6; Psa. 149:2; Isa. 1:8, 27; Isa. 2:3; Isa. 4:2–6; Isa. 12:6; Isa. 14:32; Isa. 24:23; Isa. 27:2, 3; Isa. 28:5, 16; Isa. 31:4, 5; Isa. 33:5, 14, 20–24; Isa. 35:1–10; Isa. 40:9–11; Isa. 43:1–7, 21, 25; Isa. 44:23; Isa. 49:14–17; Isa. 52:1, 2, 7–12; Isa. 59:20; Isa. 60:1–6, 19–21; Isa. 61:1–3; Isa. 62:1, 3, 11, 12; Isa. 66:8, 18; Jer. 3:14, 15; Jer. 12:10; Jer. 13:11; Jer. 31:6, 7, 12, 23; Jer. 33:9; Ezek. 43:7; Joel 2:1, 15–17; Zech. 8:3; Matt. 13:24; Matt. 16:18; Acts 7:38; Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 3:9; 1 Cor. 12:28; 1 Cor. 15:9; 2 Cor. 8:1; Eph. 1:22, 23; Eph. 2:21, 22; Eph. 3:15, 21; Eph. 5:23–27, 29; Col. 1:24; 1 Tim. 3:14, 15; Heb. 3:6; Heb. 12:22, 23; 1 Pet. 2:5; Rev. 1:20; Rev. 21:2, 10, 11, 23

**Backslidden:** Psa. 12:1; Psa. 80:1–19; Isa. 1:2–4 vs. 5–27; 17:9–11; 43:22–28; Jer. 2:5–34; 3:1–25; 8:5–22. Jer. 9:1–3; Jer. 10:19–22. Jer. 18:11–17; 50:4–7; Ezek. 2:3–5; 5:5–17; 16:23; Hos. 2, 4, 6; Joel 2; Amos 6; Matt. 21:33–46; Mark 12:1–12. Luke 13:6–9; Rev. 2:1–6, 12–16, 18–25; Rev. 3:1–4, 14–20. Backslidings of Israel. See **BACKSLIDERS**, **BACKSLIDING OF ISRAEL**. See **CORRUPTION IN**, below; **BACKSLIDERS**.

**Beneficence of.** See **BENEFICENCE**; **GIVING**; **LIBERALITY**.

**Christ, Head of:** Psa. 118:22, 23. Matt. 21:42, 43; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17, 18; 1 Pet. 2:7. Isa. 33:22; Isa. 55:4; Matt. 12:6, 8. Mark 2:28; Luke 6:5. Matt. 23:8, 10; John 13:13; John 15:1–8; Acts 2:36; Rom. 8:29; Rom. 9:5; 1 Cor. 3:11; 1 Cor. 11:3; 1 Cor. 12:5; Eph. 1:10, 22, 23; Eph. 2:20–22;



Eph. 4:15; Eph. 5:23–32; Col. 1:13, 18; Col. 2:10, 19; Col. 3:11; Heb. 3:3, 6; Rev. 1:13; Rev. 2:1, 9, 12, 13, 18, 19; Rev. 3:1, 7; Rev. 5:6; Rev. 21:22, 23; Rev. 22:16 See **JESUS, KINGDOM OF.**

**Christian, Divinely Established:** Matt. 16:15–18; Eph. 2:20–22; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:15

**Corruption in:** Hos. 4:9; Mic. 3:1–4, 9, 11; Matt. 21:33–41, 45 Mark 12:1–12. Matt. 23:2–7, 13–33; Matt. 26:59–68; Mark 14:10, 11 Matt. 26:14–16; Luke 22:3–6. See **BACKSLIDERS, BACKSLIDING OF ISRAEL.**

**Decrees of:** Acts 15:28, 29; Acts 16:4

**Design of:** Rom. 3:2; Rom. 9:4; Eph. 2:20–22; 1 Tim. 3:15

**Dissensions in:** 1 Cor. 1:11–13; 3:3, 4; 11:18, 19; 2 Cor. 12:20, 21.

**Duty of, To Ministers:** Deut. 12:19; 1 Cor. 16:10, 11; Phil. 2:29; Phil. 4:10–12, 14–18; 1 Thess. 5:12, 13; 1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:7, 17 See **MINISTER, DUTIES OF THE CHURCH TO.**

**Government of, Mosaic and Christian:** Deut. 17:8–13; Matt. 16:19; Luke 9:46–48; Luke 22:24–30; John 20:23; Acts 1:15, 23–26; Acts 6:2–6; Acts 11:22, 29, 30; Acts 13:1, 3, 5; Acts 14:23; Acts 5:1–31; Acts 16:4, 5; Acts 20:17; 1 Cor. 7:17; 1 Cor. 11:2, 33, 34; 1 Cor. 12:5, 28; 1 Cor. 14:26, 33, 40; 1 Cor. 16:3, 16; 2 Cor. 2:6, 7 vs. 2–11.; Gal. 2:9, 10; Eph. 4:11, 12; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1, 2, 5, 8–13 vs. 1–13.; 1 Tim. 4:14; 1 Tim. 5:1, 17, 22; 2 Tim. 1:6; Tit. 1:5; Heb. 13:17, 24; Jas. 5:14, 15; 1 Pet. 5:1–3; 3 John 9, 10; Jude 22, 23 See **MINISTER, DUTIES OF.**

**Rules of Discipline in, Mosaic and Christian:** Gen. 17:14; Ex. 12:15; Ex. 30:33, 37, 38; Lev. 7:27; Lev. 17:8, 9; Lev. 19:5–8; Lev. 20:18; Lev. 22:3; Num. 9:13; Num. 15:31; Num. 19:13, 20; Deut. 13:12–18; Deut. 17:2–13; Deut. 19:16–21; Deut. 21:1–9, 18–21; Deut. 22:13–29; Ezra 10:7–8 vs. 1–44.; Matt. 16:19 John 20:23. Matt. 18:15–18; John 9:22, 34, 35; John 16:2; Rom. 14:1; Rom. 15:1 vs. 1–3.; Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 4:19, 21; 1 Cor. 5:1, 4–7, 11–13; 1 Cor. 16:22; 2 Cor. 2:6–8, 10, 11; 2 Cor. 6:14, 15; 2 Cor. 7:8 2 Cor. 10:1–11. 2 Cor. 13:1, 2, 10; Gal. 5:10, 12; Gal. 6:1; 1 Thess. 5:14; 2 Thess. 3:6, 14, 15; 1 Tim. 1:19, 20; 1 Tim. 5:1, 2, 19, 20; 1 Tim. 6:3–5; 2 Tim. 4:2; Tit. 1:13; Tit. 2:15; Tit. 3:10, 11; 2 John 10, 11; Jude 22, 23; Rev. 22:19 See **EXCOMMUNICATION;**

**MINISTER, DUTIES OF.**

**Love for:** Psa. 102:14; Psa. 122:6, 9; Psa. 128:5, 6; Psa. 137:1–6; Isa. 22:4; Isa. 58:12; Isa. 62:1, 6, 7; Isa. 66:10, 13, 14; Jer. 9:1; Jer. 14:17; Jer. 51:50, 51; Lam. 2:11; Lam. 3:48–51 chapters 1–5.

**Membership in:** Isa. 44:5; Ezek. 44:6, 7, 9; Matt. 12:50; Luke 18:16 Matt. 19:14; Mark 10:14.

John 15:5, 6; Acts 2:41, 47; Acts 4:4; Acts 5:14; Acts 9:35, 42; Acts 11:21; Rom. 12:4, 5; 1 Cor. 3:11–15; 1 Cor. 12:12–28; Eph. 4:25; Eph. 5:30; Phil. 4:3; Rev. 21:27 See **RIGHTEOUS, DESCRIBED.**

**Prophecies Concerning Prosperity of:** Gen. 12:3; Gen. 49:10; Deut. 32:21; Psa. 2:8; Psa. 22:27–31; Psa. 46:4, 10; Psa. 65:2; Psa. 66:4; Psa. 68:31, 32; Psa. 69:35, 36; Psa. 72:2–4, 7–11, 16, 19 vs. 1–20.; Psa. 85:10–12; Psa. 86:9; Psa. 87:4; Psa. 89:25, 29, 36, 37 vs. 1–37.; Psa. 96:11–13 vs. 1–13.; Psa. 102:13–16, 18–22; Psa. 110:3 vs. 1–7.; Psa. 113:3; Psa. 118:24; Psa. 126:5, 6; Psa. 132:15–18; Psa. 138:4, 5; Psa. 145:10, 11; Isa. 2:2–4 v. 5.; Isa. 4:2, 3, 5, 6; Isa. 9:2, 6, 7 vs. 1–7.; Isa. 11:6–10 vs. 1–10.; Isa. 18:7; Isa. 19:24, 25; Isa. 23:17, 18; Isa. 24:16; Isa. 25:6–8; Isa. 29:18, 19 vs. 18–24.; Isa. 30:20; Isa. 32:3, 4, 15–17 vs. 1–20.; Isa. 33:20, 21 vs. 5, 13–24.; Isa. 35:1, 2, 5–7 vs. 1–10; 41:17–20. Isa. 40:5 vs. 4–11.; Isa. 42:3, 4 vs. 1–12.; Isa. 44:3–5; Isa. 45:8, 14, 23, 24 v. 6.; Isa. 46:12, 13; Isa. 49:6–12, 18 vs. 18–23.; Isa. 51:3, 5, 6, 8 vs. 3–16.; Isa. 52:1, 2, 7, 8, 10, 15 vs. 1–15.; Isa. 53:10–12; Isa. 54:1–5, 11–14 vs. 1–17.; Isa. 55:5, 10–13 vs. 1–13.; Isa. 56:7, 8 vs.



3–8.; Isa. 59:19 vs. 19–21.; Isa. 60:1, 3–5, 7–9, 19, 20 vs. 1–22.; Isa. 61:1–3, 6, 9, 11 vs. 1–11.; Isa. 62:2, 3, 12 vs. 1–12.; Isa. 65:1, 17–19, 23–25 vs. 1–25.; Isa. 66:12, 19, 23 vs. 7–23.; Jer. 3:17; Jer. 4:2; Jer. 16:19–21; Jer. 31:7–9, 34; Jer. 33:22; Ezek. 17:22–24; Ezek. 34:26, 29–31 vs. 23–31.; Ezek. 47:3–5, 7–9, 12 vs. 1–12.; Dan. 2:35, 44 v. 45.; Dan. 7:13, 14, 18, 22, 27; Dan. 12:4 vs. 1–13.; Joel 2:26–32 Acts 2:16–21. Joel 3:18; Amos 9:11, 12; Mic. 4:3, 4 vs. 1–7.; Mic. 5:2, 4, 7 vs. 2–15.; Hab. 2:14; Zeph. 2:11; Zeph. 3:9 vs. 9–20.; Hag. 2:7–9; Zech. 2:10, 11; Zech. 6:15; Zech. 8:20–23; Zech. 9:1, 10 vs. 9–17.; Zech. 14:8, 9, 16 vs. 8–21.; Mal. 1:11; Matt. 8:11; Matt. 11:11; Matt. 13:16, 17, 31–33; Matt. 16:18; Mark 4:26–29 vs. 30–32.; Luke 7:22 Matt. 11:5. John 8:35; John 10:16; Rom. 1:5–7; 1 Cor. 15:24–28; Eph. 1:10; Heb. 12:23, 24, 27, 28; Rev. 5:10, 13, 14; Rev. 11:15; Rev. 12:10; Rev. 15:4; Rev. 20:4–6; Rev. 21:9–27; Rev. 22:1–5 See **JESUS, KINGDOM OF.** **List of Christian Churches:** Antioch, Acts 13:1. Asia, 1 Cor. 16:19; Rev. 1:4 Babylon, 1 Pet. 5:13. Cenchrrea, Rom. 16:1. Caesarea, Acts 18:22. Cilicia, Acts 15:41. Corinth, 1 Cor. 1:2. Ephesus, Eph. 1:22; Rev. 2:1. Galatia, Gal. 1:2. Galilee, Acts 9:31. Jerusalem, Acts 15:4. Joppa, Acts 9:42. Judaea, Acts 9:31. Laodicea, Rev. 3:14. Pergamos, Rev. 2:12. Philadelphia, Rev. 3:7. Samaria, Acts 9:31. Sardis, Rev. 3:1. Smyrna, Rev. 2:8. Syria, Acts 15:41. Thessalonica, 1 Thess. 1:1. Thyatira, Rev. 2:18. **Unity of:** Psa. 133:1; John 10:16; John 17:11, 21–23; Rom. 12:4, 5; 1 Cor. 10:17; 1 Cor. 12:5, 12, 13, 26, 27 vs. 12–27.; Gal. 3:26–28; Eph. 1:10; Eph. 2:14–19, 21; Eph. 3:6, 15; Eph. 4:4–6, 12, 13, 16, 25; Col. 3:11, 15 See **ECCLESIASTICISM.** **Triumphant:** Gal. 4:26; Heb. 12:22, 23; Rev. 3:12; Rev. 21:3, 10<sup>7</sup>

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

# *The New Testament Church*

**Michael L. Dusing**

An area of Christian theology often minimized and taken for granted is the doctrine of the Church. In part, this is due to the common assumption that some areas of theological study are

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<sup>7</sup> Swanson, J., & Nave, O. (1994). [\*New Nave's Topical Bible\*](#). Logos Research Systems.



more essential to salvation and the Christian life (e.g., the doctrines of Christ and salvation) and others are simply more exciting (e.g., manifestations of the Holy Spirit or the doctrine of last things). The Church, on the other hand, is a subject that many Christians consider themselves familiar with; after all, it has been a regular part of their lives. What more could be gained by an extensive study of something so common and routine in the experience of most believers? The answer, of course, is plenty.

The Scriptures, along with the history of the development and expansion of Christianity, offer a wealth of insight into the nature and purpose of the Church. Acquiring a better theological understanding of the Church is not only a worthy academic exercise, but also essential to a well-rounded and balanced perspective of how theology is to be applied and lived out in everyday life. The Church is God's creation and design; it is His method of providing spiritual nurture for the believer and a community of faith through which the gospel is proclaimed and His will advanced in every generation. Therefore, the doctrine of the Church addresses issues of fundamental importance to one's individual Christian walk and proper understanding of the corporate dimension of Christian life and ministry.

## THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHURCH

### THE CHURCH DEFINED

**Jesus asserted in Matthew 16:18, "I will build my church."** This is the first of more than one hundred New Testament references that employ the primary Greek term for church, *ekklēsia*. The word is compounded from the preposition *ek*, "out," and the verb *kaleo*, "to call." Hence *ekklēsia* originally denoted a group of citizens called out and assembled for a specific purpose. The term is found from the fifth century BC forward in the writings of Herodotus, Xenophon, Plato, and Euripides. This concept of *ekklēsia* was especially prevalent in the capital city of Athens, where the political leaders were called together as a constitutional assembly as often as forty times a year. This more secular usage of the term can also be seen in the New Testament. For example, in Acts 19:32, 41 *ekklēsia* refers to the angry mob of citizens that assembled in Ephesus to protest the effects of Paul's ministry. The majority of New Testament uses of *ekklēsia*, however, have a more sacred application, referring to those whom God has called out of sin into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ, and who have become "fellow citizens with God's people" (Eph. 2:19). The word is always used of people and also identifies their gathering to worship and serve the Lord.

The Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament, also uses *ekklēsia* nearly one hundred times, usually as a translation for the Hebrew term *qahal* ("assembly," "convocation," "congregation"). The Old Testament usage of this term like the New, sometimes refers to a religious assembly (e.g., Num. 16:3; Deut. 9:10) and at other times to a gathering for more secular, even evil, purposes (e.g., Gen. 49:6; Jud. 20:2; 1 Kings 12:3). A Hebrew term with a meaning similar to *qahal* is *'edah* ("congregation," "company," "assemblage," "gathering"). It is significant to the note that *ekklēsia* is frequently used in the Septuagint to render *qahal*, but never *'edah*. Rather, this latter term is most often rendered *sunagōgē* ("synagogue"). For



example, the phrase “community of Israel” (Ex. 12:3) could be translated the “synagogue of Israel” if one were to follow the Septuagint’s rendition (see also Ex. 16:1ff.; Num. 14:1ff.; 20:1ff.).

The Greek term *sunagōgē*, like its frequent Hebrew counterpart *’edah*, has the essential meaning of people assembled together. When hearing the word “synagogue” today, one usually pictures an assembly of Jewish persons gathered to pray and to listen to the reading and exposition of the Old Testament. Such a meaning of the word is also in the New Testament (e.g., Luke 12:11; Acts 13:42). And although early Christians normally avoided this word to describe themselves, James did not (using the term [James 2:2] to refer to believers who met for worship perhaps because most of his teachers were Jewish converts).

Consequently, whether one refers to the common Hebrew terms *qahal* and *’edah* or the Greek words *sunagōgē* and *ekklēsia*, the essential meaning is still the same. The “Church” comprises those who have been called out of the world, out of sin and isolation from God, and through the redemptive work of Christ have been gathered as a community of faith that shares in the blessings and the responsibilities of serving the Lord.

The English word “church” and its related cognate terms in other languages (e.g., the German *kirche* and the Scottish *kirk*) originated from the Greek word *kuriakos*, “belonging to the Lord.” This term is found only twice in the New Testament (1 Cor. 11:20; Rev. 1:10). It was significant in early Christianity, however, in that it became a designation for the place where the Church, or *ekklēsia*, gathered. This place of assembly, regardless of its normal usage or surroundings, was considered “holy,” or belonging to the Lord, because God’s people assembled there to worship and serve Him.

Today the word “church” is used in a variety of ways. It often refers to a building where believers meet (e.g., “we are going to the church”). It can refer to one’s local fellowship or denomination (e.g., “my church teaches baptism by immersion”). In some areas, it can refer to a regional or national religious group (e.g., “the Church of England”). The word is frequently used in reference to all born-again believers, regardless of their geographical or cultural differences. (e.g., “the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ”). Be that as it may, the biblical meaning of “church” refers primarily, not to institutions of structures, but rather to the people who have been reconciled to God through the saving work of Christ and now belong to Him.

## POSSIBILITIES OF ORIGIN

Precisely when the New Testament Church began has been a matter of some debate in theological circles. Some have taken a very broad approach, suggesting the Church has existed since the conception of humanity and includes all persons who have ever exercised faith in God’s promises, starting with Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:15). Others endorse an Old Testament beginning for the Church, specifically with the covenantal relationships of God with His people, beginning with the patriarchs and continuing with the Mosaic period. Many scholars prefer a New Testament origin for the Church, but in this context there are also differences of opinion. For example, some believe the Church was founded when Christ began His public ministry and called His twelve disciples. Other viewpoints abound, including some ultradispensationalists



who think the Church did not truly begin until the ministry and missions trips of the apostle Paul.<sup>7</sup>

The majority of scholars, whether from Pentecostal, evangelical, or liberal backgrounds, believe that the scriptural evidence for the inauguration of the Church favors the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. Some, however, recognize that Christ's death put the New Covenant into effect (Heb. 9:15–16). Therefore they take John 20:21–23 to be the inauguration of the Church as a new covenant body (cf. John 20:29 which shows that the disciples were already believers and thus were already the Church before they were empowered by the baptism in the Holy Spirit).

There are several reasons for the belief that the Church originated, or at least was first publicly recognized, on the Day of Pentecost. Although in the pre-Christian era God certainly had association with a covenant community of righteous believers, there is no clear evidence that the concept of the Church existed in the Old Testament period. When Jesus expressed the first direct statement concerning the *ekklēsia* (Matt. 16:18), He was speaking about something that He would initiate in the future ("I will build" [Gk. *oikodomēsō*] is simple future—not an expression of disposition or determination).

By its very nature as the body of Christ, the Church is integrally dependent on the finished work of Christ on earth (His death, resurrection, and ascension) and the coming of the Holy Spirit (John 16:7; Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 12:13). In connection with this, Millard J. Erickson notes that Luke never uses *ekklēsia* in his Gospel, but employs it twenty-four times in the Book of Acts. This would suggest that Luke did not think of the Church as being present until the period covered in Acts. Following that great day when the Holy Spirit was outpoured upon the gathered believers, the Church began powerfully to propagate the gospel as predicted by the risen Lord in Acts 1:8. From that day forward, the Church has continued to develop and expand throughout the world in the power, and by the direction, of that same Holy Spirit.

## A BRIEF HISTORY

As the Church developed in the centuries following the New Testament Era, its character was altered in many different ways, some far astray from the teachings and patterns of the first-century Church. Many good volumes on the history of Christianity are available that would help one gain a broader and enhanced perspective on this subject. For the purposes of this chapter, several brief observations are in order.

During the Patristic Era (the ancient period of the church fathers and apologists of the faith), the Church experienced both external and internal difficulties. Externally it faced severe persecution by the Roman Empire, especially the first three hundred years. At the same time, within the Church numerous heresies were developing—which in the long run proved to be more calamitous than the persecutions.

The Church, by God's sovereign grace, survived these arduous times and continued to grow, yet not without some changes with negative consequences. In an effort to unite and withstand the onslaught of persecutions and heresies, the Church increasingly rallied around and elevated the authority of its leadership. Especially after political peace and harmony were achieved with



the Roman government in the fourth century, the religious hierarchy escalated. As the authority and control of the clergy (particularly the bishops) increased, the importance and participation of the laity decreased. In this way, the Church became more institutionalized and less dependent on the empowerment and direction of the Holy Spirit. The status of the bishop of Rome and the church under his control grew, so that by the end of the Ancient Era the position of “Pope” and the authority of what was becoming known as the Roman Catholic Church were secure in Western Europe. The Eastern Church, however, broke away and remained under the direction of chief bishops whom they termed “patriarchs.”

In the Middle Ages the Church continued in the direction of formality and institutionalism. The papacy attempted to exercise its authority not only in spiritual matters but in temporal affairs as well. Many popes and bishops sought to “spiritualize” this period of history, in which they envisioned the kingdom of God (or the Roman Catholic Church) spreading its influence and regulation throughout the earth. This created a continuous tension between the secular rulers and the Popes about who had control. Nevertheless, with few exceptions the papacy held supremacy in nearly every area of life.

Certainly, not everyone accepted this increased secularization of the Church and its aspiration to Christianize the world. There were some notable medieval attempts to reform the Church and to return it to a path of true spirituality. Several monastic movements (e.g., the Cluniacs of the tenth century and the Franciscans of the thirteenth century) and even lay movements (e.g., the Albigenses and the Waldensians, both of the twelfth century) made such efforts. Prominent individuals, such as the mystics Bernard of Clairvaux (twelfth century) and Catherine of Siena (fourteenth century), and Catholic clerics, such as John Wycliffe (fourteenth century) and John Hus (late fourteenth, early fifteenth century), sought to rid the Catholic Church of its vice and corruption and return it to the pattern and principles of the New Testament Church. The Church of Rome, however, largely rejected these reform efforts, instead becoming more crystallized in its doctrine and institutionalized in its tradition. Such an attitude made the Protestant Reformation nearly inevitable.

The sixteenth century saw the emergence of great Reformers who led the way in revolutionizing the Church, men such as Martin Luther, Huldreich Zwingli, John Calvin, and John Knox. These men and their followers shared many of the same ideas of earlier Reformers. They saw Christ, not the Pope, as the true Head of the Church; Scripture, not the tradition of the Church, as the true basis of spiritual authority; and faith alone, not works, as essential for salvation. The Renaissance had helped pave the way for the introduction and acceptance of such ideas, ideas once familiar to the Church in the first century but now radical to the Church of the sixteenth. Reformers differed among themselves on many of the specific doctrines and practices of Christianity (e.g., their views on the ordinances and government of the Church, which will be addressed in later sections of this chapter), but they shared a passion for the return to biblical faith and practice.

In the centuries since the Reformation (commonly known as the post-Reformation era), individuals and organizations have taken many and varied directions as they have tried to apply their interpretation of New Testament Christianity. Unfortunately, some have repeated



mistakes of the past, emphasizing the rituals and formalism of the institutional Church to the neglect of the biblical emphasis on salvation by grace through faith and on life in the Spirit.

The rationalism of the eighteenth century helped prepare the stage for many of the liberal and sometimes antsupernatural teachings of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Louis Berkhof aptly states that such movements have led to the “modern liberal conception of the Church as a mere social center, a human institution rather than a planting of God.” From a more positive perspective, however, the post-Reformation Era has also witnessed reactions to these stifling and liberalizing tendencies through movements that have once more yearned for and received a genuine experience with God. The Pietist movement (seventeenth century), the Moravian and Methodist movements (eighteenth century), and the Great Awakenings, Holiness movement, and Pentecostal movement (eighteenth–twentieth centuries) are all examples that the Church founded by Jesus Christ (cf. Matt.16:18) is still alive and well, and shall continue to progress until He comes.

## THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

### BIBLICAL TERMS APPLIED TO THE CHURCH

The Church has previously been defined by examining primary biblical terms, such as *ekklēsia* (a group of citizens assembled together for a specific purpose) and *kuriakos* (a group which belongs to the Lord). The nature of the Church, however, is far too extensive to be encompassed in a few simple definitions. The Bible uses numerous metaphorical descriptions for the Church, each of which portrays a different aspect of what the Church is and what it is called to do. Paul Minear indicates that as many as eighty New Testament terms delineate the meaning and purpose of the Church. An exploration of each of them would make a fascinating study, but for the present chapter several of the more significant designations will be examined.

***People of God.*** The apostle Paul borrowed from the Old Testament description of Israel and applied it to the New Testament Church when he declared, “As God has said: ‘I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people’ ” (2 Cor. 6:16; cf. Lev. 26:12). Throughout the Scriptures, the Church is depicted as God’s people. Just as in the Old Testament God created Israel to be a people for himself, so the New Testament Church is God’s creation, “a people belonging to God” (1 Pet. 2:9–10; cf. Deut. 10:15; Hosea 1:10). From the Church’s beginning and throughout its history, it is clear the Church’s destiny is founded upon the divine initiative and calling of God. As Robert L. Saucy notes, the Church is “a people called forth by God, incorporated into Christ, and indwelt by the Spirit.”

As the people of God, the Church is described by many very meaningful terms. The Church is an “elect” body. This does not mean that God has arbitrarily selected some for salvation and others for eternal condemnation. The people of God are called “elect” in the New Testament because God has “chosen” that the Church should do His work in this age by the Holy Spirit, who is actively at work to sanctify and conform believers to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:28–29).



Over one hundred times in the New Testament, the people of God are referred to as the “saints,” or “holy ones,” (Gk. *hagiois*) of God. This does not imply that those so designated have achieved a superior spiritual status or that their behavior could be depicted as perfect or “saintly.” (The many references to the Church in Corinth as “saints of God” should serve as a sufficient indication of this.) Rather, this again draws attention to the fact that the Church is God’s creation and that by His divine initiative believers are “called to be holy” (1 Cor. 1:2). The people of God are frequently designated as those who are “in Christ,” which suggests that they are the recipients of Christ’s atoning work, and they share corporately in the privileges and responsibilities of being called Christians (Gk. *Christianous*).

The people of God are referred to in other ways. Three are worthy of brief mention: “believers,” “brethren,” and “disciples.” “Believers” is from the Greek term *pistoi*, “the faithful ones.” This term intimates that the people of God have not simply believed, that is, given mental assent at some point in the past to the saving work of Christ, but rather that they live continuously in the attitude of faith, obedient trust, and commitment to their Savior. (This is further highlighted by the fact that *pistoi* is normally found in the present tense in the New Testament, denoting ongoing action.) “Brethren” (Gk. *adelphoi*) is a generic term, referring to both men and women, frequently used by the New Testament writers to express the fact that Christians are called to love not only the Lord, but also one another (1 John 3:16). Such a mutual love and fellowship are inherent among the people of God and help to remind them that regardless of individual callings or offices of ministry, all the brethren have equal standing in the presence of the Lord (Matt. 23:8).

The word “disciples” (Gk. *mathētai*) means “learners” or “pupils.” Being such a student in biblical times meant more than listening to and mentally assimilating information given by a teacher. It also denoted that one would emulate the teacher’s character and conduct. The people of God are indeed called to be such disciples of their Teacher, Christ. As Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching [literally, “if you remain or continue in my word”], you are really my disciples” (John 8:31). Jesus did not falsely present the life of being His disciple as something easy or glamorous (see Luke 14:26–33), but He did indicate that it is no less than essential for those who desire to follow Him. The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer has aptly noted that true Christian discipleship requires a willingness to die to self and to give all to Christ. Such authentic discipleship is possible only through what Bonhoeffer termed “costly grace” as, “Such grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow, and it is *grace* because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life.”

**Body of Christ.** A very meaningful biblical image for the Church is the “body of Christ.” This expression was a favorite of the apostle Paul, who often compared the parts of the human body to the interrelationships and functions of the members of the Church. Paul’s writing emphasizes the true unity that is essential in the Church. For example, “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts.... So it is with Christ” (1 Cor. 12:12). Just as the body of Christ is designed to function effectively as one, so the gifts of the Holy Spirit are given to equip the body by “the same Spirit ... the same Lord ... the same God [who] works all of them in all men ... for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:4–7). Because of this, members of Christ’s body are to exercise great



caution that “there should be no division [Gk. *schisma*] in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other” (1 Cor. 12:25; cf. Rom. 12:5). Christians can have this unity and mutual concern because they are “all baptized by one Spirit into one body” (1 Cor. 12:13). The Holy Spirit’s indwelling each member of the body of Christ allows for the legitimate manifestation of this unity. Gordon D. Fee correctly states, “Our desperate need is for a sovereign work of the Spirit to do among us what all our ‘programmed unity’ cannot.”

While there must be unity within the body of Christ, it is not antithetical to emphasize that there is a necessary diversity if the body of Christ is to function properly. In the same context in which Paul emphasizes unity, he states, “Now the body is not made up of one part, but of many” (1 Cor. 12:14). Referring to the same analogy in a different Epistle, Paul declares, “Each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function” (Rom. 12:4). Fee observes that unity “does not mean uniformity.... there is no such thing as true unity without diversity.”

The significant and beauty of this diversity are stressed throughout 1 Corinthians 12, especially in connection with the spiritual gifts that are so essential for the ministry of the Church (see 1 Cor. 12:7–11, 27–31; cf. Rom. 12:4–8). God has not cast each member of the Church in the same mold, and He does not call all the members to the same ministry or equip them with the same gift. Rather, just as with the human body, God has so composed the Church that it functions most effectively when each part (or member) is efficiently fulfilling the role (or calling) for which it was designed.

In this way, there is “unity in diversity” within the body of Christ. In other words, inherent in this metaphor is the idea of mutuality, of each believer working with and striving for the edification of other believers. For example, this may involve suffering with those in pain or rejoicing with those being honored (1 Cor. 12:26); bearing the burdens of a brother or sister in the Lord (Gal. 6:2) or helping to restore one who has fallen into sin (Gal. 6:1). There are countless other practical ways in which this mutuality is exemplified in Scripture. The main point here is that a member of the body of Christ cannot have an exclusive, individualistic relationship with the Lord—each “individual” is in fact a necessary component of the corporate structure of the Church. As Claude Welch asserts, “There is no purely private Christianity, for to be in Christ is to be in the church, and to be in the church is to be in Christ, and any attempt to separate relation to Christ in faith from membership in the Church is a perversion of the New Testament understanding.”

A final aspect that is integral to the image of the body of Christ is the Body’s relation to its Head, Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:22–23; 5:23). As the Head of the Body, Christ is both the source and the sustenance of life for the Church. As its members are arranged under Christ’s headship and function as He desires, the body of Christ will be nourished and sustained and will grow “as God causes it to grow” (Col. 2:19). The unity, diversity, and mutuality that are indispensable for the body of Christ are attainable as the Church “will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body ... grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Eph. 4:15–16).

**Temple of the Spirit.** Another very meaningful New Testament image for the Church is its depiction as the “temple of the Holy Spirit.” The biblical writers make use of several symbols for



the building components of this Temple, which correspond to the materials necessary for the construction of an earthly structure. For instance, any building needs a solid foundation. Paul clearly indicates that the primary foundation of the Church is the historical person and work of Christ; “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11). Yet in another letter Paul suggests that there is a sense in which the Church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Eph. 2:20). Perhaps this means that these early leaders were uniquely used by the Lord to establish and undergird the temple of the Spirit with the teachings and practices they had learned from Christ, which continue to be communicated to believers today through Scripture.

Another important component of this building imagery, closely associated with the foundation, is the cornerstone. In modern buildings a cornerstone is usually more symbolic than integral, perhaps giving the date of its being laid and the names of key benefactors. In the biblical era, however, the cornerstone was very significant: It was typically larger than the other stones and helped to control the proper design for the rest of the building, bringing symmetry to the remainder of the edifice. Christ is described as the “chief cornerstone” through whom “the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord” (Eph. 2:20–21; cf. 1 Pet. 2:6–7).

Connected to the cornerstone were the normal stones necessary to complete the structure. The apostle Peter depicts believers in this role, describing them as “living stones, [who] are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:5). The term used here by Peter is *lithos*, a common Greek word for stone. However, unlike the more familiar synonyms *petros* (a loose stone or small pebble) and *petra* (a solid rock sufficient to build on), the “living stones” (Gk. *lithoi zōntes*) in this context suggest “worked stones,” that is, those that have been hewn and shaped by the master builder (i.e., Christ) for a proper fitting. In both Ephesians 2 and 1 Peter 2, the verbs which describe the building of this Temple are usually found in the present tense, conveying a sense of continuous action. Perhaps it could be inferred from this that Christians are, as the saying goes, “still under construction.” The purpose, of course, is to emphasize that the sanctifying work of the Spirit is a progressive, ongoing venture to accomplish God’s purposes within the lives of believers. They are being “joined together ... to become a holy temple in the Lord.... in him ... *being built together to become* a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Eph. 2:21–22).

The metaphor of the temple of the Holy Spirit adds further surety that the Church is indwelt by God’s Spirit, whether individually or collectively. For example, Paul queried the Corinthian believers, “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you?... God’s temple is sacred, and you are the temple” (1 Cor. 3:16–17). In this particular passage, Paul is addressing the Church corporately (“you” is plural in the Gk.). In 1 Corinthians 6:19, however, Paul poses a similar question to individual believers (“you” is singular): “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?” In both 1 Corinthians 3 and 6, as well as in a similar passage in 2 Corinthians 6:16ff., the word used by Paul for “temple” is *naos*. Unlike the more general term *hieron*, which refers to the whole temple, including its courts, *naos* signifies the inner sanctuary, the Holy of Holies



where the Lord manifests His presence in a special way. Paul is in effect saying that believers, as the temple of the Holy Spirit, are nothing less than the habitation of God.

The Spirit of God not only conveys power to the Church for service (Acts 1:8), but also by dwelling within He imparts His life to it. Consequently, there is a true sense in which those qualities that exemplify His nature (e.g. the “fruit of the Spirit,” Gal. 5:22–23) are to be found in the Church, evidencing the reality that the Church is “keep[ing] in step with the Spirit” (Gal. 5:25).

*Other Images.* In addition to the somewhat Trinitarian pattern of images of the Church mentioned above (people of God, body of Christ, temple of the Holy Spirit), many other biblical metaphors help to broaden one’s perspective of the nature of the Church. Portrayals of the Church as **the priesthood of believers (1 Pet. 2:5, 9)**, **the Bride of Christ (Eph. 5:23–32)**, **the flock of the Good Shepherd (John 10:1–18)**, and **the branches of the True Vine (John 15:1–8)** are a sampling of the diverse ways in which Scripture represents the makeup and distinct features of the one true Church, composed, as it is, of the redeemed. In different ways, these biblical images illustrates the Church’s identity and purpose, which Jesus expressed so beautifully in His High Priestly Prayer:

**My prayer is ... that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.... May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (John 17:21, 23).**

## THE CHARACTER OF THE CHURCH

In addition to the metaphors describing the nature of the Church, Scripture suggests other concepts by which theologians have described the character of the Church. One common method of doing this is to depict the Church as being both local and universal. There are many New Testament references to the universal Church (e.g., Jesus’ proclamation in Matthew 16:18, “I will build my church”; also Paul’s statement in Eph. 5:25, “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her”). The universal Church incorporates all true believers regardless of geographical, cultural, or denominational differences. They are those who have responded in faith and obedience to Christ and are now “members of Christ” and consequently “members of one another” (see Rom. 12:5).

The phrase “universal Church” is used in some circles interchangeably with phrases such as “ecumenical church” and “catholic church.” Although the simple meaning of the terms “ecumenical” and “catholic” is “universal,” the manner in which these words have been historically used implies substantial differences. For instance, when one today speaks of the “ecumenical” church, one is normally referring to an organization that is composed of several denominations that join together around common beliefs or practices, or both. The term “catholic” has essentially become synonymous with the Roman Catholic Church. While there are certainly true believers within the ranks of these organizations, it would be a mistake to confuse earthly associations as such with the universal body of believers.



Ideally the local church should be a small replica of the Church universal; that is, it should be composed of persons from all backgrounds, racial or ethnic cultures, and different socioeconomic levels who have been born again and share in common the commitment of their lives to the lordship of Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, such spiritual ideals are seldom realized among humans who are somewhat less than glorified. Just as in New Testament times, some local Christian assemblies likely have insincere or even false sheep among the flock. And so in spite of the best intentions, the local church often falls short of the character and nature of the true universal Church.

In a similar fashion, the Church is sometimes perceived as the visible and the invisible Church. This distinction appeared in Christian literature as early as Augustine and was frequently found in the writings of Reformers such as Luther and Calvin. Some opponents of Luther charged that he was in fact suggesting that there were two different Churches, partly because Luther spoke of an invisible *ekklēsiola* within the visible *ekklēsia*. Luther's intention, however, was not to differentiate between two distinct Churches, but to speak of the two aspects of the one church of Jesus Christ. This simply indicates that the Church is invisible because it is essentially spiritual in nature: believers are invisibly united to Christ by the Holy Spirit, the blessings of salvation are not discernible by the natural eye, etc. This invisible Church, however, assumes a visible form in the external organization of the earthly Church. The Church is visibly exhibited through Christian testimony and practical conduct, through the tangible ministry of believers corporately and individually. The visible Church, like the local church, should be a smaller version of the invisible (or universal) Church; yet, as noted previously, such is not always the case. One may profess faith in Christ yet not truly know Him as Savior, and while being associated with the Church as an external institution, one may not really belong to the invisible Church.

The tendency throughout church history has been to swing from one extreme to another. For example, some traditions, such as the Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Anglicans, place great emphasis on the priority of the institutional or visible Church. Others, such as the Quakers and Plymouth Brethren, stressing a more internalized and subjective faith, have minimized and often reproached any type of formal organization and structure, seeking for the true, invisible Church. As Millard Erickson notes, Scripture definitely looks on the individual's spiritual condition and standing in the invisible Church as a priority, but not to the neglect or debasement of the importance of the visible Church organization. He suggests that while there are distinctions between the visible and the invisible Church, it is important to have a "both-and" approach so that one seeks to make the two as identical as possible. "Just as no true believer should be outside the fellowship, so also there should be diligence to assure that only true believers are within."

**It would be impossible to properly understand the true nature and character of the Church (local and universal, visible or invisible) without acknowledging the fact that from its inception, the Church has been empowered and directed by the Holy Spirit.** This is certainly shown in Luke's account in Acts of the Church's beginning and development through its first three decades. The later epistles of the New Testament, as well as the ongoing history of the Church, give added emphasis to the Holy Spirit's vital role in the life of the Church. Just before



His ascension, Jesus declared to His disciples, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). In reference to the imminent coming and enabling ministry of the Spirit, Jesus had earlier told His followers that they would do even greater things than they had seen Him do (John 14:12). This pledge was confirmed following the unique outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost.

The reader of Acts marvels not only at the initial response to the first Spirit-filled gift of prophecy and exhortation uttered by the apostle Peter, when nearly three thousand persons were saved, but also at the continued responsiveness of those who encountered the ministry of a Church that was energized and equipped by the Holy Spirit (see Acts 2:47; 4:4, 29–33; 5:12–16, etc.). In regard to Peter’s message on the Day of Pentecost, one evangelical (but non-Pentecostal) scholar states, “One simply cannot account for the results of Peter’s sermon on the basis of the skill with which it was prepared and delivered. The reason for its success lies in the power of the Holy Spirit.” In a similar fashion, the same scholar states that the continued effectiveness of the early believers in Acts could not be accounted for on the basis of their own abilities and efforts. “They were not unusual persons. The results were a consequence of the ministry of the Holy Spirit.”

The Holy Spirit continued to provide strength and direction for the Church following the New Testament Era. Contrary to popular opinion in some non-Pentecostal camps, the gifts and manifestations of the Spirit did not cease with the Apostolic Era, but continued in the centuries following the New Testament period. As mentioned in a previous section which reviewed the history of the Church, there is little question that as a Church expanded, gained legal status and acceptance, and became increasingly formal and institutionalized, its sense of immediate dependency upon the Spirit’s leading and empowerment began to wane. Various revivalist movements, however, provide historic evidence that the prominence of the Spirit was not totally forgotten or ignored by all.

The modern Church, especially those who consider themselves among the hundreds of millions of Pentecostal and charismatic believers worldwide, must never lose sight of the biblical and theological importance of continued attention and obedience to the sovereign working of the Spirit of God. His actions are manifested not only in unusual exhibitions of miraculous power, but also in more normative and at times almost unnoticed ways of providing direction and assistance (cf. 1 Kings 19:11–12). May the modern Church always remain sensitive and submissive to the Holy Spirit’s direction and gentle guidance. Only then can contemporary Christianity claim affinity with the New Testament Church.

Another means of understanding the character of the New Testament **Church is to examine its relation to the kingdom of God** (Gk. *basileia tou theou*). The Kingdom was a major teaching of Jesus during His earthly ministry. In fact, while the Gospels relate only three specific mentions of the church, *ekklēsia* (all in statements of Jesus, recorded in Matt. 16 and 18), they are replete with emphasis on the Kingdom.

The term *basileia*, “kingdom,” is usually defined as the rule or realm of God, the universal sphere of His influence. Following this understanding, some differentiate between the Kingdom and the Church. They see the Kingdom as including all unfallen heavenly creatures (angels) and



the redeemed of humanity (before and after the time of Christ). In contrast, the Church consists more specifically of those humans who have been regenerated by the atoning work of Christ. Those who accept this distinction also believe the kingdom of God transcends time and is concurrent with the universe, whereas the Church has a definite beginning point and will have a definite culminating point, at the second advent of Christ. Therefore, from this perspective the Kingdom comprises the redeemed of all ages (Old Testament saints and New Testament saints), and the Church comprises those who have been redeemed since the finished work of Christ (His crucifixion and resurrection). Following this reasoning, one may be a member of the kingdom of God without being a member of the Church (e.g., the patriarchs, Moses, David), but one who is a member of the Church is simultaneously a member of the Kingdom. As more individuals are converted to Christ and become members of His church, they are brought into the Kingdom and it is enlarged.

Others interpret the distinction between the Kingdom and the Church differently. George E. Ladd saw the Kingdom as the reign of God, but by contrast felt the Church to be the realm of God, those who are under God's rule. Similar to those who differentiate between the Kingdom and the Church, Ladd felt the two should not be equated. Rather, the Kingdom creates the Church and the Church bears witness to the Kingdom. Further, the Church is the instrument and custodian of the Kingdom, being the form that the Kingdom or reign of God takes on earth as a concrete manifestation among humanity of God's sovereign rule.

Others distinguish between the kingdom of God and the Church in that they believe the Kingdom is primarily an eschatological concept and the Church has a more temporal and present identity. Louis Berkhof sees the primary scriptural idea of the Kingdom as the rule of God "acknowledged in the hearts of sinners by the powerful regenerating influence of the Holy Spirit." This rule is now realized on earth in principle ("the present realization of it is spiritual and invisible"), but will not be fully achieved until Christ's visible return. In other words, Berkhof sees an "already-not yet" aspect at work in the relation of the Kingdom and the Church. For instance, Jesus emphasized the present reality and universal character of the Kingdom, which was realized in a new way through His own ministry. Yet He also held out a future hope of the Kingdom which would come in glory. In this regard, Berkhof is not far from the previously stated positions, in that he describes the Kingdom in broader terms than the Church. In his words, the Kingdom "aims at nothing less than the complete control of all manifestations of life. It represents the dominion of God in every sphere of human endeavor."

## THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH

Chapter 17 deals with the mission of the Church. However, before leaving this section on the nature of the Church a few observations are in order concerning the purpose for which the Church was called into being. **It was not the Lord's intention for the Church to simply exist as an end in itself, to become, for example, simply another social unit formed of like-minded members. Rather, the Church is a community created by Christ for the world. Christ gave himself for the Church and then empowered it with the gift of the Holy Spirit so that it could fulfill God's plan and purpose. Many possible items could be included in a discussion of the**



**Church's mission. However, this brief discussion will examine four: evangelization, worship, edification, and social responsibility.**

Central to Jesus' last instructions to His disciples before His ascension was the command (not suggestion) to evangelize the world and make new disciples (Matt. 28:19; Acts 1:8). Christ did not abandon these evangelists to their own abilities or techniques. He commissioned them to go under His authority (Matt. 28:18) and in the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8). The Spirit would do the convicting of sin (John 16:8–11); the disciples were to proclaim the gospel. The task of evangelization is still an imperative part of the Church's mission: The Church is called to be an evangelizing community. This command has no restrictions or boundaries, geographically, racially, or socially. Erickson declares, "[L]ocal evangelism, church extension or church planting, and world missions are all the same thing. The only difference lies in the length of the radius." Modern believers should not fail to remember that while they are the instruments of proclaiming the gospel, it is still the Lord of the harvest who "brings forth the increase." Believers are not accountable for their "success rate" (according to the world's standards), but for their commitment and faithfulness in service.

The Church is also called to be a worshiping community. The term "worship" is derived from an old English word that means "worth-ship," denoting the worthiness of the one who receives special honor in accordance with that worth. Genuine worship is characterized by the Church's focusing its attention on the Lord, and not on itself.<sup>32</sup> In turn, as God alone is worshiped, believers invariably are blessed and spiritually strengthened. Worship need not take place only in a regularly scheduled church service. In fact, every aspect of one's life as a believer should be characterized by the desire to exalt and glorify the Lord. This seems to be Paul's point in saying, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31).

**A third purpose of the Church is to be an edifying community.** In evangelization the Church focuses on the world, in worship the Church focuses on God, and in edification the Church (correctly) focuses on itself. Believers are repeatedly admonished in Scripture to build up one another into a mature community of believers (e.g., Eph. 4:12–16). Edification can be accomplished in many practical ways: For example, teaching and instructing others in the ways of God certainly enrich the household of faith (Matt. 28:20; Eph. 4:11–12). Administering spiritual correction in an attitude of love is essential if one desires to help a wayward brother or sister continue on the path of faith (Eph. 4:15; Gal. 6:1). Sharing with those in need (2 Cor. 9), bearing one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2), providing opportunities for wholesome Christian fellowship and social interaction are all meaningful ways of edifying the body of Christ.

The Church is also called to be a community with social concern and responsibility. Unfortunately this calling is minimized or neglected among many evangelicals and Pentecostals. Many sincere believers are perhaps afraid of becoming liberal or going in the direction of the so-called social gospel if they become involved in socially oriented ministries. Taken to an unhealthy extreme, and overlooking eternal verities for the sake of temporal relief, this could become true. This neglect of social concern, however, overlooks a vast number of scriptural admonitions for God's people to fulfill such obligations. Jesus' ministry was characterized by a loving compassion for the suffering and destitute individuals of this world (Matt. 25:31–46; Luke 10:25–37). This same concern is shown both in the prophetic writings of the Old



Testament (Isa. 1:15–17; Micah 6:8) and in the epistles of the New Testament (James 1:27; 1 John 3:17–18). Expressing the love of Christ in a tangible way can be a vital means of the Church fulfilling its God-given mission. As with all aspects of the Church’s mission, or purpose, it is essential that one’s motives and methods be directed to doing all for the glory of God.

## THE FELLOWSHIP OF BELIEVERS

### INDIVIDUALS IN COMMUNITY

The Holy Spirit makes living the Christian life possible. Everything he does for us after our conversion is geared to that end and designed for that purpose. There are a few people who never get the opportunity to lead a Christian life because they die almost immediately after their conversion, but this is rare and cannot be regarded as the norm. Most of us remain on earth for some time after we have become believers, and we are therefore obliged to work out our salvation in a way that honors God in our own lives and in our witness to other people.

As Christians, we are called to do this both as individuals and in fellowship with others who share our faith. These two things go together, and rather like the chicken and the egg, it is hard to say which of them comes first. Logically speaking, conversion to Christ comes before fellowship with others because we cannot enjoy such fellowship if we are not converted. On the other hand, most people come to faith because they have been in contact with such a fellowship and heard the gospel preached by someone who already belongs to the Christian community. Converted individuals form a community, but that community then attracts other individuals and leads them to faith. The key to understanding the Christian life is not to give priority to the one over the other but to see individuals and communities interacting in a mutual relationship from which each draws strength and to which each contributes.

The fellowship of believers into which we are called is known as the church, a word with many layers of meaning. When they hear the word “church,” most ordinary people think first of a building, and then perhaps of the organization that owns it, but they may never realize that those things are only the outward and visible manifestations of a spiritual and invisible reality. Buildings have their importance and cannot be neglected or ignored, but they point to something beyond themselves that the eye of the beholder cannot immediately see. The invisible church expresses itself in visible forms, and the buildings and organizations we call “churches” are evidence of that. To belong to the invisible church without also belonging to the visible one is like trying to be a spirit without a body. That may be imaginable in theory, but it is not practically possible in this world. Whether we like it or not, we are both spirit and body, and so is the church.

But just as our bodies are temporary and wasting away in their present form, so too, the visible church is a temporal thing that is subject to the law of decay and death. There is no visible church that can claim to be a perfect or complete manifestation of the invisible one, and every human organization will suffer from the limitations imposed on all human beings. It is important to understand this because many people find it difficult to belong to a visible church which they know is imperfect. They see that it is full of hypocrites, riven by political divisions, and exposed



to scandals of various kinds. For some, the existence of different denominations, which often seem to be in competition with one another, makes a mockery of the claim that we are all one in Christ. Surely it is much simpler just to follow him and put his teaching into practice, without getting wrapped up in such complications.

To this, various answers can be given. At one end of the spectrum are those who say that, just as there is only one invisible church, so there is only one visible church that represents it, even if it does so imperfectly. According to this way of thinking, other groups may claim the status of churches, but they are defective in one way or another. They may teach false doctrine, or be incapable of exercising discipline among their members. They may be too localized, belonging essentially to one geographical area or ethnic group, and not embracing the whole of mankind on an equal footing. Whatever the reason, they are inadequate to represent the one true, universal church and so their claim to be churches in the true sense of the word must be rejected, even if genuine Christians can be found in their ranks.

This is the position taken by the Roman Catholic Church, by the various Eastern Orthodox churches, and also by some Protestant churches, particularly those who hold to a “restorationist” view of the church. Restorationists say that it is possible to ignore the corruptions of the past two millennia, go back to the New Testament, and form a church based exclusively on what it says. If that is done, they claim, the visible church will be as perfect as it can be because the accretions of later times, which have no divine authority, will be excluded. In practice, of course, pure restorationism is not possible, and even the strictest of these churches have to compromise with modernity to some extent—just as the Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox are usually more flexible in practice than their official doctrine would suggest.

Unlike the restorationists, however, the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches do not reject post-biblical traditions. On the contrary, they justify them by saying that the Holy Spirit has continued to speak to the church and in the course of time has led it to adopt certain beliefs and practices which are consonant with the historical development of Christian teaching. Such beliefs and practices are not meant to contradict what the Bible says but to clarify and supplement it when necessary. The great creeds of the early church are a prime example of this because they proclaim the truth of the Scriptures in language adapted to the needs of later times. In the course of history, certain doctrines and devotional practices have taken shape to deal with the challenges posed by specific circumstances or to help Christians grow deeper in their faith. At any given time, there will be a number of such things that are less emphasized or less official than others, and these are optional extras as far as the ordinary believer is concerned. But if the church is led to define them more precisely and make them official, there can be no further opting out—the decision taken by the church must be accepted by everyone. A good example of this is the Roman Catholic doctrine of papal infallibility. Before it was proclaimed in 1870, there were many people who either did not believe it or who would have expressed it in much looser terms, but now that it has become an article of faith, it must be believed by everyone who wants to belong to the Roman Catholic Church.

One of the biggest problems with this view of the visible church is its inherent inflexibility. If what is seen reflects what is unseen, and if that necessarily produces a single, united set of beliefs and practices, it is hard to see how genuine diversity can be accommodated within the visible



structures. There have been times in the past when the need felt for visible unity has been taken to extremes, as when the Roman Catholic Church required its services to be conducted exclusively in Latin, the supposedly universal language. The Eastern Orthodox churches have usually been more flexible on the matter of language, but the forms of their liturgy have not changed in centuries and are easily recognizable all over the world. So rigid has this become, that even a modest reform of the calendar (to bring it into line with the reform made by the papacy in 1582, which is now universally accepted in the secular sphere) has been hotly contested and has led to a breach of the church's unity in spite of the essentially trivial and nontheological nature of the reform. It has even been claimed by some extremists that those Orthodox who have accepted calendar reform are out of line with the saints in heaven, who presumably are using the old Roman calendar, which was adopted by Julius Caesar in 46 B.C. and was in use in the time of Jesus.

Most Protestants take a view of the visible church different from the one just described. They agree that there is only one spiritual, invisible church, but they do not accept that this is manifested in only one visible form. Even in the New Testament, the different cities and provinces of the Roman empire had autonomous local churches which submitted to apostolic authority but not to each other. The churches of Achaia (in southern Greece) sent money to the church at Jerusalem in order to help with famine relief there, but there is no sign that either one sought to influence or discipline the other in any way. This is particularly significant because it is well known that the Jerusalem church was stricter in its observance of Jewish customs than most of the Gentile churches were, a fact that had caused tensions in the not too distant past.<sup>4</sup> But as long as these differences did not touch on an essential point of faith, they were accommodated within the overall fellowship of the wider church and did not act as a barrier that was destructive to Christian unity.

It is this model that most Protestants adopt, though they disagree about what constitutes a "local" church. For some, this means the individual congregation, which claims the freedom to order itself and to associate with other like-minded believers as it sees fit. For others, "local" means national or regional. Their churches are structured along customary or secular territorial lines, within which a common order is adopted, usually by the vote of a representative council or synod. Individual congregations must then conform to this common order or be disciplined. This discipline can take many forms and is often fairly lax, with provision being made for dissenters if they constitute a significant minority. In recent times, this has happened when a church has revised its forms of worship only to discover that many of its members remain attached to what was already in use. In such situations it is usual to allow them to continue to use the older forms, at least for a period of time, until the transition to the new order is complete. Nevertheless, the decision to allow exceptions of this kind is a commonly agreed one and operates within the guidelines accepted by the church as a whole, so that its visible unity is preserved. The underlying principle here is the desirability of distinguishing what is essential from what is not, and allowing tradition and personal preferences to have their place when nothing essential is at stake.

For Protestants, learning to distinguish between what is essential and what is not is vitally important if the unity of the church is to be preserved and the truth of the gospel maintained. If nonessentials are allowed to become matters of debate that divide the church, the likelihood is



that people will focus on them rather than on the far more important matters directly connected to the gospel. When the Roman Catholic Church made it optional to eat fish on Fridays (a discipline that had been imposed until the 1960s), many ordinary church members thought their whole faith had been changed. Some resisted this overreaction, of course, but many others proceeded to reject such things as the doctrine of the Trinity, on the ground that it too was just an outdated church ordinance that could safely be discarded along with the previously compulsory fish. Protestant churches tend not to have disciplinary rules like that, but many Protestants can be just as attached to forms of worship or versions of the Bible that have no particular authority, and feel that if they are abandoned something essential to their faith has been lost.

The history of Protestant denominationalism shows how problematic this can be. A comparison of the different confessions of faith that Protestant churches have adopted tends to show that the first half is much the same in all of them. This is the part that deals with God, the Bible, and the way of salvation. It is in the second half, which usually deals with church government, ritual practices, ministry, church-state relations, and social issues such as Sunday observance and pacifism, that significant differences appear. A look at the way denominations identify themselves will confirm this. Episcopalians are people who have bishops, Presbyterians are those who have synodical government, Congregationalists champion local autonomy, Baptists practice only believer's baptism, and so on. None of these things is central to the message of the gospel, but feelings about them have been strong enough to divide the church when compromise has been unattainable.

Unfortunately, the tendency to downplay the more essential matters is such that today there are people in all these denominations who deny or compromise the basic doctrines of the faith without being disciplined, but woe betide anyone who transgresses one of the so-called "denominational distinctives." An Episcopalian who accepted the validity of Presbyterian ordination, for example, or a Baptist who baptized an infant would probably be thrown out of his church, but the same church might happily let them preach unitarianism and get away with it! When this happens, priorities have been inverted, and the church must be called back to the distinction between the fundamentals, on which there must be unity, and the nonessentials, where each person can be allowed to make up his own mind and act accordingly.

Reflection on this distinction between what is central and what is secondary or even peripheral will soon show that one of the reasons why the distinction is so hard to maintain is that the secondary things tend to be material whereas the primary ones are more likely to be spiritual and therefore, to many minds, purely intellectual and theoretical. This is why preaching heresy from the pulpit is likely to attract less attention than reordering the furniture, introducing a new hymnbook, or altering the worship style. Those are things that ordinary people can relate to, and so trouble is likely to result from that kind of change. Nothing demonstrates more clearly than this that we are earthly beings, attached to what our physical senses tell us. In this respect, traditionalists and innovators may be equally at fault because both tend to concentrate on what is superficial. They either ignore what really matters or assume that by changing appearances the spiritual message will come across more clearly. The many reforms of liturgy and worship that have been introduced in the mainline churches since about 1960 have two things in common.



The first is that they were supposed to bring people back to church by making Christianity more “relevant” to the upcoming generation. The second is that they have all failed in their aim, and the churches that have adopted them are more divided and weaker now than they have ever been.

Given this situation, the need to stress the underlying spiritual unity of the church is more pressing today than ever before. The church of God is first and foremost a creation of the Holy Spirit, as we can see from the experience of Pentecost, when the preaching of Peter and the other apostles led to the formation of the first Christian community. That community came into existence through the proclamation of the Word of God and in direct response to it. There was nothing else that bound its members together, since as the text tells us, they came from every part of the known world and did not even speak the same language. Until the apostles got them organized, there was no church for them to belong to. The First Christian Church of Jerusalem (or if you prefer, the Cathedral Church of St. Peter and the Apostles!) never existed as such. What did exist was a community gathered by the preaching of the gospel, and that gospel came straight out of the pages of Holy Scripture.

What happened on the day of Pentecost became the pattern in the early church, as the Acts of the Apostles tells us. There we find a developing ministry of preaching which took the erstwhile disciples of Jesus from Jerusalem to all Judea, then to Samaria, and ultimately to the ends of the earth, as Jesus had told them it would. For this to be done with the maximum degree of efficiency, it was desirable to set aside certain people, who clearly had the gift of preaching, and commission them to do it on a full-time basis. Nevertheless, the officially appointed preachers did not monopolize the ministry. The degree to which the apostles were prepared to accept anyone as a preacher, provided the message itself was sound, is well illustrated by Paul, who wrote,

Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here [in prison] for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

It would be hard to find a better endorsement of the primacy of the message over the preacher. The spiritual state and motivation of the preacher was less important to Paul than the content of what he had to say, and on that there could be no doubt or compromise. The gospel message has always been public, and there is no room for reasonable doubt about what it is. But that has not stopped some people from trying to twist it to their own predilections, and when that happens, those who know the truth are forced to react. Paul had this happen to him in Galatia. After preaching to the churches there and winning many to Christ, he was followed by others who tried to tell the Galatian Christians that the message they had heard was defective. To be a real Christian, they claimed, a person must first of all become a Jew, because the message of Jesus did not abolish the law of Moses. When Paul discovered this, he was quick to react:



There are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.

Once again, we see that the credentials of the preacher are of secondary importance. It is the message that counts because that is what wins people to Christ and constitutes the church. It is for this reason that purity of doctrine has always been of fundamental concern. It is perfectly possible to be an eloquent orator and yet preach a false message, as many famous dictators have demonstrated. People like that are especially dangerous because they sound so convinced of what they are saying and come across so persuasively. Over the years the church has known many people of that kind, who have gained a following, thanks to the power of their voice and personality. They may be very successful for a time, but after they are exposed or fade from the scene, their followers melt away and the church is back to where it was before, perhaps with a few extra scars to show what it has been through.

The Galatian Christians were fortunate in that they had Paul to put them straight, but we are better off still because we have the entire New Testament. Anyone can buy a copy and read what it says. It is perfectly possible to test what preachers say against the Bible itself, and this is what we are called to do as believers. The intelligent Christian is one who is learned in the Word of God and recognizes it when he hears it—and who also knows when he does not hear it. But some people may ask, if reading the Bible is enough to teach us the truth, do we really need the ministry of preachers, especially nowadays when there are so many other means of mass communication readily available to us?

To those who are spiritual and who understand what it is saying, the Bible is an essential guide to the Christian life and speaks very powerfully to rebuke us when we stray from the right pathway. But to those who have no such understanding, the Bible is a closed book. It is sometimes said that the Bible can be read as great literature, but hardly anyone actually does so. Outside the sphere of the church or the synagogue, its contents are little known. Those unbelievers who know it well have almost always had a Christian education, but with the secularization of Western culture, that can no longer be taken for granted. At the other end of the spectrum, there are some people who have devoted their lives to studying the Bible in an academic way but who have no sympathy with its teaching and no real understanding of what it is saying. In that respect, the Bible, like any other aspect of the visible church, can be read and studied without any appreciation of the spiritual dimension to which it bears witness.

This is where preachers come in. They are men sent by God to bring his Word alive in the world. Their purpose is not merely to teach what the Bible says, though that is important, but to challenge their hearers to receive that teaching in their hearts. A sermon is not a lecture but a plea to us to hear and submit to the authority of the Word of God. The problem with ancient Israel was not that it had not heard that Word but that it had not submitted to it in humble obedience. Unfortunately, what was true of them is also true of many people today because true preachers (as opposed to lecturers and pulpit entertainers) are few and their message is neglected. The true preacher is a man filled with the Spirit of God, who can bring his Word alive



in that Spirit. As the fire in him spreads to those who hear him, the dry wood is set alight, and men and women come to know the power of the Lord Jesus Christ in their lives.

When that happens, the conversion of individuals leads to the creation of the new community that we call the church. Fire can exist on its own, but only for a time because eventually it will grow cold and be extinguished. Individual sparks need to find the full body of the blaze to which they can contribute and from which they will draw new life. That fire and that life can be found in the visible institutions we call “the church,” but the two things are not identical. When we are alive in the Spirit, we live in the visible church but we see beyond it, knowing that our true home, and indeed the true church of God, is the spiritual body, which the Spirit’s heavenly fire brings to life in the world.

Before we move on to consider the way in which the different branches of the visible church see themselves and each other, something needs to be said about the eternal dimension in which the invisible church can also be found. The visible community of God’s people exists only in time and space, but there is a whole body of saints in heaven who are also members of the church, even though we no longer see them and often do not know who they are. They constitute what is known as the “church triumphant,” as opposed to those of us who are still engaged in spiritual warfare here below, who constitute the “church militant.” There is evidence in Scripture to suggest that the church triumphant prays for us in our struggles here below, but this is too vague for us to be able to draw any conclusions from it about our relationship with its members. There is certainly no evidence that we can pray to the saints in heaven and ask them to intercede for us; we have direct access to God the Father and do not need to go through his servants in order to speak to him. Even if communication with those who have gone before is theoretically possible, there is no evidence that it occurred in New Testament times, and attempts to contact them should be avoided. The saints in heaven are at rest, and they should be allowed to remain that way.

## THE OLD TESTAMENT PEOPLE OF GOD

The origins of the church reach back into the distant past, to the time when God called Abraham to leave his father and mother and to go to a distant country, where he would settle and become the ancestor of a great nation. Abraham believed what God said, and in spite of many hurdles and setbacks, he did indeed become the founder of a new people, known to us as Israel, the name God gave to Abraham’s grandson Jacob. It is a fundamental Christian belief that God’s love has been poured out on the world in and through Israel, and no one can come to know God or experience his love as long as he remains a stranger to that nation. Every child of God is a descendant of Abraham, sharing his faith and entering into the same relationship that Abraham had with his Creator. For many centuries, that relationship was essentially confined to Abraham’s physical descendants. Not all of them wanted it, and many were cut off from their inheritance because of their rejection and disobedience. On the other hand, there were a few who came to share Abraham’s faith even though they were not physically descended from him, and they were subsequently integrated into his people along with his blood descendants. The most famous of



these was Ruth the Moabitess, who became an ancestor of King David and, through him, of Jesus.<sup>13</sup> There were also isolated cases of individuals such as Naaman, who professed belief in the God of Israel but did not join the nation. Naaman was even excused for having to participate in pagan worship because of his high position in the Syrian kingdom, though this was unusual. Both the large numbers of Israelites who turned away from God and the small numbers of foreigners who submitted to him were exceptions in a world where tribal and national allegiances determined religious beliefs most of the time. Renegade Israelites rapidly disappeared into the surrounding pagan societies, while believing foreigners were too few in number to constitute a distinct group.

The Old Testament people of God were a nation among the nations, and what we know about them reflects that. Their laws and their history are faithfully recorded for us, sometimes in great detail. From those records we learn that Israel was expected to demonstrate its character as God's chosen people in every aspect of its social life, and the great principles of justice that the law enshrines remain valid for believers today. But a detailed application of the ancient law is seldom if ever possible now because circumstances have changed beyond recognition. A good example of this is the law of jubilee, according to which all debts were to be canceled every fifty years. The purpose of this law was to ensure that indebtedness did not become an insoluble problem, weighing the nation down and leading to a situation in which the poor would find themselves in semi-permanent slavery. Whether the law of jubilee was ever applied is doubtful, but the principle is a good one and is maintained today by various kinds of debt-relief schemes that try to do much the same thing. In other words, the principle has survived, even if the precise details are no longer applicable.

Maintaining this distinction is important in guiding our interpretation of the Old Testament. The Christian church is not a state in the way that ancient Israel was, and we cannot simply adopt laws originally intended for civil government back then if they make little or no sense in modern conditions. We also have to remember that no modern state is the embodiment of God's people on earth, and, although there may be some benefit in following particular biblical precepts, governments today are not under any divine obligation to do so. This has to be said because in the past, Christians have sometimes tried to justify things like slavery on the basis of Old Testament texts. The argument they used was that the institution existed in ancient Israel and so it was permissible in a Christian society as well, even though slavery was not encouraged in Israel and the economic and social circumstances that had made it hard to eliminate in ancient times no longer applied.

## THE NEW TESTAMENT PEOPLE OF GOD

When God fulfilled his promise to Abraham and came to earth himself in the person of the Son, Jesus Christ, Israel's relationship to him changed forever. True descent from Abraham was thenceforth to be defined as a spiritual inheritance which could be enjoyed by anyone who shared his faith. The physical descendants of Israel, who thought of themselves as a race apart, were told that they had no grounds for thinking they had a special relationship with God on the



basis of their human ancestry. When the Son of God came to earth, many of those who were identified as Jews in human terms refused to accept their promised Messiah, but at the same time many non-Jews—far more, in fact—who had previously been excluded or untouched by the grace of God came to enjoy a saving faith in him. The new community these people formed is what we call “the church.” It includes those faithful believers who lived before the coming of Christ, whether or not they were Israelites, but it is not a “nation” in the way that Israel was.<sup>17</sup> The essential difference between Israel and the church is that what was external in the former has now been internalized. The temple that once stood in Jerusalem as the focus of worship and the sign of God’s presence has disappeared and has been replaced by the body of Christ, which was once present on earth in material form but is now spiritually manifested in each and every believer. Christians do not constitute an ethnic community, but they are a particular people, chosen from among the nations and separated out as a special society that transcends and relativizes human barriers of every kind.<sup>19</sup>

The Christian church as we know it began fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus and ten days after his ascension into heaven, when he filled his expectant disciples with the Holy Spirit that he had promised to send after his departure. From then on, the people of God were distinguished by the indwelling presence of that Holy Spirit, who taught them the meaning of God’s love as revealed in Christ.<sup>21</sup> The relationship with God that had been held out to Israel as the sign and seal of that love now became a reality in their lives. No longer was it necessary to struggle to attain to a standard acceptable to God in order to enjoy his favor. Instead, it was clearly recognized that no one could ever satisfy God’s requirements by his own efforts—and that it was pointless to make the attempt, because Jesus Christ had already done what was necessary on our behalf. Not only had he kept the law of God in his own life, but he had also taken our sins and shortcomings on himself and died in order to atone for them. Furthermore, he had defeated the forces of evil ranged against us, and although we must continue to struggle against them, they can no longer control our lives.

The church is primarily the community of those who have come to know the love of God as their Savior and Lord, but it has always also included unbelievers, who have been attracted to it for some reason but have never truly entered into the relationship of faith that characterizes the true child of God. Why this should be so is a mystery, but whatever the explanation, we can be sure that it is part of God’s way of showing his love to his creation and of glorifying himself. Perhaps he wants to show how wonderful the blessing given to the church is by demonstrating the power it has to attract even unbelievers. Maybe he wants to keep us humble by reminding us that belonging to an outward body of people is no guarantee of our spiritual state before him. There may be other explanations for it that are unknown to us. Whatever the case, the visible church has never been “pure” because it never has consisted exclusively of believers. In the words of Jesus himself, “The wheat and tares grow together until the harvest,” and attempting to root out the latter runs the risk of damaging the former in the process. In the end, it is not through the church that we come to God, but through God that we come to the church and through him that we recognize who our spiritual brothers and sisters are.



## THE CHURCH AND THE CHURCHES

The relationship between the church and the churches is essentially that between the invisible and the visible people of God. All who are born of the Spirit are members of the church, grafted into the olive tree as members of the body of Christ. No external rite, official ceremony, or formal document can produce that effect, nor is it possible for any ecclesiastical authority to detract from it. If the Holy Spirit is dwelling in our hearts, then no power on earth can separate us from the love of God in Christ. We can and do have fellowship with all who belong to that church, whatever branch of the visible institution they may belong to. Conversely, we do not (and cannot) have fellowship with those who are not born again by the Holy Spirit, even if we both belong to the same denomination. We do not know what the boundaries of the invisible church are, and it is not our business to define them. Spiritual fellowship comes naturally to those who live in the Spirit, as people from all over the world can testify from their personal experience. But when we encounter those who do not know the Lord, no amount of common tradition or culture can bridge the abyss between us.

It is when we talk about the visible church that we use the word in the plural, especially when we are talking about individual congregations or different denominations. The New Testament gives us plenty of evidence for the first of these because there were congregations of believers in all the major cities of the Roman world, but it knows nothing of denominations. In those days, and for at least four centuries afterwards, there was really only one visible church, even though there were always sectarian offshoots or heretical groups that competed with the mainline body. It was only in the fifth century that this church began to break up into different groups which exist to this day and are generally recognized as being “churches” in the modern, denominational sense.

The event that sparked the first of these lasting divisions was the Council of Chalcedon in 451, where the incarnate Christ was defined as being one divine person in two natures. The Antiochene party, which followed the teaching of Nestorius (381?–451?), rejected this formulation because it felt that it obscured the completeness of Christ’s humanity. These so-called Nestorians were forced to leave the Roman empire in 484 and go to Persia, where they were welcomed and allowed to settle. For many centuries, they evangelized Central Asia and established a number of flourishing churches there, but persecution and isolation gradually weakened them. Today there is only a small handful of them left, living mostly in northern Iraq and as exiles in the United States. Among themselves, they claim to be the only true church, but they are too small and obscure for this claim to be taken seriously.

The other group that rejected Chalcedon did so for the exact opposite reason. These were the followers of Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444), who insisted that the incarnate Christ had only one nature after his incarnation, a nature in which his humanity had effectively been absorbed into his divinity. We call them Monophysites because of their “one nature” Christology, and they became the main church in Egypt, Syria, and Armenia. Later on, they went to Ethiopia and also to South India, where they remain an important presence. Like the Nestorians, the Monophysites also claim to be the one true church, but again, their historical circumstances are such that it is hard to accept this.



The next major division in the Christian world occurred between the churches of what had been the Western and Eastern Roman empire. That empire had been divided for the first time in 313, shortly before Christianity became a legal religion (in 380), but the division was made permanent in 395, and the two sides moved further apart. The Western empire collapsed in 476 and was replaced by a number of Germanic kingdoms, most of which were Arian or pagan. In those circumstances, the Christian population came to see itself as essentially Roman and universal, or “catholic,” because the church covered the area that had previously been part of the empire. Rome was its natural capital, and that city gradually assumed greater importance as time went on. Latin was its official language, not least because the Germanic tribes had no written languages of their own. Latin thus quickly established itself as the universal standard for worship and theology. In the East, however, the empire survived until 1453 and never developed the same cultural homogeneity. Greek was its main language, but not the only one, and the church was quite happy to use Georgian, Armenian, Syriac, and Coptic as well. Later on, Slavonic was added to this list as missionaries moved north to convert the Slavs to the Eastern form of Christianity.

Like the Nestorians and the Monophysites, both the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox churches claim to be the one true church, but as they are much larger and more influential, their claims have to be taken more seriously. The Eastern Orthodox churches do not have a single head or the kind of unity that typifies Rome. They are loosely grouped around the patriarch of Constantinople (Istanbul) and are held together by a common doctrine and liturgy, which compensates for the vast differences of language and culture that otherwise distinguish them from one another. Outsiders sometimes find it hard to believe that Greeks and Russians belong to the same church, but they may be even more surprised to discover that many Greeks and Russians share the same feeling.

The main problems with the Eastern Orthodox claim to be the one true church are that they are so obviously the products of a fractured European history that this claim makes little sense. How can Romanians and Bulgarians be real Christians but not Portuguese or Swedes? Of course there are doctrinal differences between Eastern and Western Christians, but the degree to which these have been bound up with politics is such that it seems audacious (to put it mildly) to make such a claim nowadays. Apologists for Orthodoxy like to insist that their church has retained the purity of the ancient one and that their essentially apophatic theology is the right way to approach God. Unfortunately for them, this ignores the rather obvious fact that the modern Orthodox churches bear little resemblance to anything found in the New Testament, despite a certain historical and geographical continuity with it. It also ignores the fact that apophatic theology is by definition one-sided in its approach, that it did not dominate the ancient Greek world in the way that its devotees like to claim, and that from the sixteenth century onwards, Orthodoxy has frequently borrowed Western models and adapted them to suit its own purposes.

In recent times the Eastern Orthodox churches have had to come to terms with a wider world, but they have not done this very successfully and they continue to struggle with even the most basic elements of modern life. Those in the West who have embraced this form of Christianity have often done so precisely because they reject modernity and are attracted by a theology and devotional life that seems to be able to resist it. But as a claimant for the role of universal church, Eastern Orthodoxy remains too exotic for most people who are not part of it, and the chance that



it will ever reconcile the rest of the Christian world to itself are no greater than the chance that the rest of the world will adopt the Greek or Russian alphabet instead of the Latin one that most of us use.

That leaves the Roman Catholic Church, which is by far the largest and most important of all those who claim the title of “universal church.” When nominal or cultural Christianity is taken into account, about a third of the world’s population is “Christian” and two-thirds of these Christians are Roman Catholics. Although it clearly has its roots in the western Mediterranean, the Roman church has now spread so far and wide that it cannot easily be equated with a single cultural area. It does have a single language, Latin, but that is now used only in formal documents and very occasionally in worship. In its place, every major tongue on earth can be heard in Rome, and the church is well represented almost everywhere that Christians live. Furthermore, Rome actively pursues its vocation to universality and continues to make overtures to other churches in the hope of eventually bringing them back into union with itself.

So large and multi-faceted a church cannot be fairly assessed in a few paragraphs, though it must be said that statistics are deceptive. On paper, there may be more than a billion Catholics around the world, but many of these are nominal. Some are agnostics or have become Protestants, a phenomenon particularly noticeable in Latin America. There is a massive shortage of priests in many parts of the world, and places that only a generation ago were solidly Catholic, such as Spain, Ireland, and Quebec, have seen numbers fall dramatically in recent years. The reality is less impressive than the facade, and the future of the Catholic church is by no means as assured as one might think.

From the theological perspective, it is possible to find fault with many Catholic doctrines that go beyond the teaching of Scripture and are often tied to outdated ways of thinking. This is especially noticeable when discussing something like transubstantiation, a central Catholic teaching which was developed in the context of a now discredited Aristotelian philosophy and which no longer makes sense. Theologians know this and try to reformulate it in a way that will be acceptable today, but most lay Catholics continue to believe that when the priest consecrates the bread and wine at Communion, they become the literal body and blood of Christ. It is this belief that has traditionally underlain the great deference shown by Catholics to their clergy, who are set apart from them by compulsory celibacy and a professional culture largely insulated from the modern world.

The biggest problem with the Roman church, however, lies not in these aberrations, which can be corrected over time, but with its fundamental claim to be the universal church. The logic behind this claim is that it was founded by Jesus Christ’s direct commands to Peter, who supposedly became the first bishop of Rome and bequeathed his divine commission to his successors. Biblical support for this idea, such as it is, comes from the following passage:

[Jesus said to his disciples], “Who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and



whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

Scholars continue to debate the true meaning of Peter’s confession, and to dispute whether the authority given to him really set him apart from the other apostles. It is certainly true that Peter took the lead on the day of Pentecost, which may suggest that he was the head of the Jerusalem church, but when Paul went there after his conversion, which cannot have been that much later, he seems to have thought that the church was governed by a triumvirate of Peter, James, and John. Paul certainly did not believe that Peter was infallible, because he stood up to him on a matter of doctrine where he believed that Peter was in serious error.<sup>28</sup> If the Acts of the Apostles are anything to go by, Peter seems to have faded out as time went on, though Luke never says what happened to him. Only two New Testament letters are directly linked to Peter, although there is an ancient tradition that he dictated his memoirs to Mark, who then wrote them up as the Gospel attributed to him. As for a link with Rome, there is no sign of this anywhere in the New Testament. Peter was presumably not there when Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, since otherwise he would surely have been mentioned in the greetings in the last chapter. Nor is he mentioned at the end of Acts, when Paul went to Rome as a prisoner, which would be odd if he was the city’s bishop at that time.

The most solid piece of evidence connecting Peter with Rome is the tomb under the Vatican that is thought to be his. As this tomb was venerated at a very early date, it may very well be where he was buried, but that is all we can say. Nothing we know about the Roman church in the first centuries of its existence supports the idea that Peter was its founding bishop, and current research suggests that the church at Rome did not have a single leader until well into the second century. The names of Peter’s immediate “successors” may even be fictitious, as there is no evidence for any of them until about A.D. 180. Finally, while the other churches of the ancient world were generally happy to give Rome pride of place, and even accepted its Petrine origins, they did not submit to its jurisdiction in church affairs. Not one of the ancient councils, which established fundamental Christian doctrine, was attended by a Roman bishop or convened on his authority. It would not be until 1123, in very different circumstances, that the pope would preside over a general council of the Western church, which was not recognized in the East, although it is considered to have been “ecumenical” by the Roman Catholic church.

This is a slender base on which to build such weighty claims. Today even many Roman Catholic scholars and theologians are prepared to admit that the Roman primacy cannot be securely grounded in Scripture but must rest on tradition—in this case, much later tradition! Given the way that that primacy has been exercised, not only with respect to Protestants but also in relation to the Eastern churches and within the Catholic church itself, it is hardly surprising that other Christians are highly skeptical of the papal claims and are unwilling to join a church that bases itself on them.

This leaves us with the Protestant churches, which are too numerous and varied to be numbered, even in a major encyclopedic work! Hardly any of them would claim to be the one true church, though some erect barriers to fellowship with those outside their ranks that suggest that that is what they think about themselves. Feelings between different Protestant



denominations have run high in the past, especially in situations where one of them has been an established state church and the others have suffered as a result. Today, however, those problems have been largely overcome. Lay people move from one denomination to another with relative ease, and there are any number of nondenominational community churches and interdenominational parachurch organizations that often carry more weight than the denominations do. Given that almost all of them contain a wide range of doctrinal convictions (or lack thereof) and of worship styles, individuals often find their level and stick with that, regardless of what denominational label a particular church might wear. It is not too much to say that, nowadays, denominational divisions are more of a problem for the clergy, who have to pay attention to them, than for anyone else. Some people regret this, but it is probably true to say that, for most ordinary Protestants, it is the fellowship of the invisible church that now determines what congregation they will join. If they are one in the Spirit with those with whom they worship, other things can be left to one side and the unity of the body of Christ can once again be manifested as it was originally intended to be.

The historical divisions of the church are a reality with which we have to live in a spirit of humility, recognizing that the present situation came about for a variety of reasons, not all of which can be justified. Christians in every church and denomination must feel a sense of regret for past actions, which have sometimes led to persecution and the exclusion of other believers from a particular church. We all share responsibility for this and must do our utmost to break down barriers that have occurred for the wrong reasons. It is our duty to reach out to fellow believers wherever they may be found, and not to impose artificial conditions on them before being willing to welcome them into our fellowship. Having said that, we must also recognize that in some cases, divisions have persisted because of very real disagreements, and that these cannot be overcome merely by good will and wishful thinking. In practice, it is usually the case that individuals from different churches, and especially lay people, can share a high degree of fellowship with one another because of their common faith, but the churches they belong to cannot merge into one another because of different and sometimes mutually contradictory beliefs and practices that distinguish them.

Leaving aside divisions that have occurred mainly for political or cultural reasons, there are two main types of schism that exist within the Christian world. The first of these concerns matters of faith and the second concerns matters of order. Whether these two aspects of the church's life can be separated from one another is a matter of debate, but they can certainly be distinguished as distinct components of any given ecclesiastical community. Protestants are divided from Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox on matters of faith, which are more direct and more obvious in the case of the former. The separation between the Western and the Eastern churches was already complete at the time of the Protestant Reformation, which means that Protestants differ from the Eastern Orthodox in much the same way as Roman Catholics do. This needs to be said because some Protestants have looked for a reunion with the Eastern churches, bypassing Rome. This is not a realistic option, however, because any resolution of the differences that separate us from the East would have to resolve most of the difficulties the Roman Catholic church has and would potentially lead to reunion across the board. In practice,



reunion with the East is unimaginable without a reunion of Western Christendom—a distant and probably unattainable goal.

The main problems that divide Protestants from Roman Catholics can be summed up under the heading of the work of the Holy Spirit. Rome believes that it has been uniquely entrusted with the witness of the Spirit at work in the offices and sacraments which it administers. Its head, the bishop of Rome, is regarded as infallible when he speaks in his official capacity as “pope.” Its priests are empowered to turn bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, and thereby to administer the grace of God to his people—or to withhold it from them. These basic beliefs are shored up by a wide range of devotional practices and spiritual disciplines, which have become part of church tradition even though they rest on no other authority. These additional requirements may even go against the teaching of the Word of God, as compulsory priestly celibacy does, for example, but this is justified on the ground that the leaders of the church, and in particular the pope, have the authority to reinterpret that Word and add to it as they think necessary. Many subtle distinctions are drawn between what is merely a matter of discipline (like celibacy) and what is a matter of fundamental belief (like the infallibility of the pope) but it makes little difference in practice. Roman Catholics are expected to accept everything their church teaches, regardless of how it is justified. Those who fail to do so find themselves out of communion with it.

Protestants cannot accept this. We share many things with Roman Catholics, but we do not believe that any human being or ecclesiastical body is (or can be) invested with infallible authority. The Holy Spirit may choose to work in and through the clerical order of a visible institutional church, but no individual church leader or body can claim this as a matter of right. Whether a person receives the grace of God through the ministry of the church depends both on the faithfulness of that ministry to the teaching of the gospel and the faith of the recipient. Protestants believe that Rome has departed from the pure gospel of Christ in its teaching and has devalued the faith of its members by making its validity ultimately dependent on its priesthood. We are not in communion with Rome because we believe that such disagreements touch on matters that are fundamental to the life and witness of the church. If we accepted the claims of Rome in these areas, we would be denying those of Christ.

When it comes to relationships between Protestant bodies, most of the differences concern matters of church order, including the ministry and the sacraments. Unfortunately, order is more visible than faith, and therefore differences over it have often provoked strong feelings. Whether a church has bishops or is governed by a college of presbyters should not affect the content or preaching of the gospel, but it does alter the structure of the church’s organization. When a group insists on one of these things to the exclusion of the other it produces division within the visible church. Differences over the proper administration of baptism have also provoked splits and hard feelings, especially when those who reject the validity of infant baptism rebaptize those who received it and then later made a profession of faith as adults. In a case like that, the principled consistency of one church leads to the rejection of the ministry of another and so calls into question the validity of the faith proclaimed by that other church.

No denomination is innocent of the tendency to insist on matters of church polity to the point of excluding other believers from its fellowship. We must repent of this, whatever church we



belong to. It is one thing to adopt a particular form of church government and sacramental practice because we believe that it is the one most faithful to the teaching and intention of Christ, but quite another to refuse to have fellowship with those who disagree with us on matters that are not clearly defined in Scripture. On matters like these we must accept that different opinions are possible and that other ways of doing things have advantages from which we can (and should) learn without denying the validity of our own procedures, whose benefits we must be prepared to acknowledge and recommend to others. Happily, we can say that here the ecumenical movement of recent times has made genuine progress, and that differences of church order have sometimes been overcome when it is clear that the underlying faith of the churches concerned is identical.

## DIFFERENT TYPES OF CHRISTIANS

Alongside the different denominations there are a number of spiritual tendencies and movements in the Christian world which stand out for their distinctive emphases. The first of these appeared in the third century, when some Christians decided to lead solitary lives in the desert, seeking to get closer to God by intense spiritual devotion and asceticism. Some of these desert-dwellers, whom we call “hermits” (from the Greek word for “desert”), later banded together as “monks” (from the Greek word for “alone”), and many of them became the greatest evangelists of the early church. Spreading beyond the confines of the Roman empire, monks preached the gospel all over northern Europe, establishing monastery churches (“minsters”) as outposts for the conversion of the pagan Germanic and Slavic tribes.

Given that hermits and monks fled the cities of the Roman empire because they thought that the Christians who lived there were becoming too worldly, it is not surprising that they had difficult relations with the mainline church. When the monasteries in turn became rich and “worldly,” reform movements broke away, either to found new monastic orders or to become begging brethren (“friars”), earning their living from pious donations. The Protestant Reformation was largely the work of men trained in this way. In its early years, it could be seen almost as an attempt to create a monasticism for the masses. Many devotional practices such as daily Bible reading and hymn singing, for example, were monastic in origin, and Protestant evangelicals continue these traditions today, in spite of the vast cultural differences between them and the medieval monks. It is among evangelicals that one is most likely to find a deep interest in Bible study, fervent hymn singing (and writing), and evangelistic zeal, giving them a spiritual link with the past that other more superficially traditionalist churches do not necessarily possess.

At the other end of the spectrum are people who are much more attached to the structures of the institutional church. They prefer hierarchy, order, and submission to authority, as opposed to what they often see as the undisciplined, anarchic spontaneity of the evangelicals. These are the high church people, who are liable to think that building a cathedral is more important than conducting an evangelistic crusade, because they are thinking more long-term. To their minds, the cathedral will still be there bearing witness to the faith of those who built it, long after today’s



crusade will have been forgotten. For similar reasons, they may be more inclined to write books than to preach sermons—books last longer and reach further than the spoken word, even if they lack the latter’s sense of immediacy. Needless to say, evangelicals and high-church people often find it hard to relate to one another, though both types can be found in most of the mainline churches. High-church people are naturally more prominent in the Roman church, and evangelicals feel more at home in Protestant denominations (though they often create denominations or independent churches of their own), but neither can be exclusively identified with any one church. There are evangelically minded Catholics (and Orthodox), just as there are high-church Baptists, Presbyterians, and Methodists. The Anglican Communion gives semi-official recognition to both tendencies and tries to hold them together, though it has not always been very successful in doing so.

In addition to these groups, there is a middle way, which is often termed the “broad church” or “mainstream,” which consists of people who do not identify with either the high churchmen or the evangelicals but who see themselves as “ordinary” believers. They are the people who are most likely to be enthusiastic about the denominations they belong to and supportive of them as they stand, whereas both evangelicals and high-church people are more likely to want to reform them in their particular direction. Otherwise, the broad church is hard to define, which is one reason why it is often regarded as a lukewarm form of Christianity. Nevertheless, the life and career of men like C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) remind us that broad-church Christians can be fully orthodox in their theology and reach out to both of the others. The fact that many evangelicals and high churchmen today claim Lewis as one of their own (when in fact he was neither) shows that there is a common thread of Christian faith that is capable of uniting what might otherwise seem to be incompatible extremes.

Beyond these groupings, there are groups that over time have split off from the main churches and formed communities of their own, which are often viewed by other Christians as extreme and sectarian. The Amish, for example, would have to be classified among these, as would the Shakers. Groups like the Salvation Army are now more mainstream than they once were, but they still retain characteristics that set them apart from others and make them hard to label. In more recent times, the charismatic movement has swept across the Christian world and attracted followers from almost every denomination, but although charismatics often retain their original church loyalties, they undoubtedly form a spiritual fellowship that cuts across such barriers. At the same time, new divisions have emerged between charismatics and others. Fortunately, these have generally managed to avoid open hostility, at least so far, but there is a definite sense of difference, and some noncharismatics can be quite vocal in their opposition to what they believe is a false spirituality.

How should we deal with these differences? It must be admitted that many Christians get more worked up about them than they should and can often be quite uncharitable in their dealings with people whose spiritual outlook differs from their own. It is difficult to find exact biblical parallels because the early church was too small and too new to have developed these different streams, but there were differences within it that might offer us some kind of analogy. The most important of these was the division between Jewish and Gentile Christians, which erupted near the beginning of Paul’s missionary activity and which had to be resolved by mutual



forbearance. This allowed each side to hold to its own convictions and practices without anathematizing the other. Based on that, we can perhaps offer the following suggestions as to how we should proceed when dealing with Christians whose beliefs differ from ours:

1. Be persuaded in your own mind that what you do and recommend to others is justified by the teaching of Scripture. People who have doubts about their own beliefs are more likely to be insecure and therefore more defensive and uncharitable in their dealings with others.

2. Never do anything that goes against your conscience, even if others think it is unobjectionable.

3. Do not pass judgment on others or make life difficult for them.

4. Remember that we belong to Christ and that our duty is to please him and not ourselves.

5. Keep things in perspective. If something does not touch on the fundamentals of the gospel, do not overemphasize it.

6. Try to see the other person's point of view and to learn from him. None of us is perfect, and we can all benefit from being balanced by our contacts with those whose insights and experiences are different from ours.

7. Remember that love is the fulfilling of the law; our approach to other Christians must be governed by that spirit.

Another kind of difference that troubles the church is the division between conservatives or "traditionalists" and liberals. These labels are often used to describe clearly defined sets of people, but it is often much harder to pin them down than appearances would suggest. In broad terms, liberals are more likely to be dissatisfied with the status quo, aware of its weaknesses (or some of them), and determined to press for change, whereas conservatives and traditionalists will be more inclined to resist such moves. In practice, however, a great deal depends on the issues being debated, and such a neat distinction is not always possible. For example, evangelicals are likely to be conservative on doctrinal matters but not on liturgical ones, and some of them are in the vanguard of technological innovation, which they see as an important aid to evangelism. Liberals, on the other hand, often cling to existing church structures, especially if they think that change is likely to disadvantage them by giving their opponents a greater voice. On social matters, too, there is no neat divide. Conservative Christians were certainly more likely to support racism in the United States and in South Africa, which liberals fiercely opposed. On the other hand, liberals were often uncritical of communist regimes, which conservatives fought in every way they could, even going to prison on account of their beliefs. No side can claim to have been in the right all the time, and neither should accuse the other of having betrayed the gospel without searching its own soul first.

One of the results of the secularization of modern Western society is that the conflict between tradition and innovation which once characterized conservatives and liberals has to a large extent given way to a struggle between orthodox Christianity and various diluted forms of belief. The modern liberal is not someone pleading for a scholarly approach to biblical study, or for ecumenical cooperation on the ground that what unites Christians is more important than what separates them. Nowadays, the word "liberal" is more likely to be attached to people who deny fundamental Christian doctrines, like the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and who are prepared to say that Paul (for example) was wrong in parts of his teaching. To these people, there can be



only one response—they are not Christians at all. Jesus had to deal with “liberals” of this type, the Sadducees, a Jewish sect who denied the resurrection. He made no bones about it when he told them, “You are wrong because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.” Paul had no time for such people either:

Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

Tolerance and understanding must be extended to all who are brothers and sisters in the Lord, but not to those who claim to be Christians and deny the fundamental truths of our faith.

## 30

# BELONGING TO THE FELLOWSHIP OF BELIEVERS

## THE BELIEFS WE HOLD IN COMMON

How do we know whether a person belongs to the body of Christ? Most churches test this by some form of instruction that leads to certain questions being asked at baptism or at the time the person concerned is received into church membership, or both. Generally speaking, the questions tend to be fairly simple, such as, “Do you believe in God the Father, who made the world?” A trained theologian may find great depth in a proposition like that, but for most people the issue is straightforward. As far as they are concerned, all they have to do is affirm that they believe there is a God who created the world and whom we regard as our heavenly Father. The average Christian will have little trouble assenting to that, and in all likelihood it will seem obvious to him.

Things get more complicated the further up the scale we go. Theological students, and those about to be ordained for pastoral ministry, will (not unreasonably) be expected to give a fuller account of their beliefs, even if they are answering the same questions. For example, where the ordinary person might have little to say in answer to the above question, the trained pastor may reflect on the meaning of creation, whether it can be attributed to God the Father as opposed to all three persons of the Trinity (or to God as opposed to an evolutionary selection process), and even how “the world” is to be understood. Is it planet earth, the whole universe, or a spiritual concept that describes everything that stands in opposition to God? Ordinary believers might conceivably discuss such matters, but they would not normally be expected to do so. No one would insist that a person who is unable to discuss theological questions at that level should not



be admitted to church membership for that reason, but some churches will deny ordination to candidates unable to give satisfactory answers to such questions, and rightly so.

This has to be said because there is a persistent strand in church life which maintains that any sort of structured belief, of the kind found in the classical creeds and confessions of faith, is an imposition on believers that should not be required of anyone, or even tolerated. "No creed but Christ" is their rallying cry, or "The Bible alone is the religion of Protestants," as if other statements of faith were somehow obscuring our understanding of both Christ and the Bible. Of course, at one level we must agree with such people that the Christian faith cannot be reduced to a set of beliefs contained in a creed or confession of faith. It is a new birth in Christ, an experience of the living God that, by definition, goes beyond what words can describe. Assenting to a creedal statement may satisfy the outward criteria of formal church membership, but it says nothing about the presence or absence of true faith in the heart of the person seeking membership. That is a matter between the believer and God, who gives us the mind of Christ and shapes our every thought and action in conformity with his will.

Having said that, however, it is also true that the experience of individual believers ought to resonate with the official creeds and confessions of the church, even if they do not know or understand them. If it does not, either those statements of faith are wrong or the people concerned are mistaken. It is not impossible for the perception of a single individual to be right and the rest of the church wrong, but in the nature of things, that will be exceedingly rare. What that individual says will require careful proof if it is to be accepted. The common witness of the Christian community through the ages cannot easily be overruled, and those who claim to do so, either by some private revelation or by some new theological discovery unknown to earlier ages, must be treated with the greatest caution. The creeds of the church are not perfect, nor are they comprehensive, but the substance of what they affirm must be believed by every faithful Christian.

There will always be some people who do not like creeds, even though they agree with what they say, and we must be tolerant of this. They bear witness to the greatness of God, who goes far beyond what any human words can say about him, and they challenge us to remember that this must be true of our faith as well as of theirs. Nevertheless, their purist approach to such matters cannot be followed by the whole church because the absence of creeds makes it that much easier for false teaching to creep in. It is rather like pacifism or unilateral disarmament. The idea is a good one and Christians must surely be sympathetic to it, but the world we live in is not prepared to deal with it. We have to maintain our defenses until such time as the final victory of the Prince of Peace makes them unnecessary.

There are also those who have trouble with particular aspects of the creeds because they have not fully understood them. Here we must draw a distinction between those who are genuinely puzzled or troubled by something that they acknowledge as part of the Christian tradition but find difficult to understand, and those who say that Christians were wrong to canonize such beliefs, which they think are erroneous and must be rejected. The former group are believers seeking further understanding of their faith; the latter group have failed to understand it and are unwilling to be enlightened any further on the subject.



What cannot be accepted is preaching or teaching in the church that openly contradicts or denies some aspect of the creedal statements that express our common faith. A preacher or theologian who denies the bodily resurrection of Christ and ridicules those who believe it as being primitive “fundamentalists” is not a Christian and ought to be excluded from the pulpits of the church. Here we have a responsibility before God to maintain the purity of the message we proclaim as far as we are able to do so, and no compromise with unbelief is possible. There will always be some who will seize the authority of pastoral office in the church and use it for spreading false teaching. This was the case in the first generation, when false apostles went about subverting the gospel, and it is still the case today. Vigilance is always necessary, and the denunciation of such behavior, unpleasant as it is, is a duty imposed on us as faithful servants of Christ.

One of the most important functions of creeds and confessions is that they help us understand “the whole counsel of God,” or the teaching of the Bible in its entirety, which must form the framework for our interpretation of individual parts of Scripture. In the early church there were people who said that Jesus was not God, but was a man whom God adopted as his Son. They did not make this up, but believed that it was the right interpretation of Matthew 3:17, which says that when Jesus was baptized, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” They were trying to figure out why Jesus had to be baptized, and the answer they came up with was that this was the moment when the Father adopted him and sent his Spirit down on him in the form of a dove.

The idea that Jesus was less than fully God was very popular in ancient times because it seemed to resolve a number of questions that plagued people’s minds. They did not believe that the infinite God could become finite, or that he could suffer and die for any reason, least of all by “becoming sin” for us. God was perfect, eternal, and good, and he had to remain that way. If the world was to be saved by the death of a perfect man, that man had to be a creature and not God. To the question of whether they believed that God the Father had created the world, they would have replied with an enthusiastic “yes,” but they would also have understood the name “Father” to mean that the Son and the Holy Spirit were inferior to him and were excluded from his creative act. They regarded the Son as the highest of the creatures, closer to God than any other and therefore better able to intercede with him, but they denied that he was God in his own right.

This heresy may seem distant and obscure to many people today, but if you want to see how important it can be, ask the members of an average congregation whether or not Jesus is God. Many of them will probably be puzzled for a minute and then reply that he is the Son of God, but not quite the same as God himself. Without ever intending it, these people will have fallen into the very error that the creeds were designed to avoid. They will not realize that those who spoke of Jesus as a man whom God adopted, or as the highest of the creatures, were trying to solve one set of difficulties posed by the biblical text without taking all the evidence into account, or by twisting it to suit their preconceived theory. For instance, they might interpret a phrase like “the Word became flesh” to mean that the Word was transformed into a human being and ceased to be divine. Other passages which talk about the Son of Man coming down from heaven, or about his returning to his eternal glory, they would either ignore or misinterpret in a similar way.<sup>3</sup>



The overall effect of such thinking was to deprive people of their salvation by trying to explain it in the wrong way. It was for that reason that the church leaders of the time had to come together and formulate their beliefs in language that would be true to the teaching of Scripture and would avoid the kinds of errors into which these false (though perhaps well-intentioned) teachers had led them. Their efforts were successful, and the true faith was preserved for future generations, for which we must be deeply grateful. But as a quick survey of an average congregation will show, error is never far below the surface and can easily creep in if our teaching is inadequate. Many of the controversies that rock the church today have occurred because some aspect of Christian teaching has been ignored or underemphasized. For example, we cannot assume that, because Martin Luther thought that justification by faith alone was a fundamental Christian truth, all those who claim his legacy today will agree with him. The reality is that many of them will never have heard the phrase and only a few can explain what it really means. Yet without the reality of justification by faith alone, the preaching of the gospel would be impossible and our churches would not exist.

In conclusion, it also has to be said that those who compose statements of faith must take great care to ensure that what they are saying is truly of central importance to our faith. For example, when Archbishop Thomas Cranmer was composing a series of “articles” to explain the doctrine of the Church of England, he included a couple that dealt with the end of time and criticized the millenarian tendencies that had erupted in the wake of the Reformation. When his articles were revised a decade or so later, however, those particular ones were left out. It is extremely unlikely that the revisers had changed their minds about the issues concerned, but they must have realized that those issues were not so fundamental that church members should have to accept one particular view of them. We believe that Christ is coming again to judge the living and the dead, but precisely when and how this will happen is a mystery and there is no one answer that can be imposed on all believers. The leaders of the church may have disliked the millenarians and disagreed with them, but they were not prepared to exclude them from the fellowship of Christ, and so they remained silent about what was, after all, unknowable.

Such forbearance is unfortunately rare, and it has been excess of zeal as much as anything else that has brought confessional theology into disrepute. The divines who composed the famous Westminster Confession of Faith, for example, were great and learned men, but occasionally their prejudices got the better of them and they insisted on things that have caused embarrassment to later generations who wish they had been more restrained. The most notorious instance of this occurs in chapter 25, section 6, where, in denying that the pope is head of the church, the Confession goes on to describe him as “that Antichrist, that man of sin and son of perdition that exalteth himself in the church against Christ and all that is called God.” That was a common sentiment at the time, but it cannot really be claimed that the bishop of Rome is the Antichrist of whom John spoke. Today, even those who agree with the general thrust of the statement usually wish that it had been expressed in less offensive (and more accurate) language. We must take care not to saddle future generations with embarrassments of this kind.

In composing creeds and confessions, therefore, we must be careful not to include things that are matters of personal or local interpretation and not fundamental to the faith once delivered to the saints. If we find such things in statements inherited from the past, we should have the



humility to recognize the error and remove them so as not to bring the rest of their contents into disrepute. We must also remember that false teaching is alive and active in every generation, and we may be obliged to write our own confessions, pointing out modern errors that have crept in and corrupted the truth. Future generations will decide whether we have expressed ourselves in the best way, and they may revise what we have said in the light of developments that we cannot now foresee, but our task is to be faithful to what we understand to be true and to pass that understanding on to those who come after us.

## THE FREEDOM WE HAVE IN CHRIST

One of the great themes of the New Testament that was stressed with particular vigor at the time of the Reformation is that of the freedom we have in Christ. This freedom is rooted in the deliverance from sin that we enjoy because he died for us on the cross and rose again from the dead. The consequences of that for our lives now are many. First of all, we have been delivered from any need to keep the ancient Jewish law because its provisions have been fulfilled by Jesus and therefore are now redundant. Second, we have been set free to live a new life without having to carry the burden of our past sins and failures.

Few of us today are particularly bothered about keeping the Jewish law, which is not a major issue in the church in the way that it was for the first generation of (mainly Jewish) Christians. But there are still many people for whom the burden of guilt for their past sins is very much a reality, and we must deal with this as best we can. In principle, all sinners are equal in the sight of God because all have fallen short of his glory, and it makes little difference to him whether some have fallen further than others. In practice, however, those who have committed serious crimes like murder, or who in various ways have to live with the consequences of their past actions, are more likely than others to feel the reproach of sin. To some extent, this may be due to their own inner sense of guilt, but it may also be due to the feeling that other people are still holding it against them. There will always be someone who will not let such things be forgotten, and it is easy to fall victim to the idea that nothing can be done about it. It is to this feeling of spiritual bondage that Paul spoke when he said,

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

Freedom in Christ is not license to do whatever we want, and the moral precepts of the law are still as valid for us as they were for the people of ancient Israel. Lying, cheating, and stealing are just as intolerable in a Christian context as they are anywhere else, and indeed more so because those in whom the Holy Spirit dwells have the responsibility and the power to live as children of God. Most people understand this readily enough, but there are always gray areas where it is not entirely clear what we should do. In the New Testament, we come across this phenomenon in the case of those who felt at liberty to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Christians do not believe that idols exist, and so it ought to make no difference whether meat has been sacrificed to them. In terms of strict logic, this is undoubtedly true, and the apostle Paul



recognized that, in principle, there was nothing wrong in ignoring such pagan habits. Those who had been brought up as Jews, however, were sensitive to this because even if the argument used by the people who ate such meat was logically flawless, the impression they were giving was quite different. People who saw them doing such things might easily have thought that they were indulging in a pagan practice, if only by association, and therefore they believed that it was better to avoid “idol meat” altogether.<sup>9</sup>

What we see here is the phenomenon that “perception is part of the reality.” It might be theoretically possible for me to visit brothels as part of my ministry to prostitutes, and there need not be any untoward activity associated with that. But would people observing me draw such a high-minded conclusion? What impression would I give to others if I claimed to have a ministry to the poor but wore expensive clothing and drove a car that most of those people could not afford? There may be nothing objectively wrong with such things, but we have to be aware of the impact our behavior is likely to have on our witness and act accordingly.

What applies to individuals also applies to churches. It is not unknown for churches to invest in companies that do business in unethical ways, and that should be avoided as much as possible. Church property should not be used for activities such as gambling, even if it appears to be small-scale and relatively innocent, as it often does. Nor should church buildings be sold to developers who will turn them into nightclubs, or to adherents of other religions who will use them as a place of worship. It may be true that a building is “just a building,” but when it is clearly associated with the worship of God, to use it for some other purpose sends the wrong message and is harmful to the witness of the gospel. We must not forget that, in some parts of the world, churches have been forcibly turned into mosques in order to make the point that the God of Islam is greater than the God of Christianity, so to do this voluntarily is short-sighted and ignorant of the way our action is likely to be perceived.

The trouble with freedom is that there are no fixed rules that can be applied in every circumstance. If there were, our freedom would be lost. Each situation has to be decided on its merits, and in the nature of things, different people are almost bound to come up with different conclusions. The one thing that Paul counsels in such circumstances is that the law of love should prevail. If I am doing something that wounds the conscience of another Christian, how important is that thing to me? Would it really matter to me if I gave it up? If the answer is no, says Paul, then the right thing is to give way and not cause unnecessary offense. In time, the conscience of my “weaker brother” may be healed by my humility and spirit of self-sacrifice, but if I am obstinate and insist on my “rights,” it is virtually certain that I shall lose him, and that is simply not worth it.

Freedom in Christ applies to the way we are called to live with a clear conscience, which includes things that we do not know for sure and about which Christians hold different and even contradictory opinions. No one can know exactly what is going to happen in the future, but that has not stopped some people from giving what are occasionally very detailed descriptions of the “end times,” which they then assume have the authority of revelation. Others come up with very different conclusions, but likewise think that their views ought to be accepted as correct. Faced with such a situation, the proper response is to examine the Scriptures carefully, and if the evidence in them is insufficient to form a definite doctrine, to have the humility to admit it. To



say that we do not understand exactly how or when Christ will come again is not to say that we do not believe that he will, but only that we have not been told what we do not need to know about it. Being humble in the presence of the unknown is not the same thing as being indifferent to it. After all, the being of God is unknown and yet it is the focus of our attention and the goal of our striving. No Christian would claim that, because we cannot fathom the nature of God, it does not matter, and so we might as well ignore it and get on with life!

At the same time, there are things pertaining to the life of the visible church that are not fully revealed in God’s Word, and here we do have freedom to decide for ourselves. Obvious cases relate to church order and worship. Some Christians believe that faith and order go together, and justify this by saying that what we do must correspond to what we believe. That is true, of course, but it ignores the fact that we have the freedom to implement what we believe in different ways, so that our church order and forms of worship may legitimately differ without imperiling the unity of our faith. Here we must recognize that there is a difference between cultures that are literate and cultures that are not. In modern Western society, where everyone can read and write, variations in practice are less important than they are in places where people put a great deal of weight on gestures and ceremony. It is irrelevant to me whether the bread used at Holy Communion is leavened or unleavened, or even whether it is “bread” at all, but people who learn from symbols may think differently. To them, there may be great significance attached to such apparently minor details, and where that is the case, our practice must be tailored accordingly.

It is the same principle as that of the weaker brother all over again and may be equally difficult to resolve. In many developing countries, the gospel was introduced by different missionary groups who brought their traditional practices with them, whether or not they were essential (or even appropriate). Christians in those countries came to associate these practices with the content of their faith, which may create problems when attempts are made to unite churches across denominational boundaries. Can a common form of worship be devised, or is it practically necessary to allow different forms to coexist side by side, in order not to upset those who are used to them? There is no simple answer to that question, but at least a start can be made if we accept that the form of church order we adopt is part of the freedom given to us by God, and not something prescribed by the Bible or by ancient but alien traditions.

## THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT

The church is the body of Christ, formed and preserved in being by the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit. In order to maintain this body in good working order, the Spirit gives certain people gifts meant to be used for its growth. There are four lists of these gifts in the New Testament, which can be compared as shown in table 30.1, on page 694.

**Romans 12:6–8      1 Corinthians 12:8–10      1 Corinthians 12:28      Ephesians 4:11**

		1. Apostles	Apostles
Prophecy	Prophecy	2. Prophets	Prophets



			Evangelists
			Pastors
Teaching		3. Teachers	Teachers
	Wisdom		
	Knowledge		
	Miracles	4. Miracle workers	
	Healing	5. Healers	
Service		6. Helpers	
		7. Administrators	
	Interpretation of tongues		
	Speaking in tongues	8. Speakers in tongues	
Exhortation			
Giving			
Leading			
Acting in mercy			
	Faith		
	Discernment of spirits		

TABLE 30.1

In the first two lists, Paul expresses the gifts in terms of their function, whereas in the third and fourth he does so in terms of the people appointed to exercise those functions. The third list is also the only one to be graded in order of importance, though it is interesting to note that Paul



omits interpreters of tongues, whom he certainly regarded as more highly gifted than those who merely spoke in them. Curiously enough, the gift of prophecy is the only one to appear in all four lists, though a case can be made for saying that those who are given the utterance of wisdom and knowledge were probably teachers.<sup>13</sup> What is certain is that no one list is definitive, and we need to look at them all in order to get a comprehensive picture of what the Holy Spirit was doing in the early church.

By their nature, some of the gifts are unlikely to have been the preserve of officers specially appointed for the task. In many churches there are people who are unusually generous donors, for example, but they often prefer to remain anonymous. Likewise, people with extraordinary powers of faith may take a back seat in the congregation, praying and encouraging others in a quiet way, and the same may be said for those who perform particular acts of mercy. Exhortation, leading, and the discernment of spirits are harder to define. It would probably be impossible to “lead” a congregation without having some kind of recognized authority, though there are people who have an ability to get others moving even if they have no special position, and Paul may be referring to them. The same might be true of exhorters, a term which could refer to those who are called to remind people of their duties and tasks in the church, something that is often best done quietly on a one-to-one basis. The discernment of spirits is also hard to pin down, but some people do have an unusual ability to see through things, and that may be what is meant here. Paul clearly believed that every congregation would contain people of these types, and he did not think it necessary to single them out for special ordination or commissioning.

It is somewhat different with the third list because there it is clear that at least the first few gifts mentioned applied to specific people who had been called by God to exercise a particular ministry. The most important of these was the apostleship, which Paul himself had received, though not in the same way as the others had. It is therefore with the gift of apostles that we must begin.

In order to make sure that the gospel would be maintained in its purity in the church, the Holy Spirit appointed the apostles as the supreme guardians of the gospel in the first generation after Christ. Most of them had been Christ’s disciples during his earthly ministry, but the overlap between disciples and apostles was not total. As everyone knows, there was one famous disciple, Judas, who betrayed Jesus and did not become an apostle, and there was one famous apostle, Saul or Paul of Tarsus, who had not been a disciple. But all the apostles had seen the risen Christ, a criterion which was essential to their office and ministry. It seems in fact that the word “apostle” was originally used to refer to those who were witnesses of the resurrection (more than five hundred people in all) and who formed the first generation of evangelists. It is to this category that Andronicus and Junia must have belonged, if the reference to them as “well known to the apostles” is to be interpreted as including them within the apostolic company.<sup>16</sup>

Further evidence for the existence of many apostles may be found in Paul’s condemnation of the so-called false apostles who seemed to have followed him around with the intention of destroying his ministry. If the number of apostles had been confined to the original disciples of Jesus, it would have been easy to detect imposters, but the fact that these men were able to convince the Corinthians of their status suggests that apostleship was not as closely defined as that. It must also be said, however, that very soon the term “apostle” was restricted to the



Twelve, who had existed as a distinct group from the beginning. Here again we find a good example of how the early church developed its theological terminology. The word “apostle,” which originally meant a variety of things, was narrowed down and turned into a technical term with a specific meaning, which is the one Paul appears to be using in 1 Corinthians 12.

The historic apostles had no successors, and the claims made for the bishop of Rome in this respect are without foundation. The same must be said for other churches of much more recent origin which have claimed to have “apostles” in their midst. To the extent that the apostolic ministry exists today, it does so in and through the New Testament, which is the authorized record of their teaching. When Paul handed on his ministry to Timothy and Titus, he did not grant them the same authority as he possessed, but told them to guard the deposit of faith that had been entrusted to them, which is what we continue to do today.

There were almost certainly some apostolic practices that have not come down to us in written form, most likely because they were not particularly controversial. As far as we can tell, most of them related to the worship of the early church and existed as oral traditions handed down in the Christian communities. The difficulty is that we cannot be entirely sure what they were, and because they are not found in the New Testament, they have no binding authority on us. For example, the signing with the cross at baptism is an ancient practice that may well go back to the apostles, but they never told their churches that they must practice it and so it cannot be insisted upon today as a necessary part of the apostolic faith.

Next to the apostles in Paul’s list come the prophets, an ambiguous term that is open to different interpretations. There were prophets in the Old Testament, of course, but that form of prophecy died out about four hundred years before the coming of Christ, and was revived only by John the Baptist. Even so, we read that Anna, the old woman who waited for the coming of the Messiah in the temple, was a prophetess. So was Agabus, the man who went down from Jerusalem to Antioch and foretold the coming of a famine, and who afterwards met Paul on his return to Palestine and predicted that he would be arrested when he got to the city.<sup>20</sup> Whether Anna uttered similar prophecies is unknown, but Agabus’s actions are reminiscent of what we might expect from an Old Testament prophet, and by Luke’s account, it seems that he was not the only one to exercise that kind of ministry.

That there were prophets recognized as such in the early church is also clear from the fact that Philip the evangelist had four daughters who prophesied, and when Paul laid hands on some Ephesian disciples, they too began to prophesy. More than that, Paul openly encouraged prophecy in the Corinthian church, and he seems to have assumed that there were people there who were claiming that gift.<sup>23</sup> The question for us is, what sort of gift was it?

The Old Testament prophets had been used by God to convey his word to Israel, but this cannot have been the function of the prophets we find in the New Testament, since that ministry had passed to the apostles, who tolerated no rivals. Paul did not hesitate to warn anyone at Corinth who claimed the gift of prophecy that, if his claim was genuine, he would have to accept what the apostle was teaching as the word of God and fall into line with it. Whatever a prophet said or did had to conform to the apostolic teaching, and if it did not, it was to be rejected. In the sixteenth century, and still today in some circles, it was assumed that “prophets” in the New Testament referred to preachers, and prophecy was a term regularly used for the ordinary



preaching ministry. But although the prophets may well have preached, that does not seem to have been their main function in the early church, and we cannot equate them with preachers as if there were no difference between the two functions.

It is virtually impossible to analyze the phenomenon of New Testament prophecy now because, apart from the predictions of Agabus, we have no example of anything they actually said. The only clue we have is what Paul tells us when he writes that “the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.” These qualities are those of a good pastor, and that may be what the New Testament prophets essentially were. In later times, as preaching came to be the main source of pastoral guidance in most congregations, it is easy to see how the two things could have been conflated, but there is no evidence that that was the case at the beginning, and from what little we do know, it seems that it probably was not.

Alongside prophets Paul mentions evangelists, who are called to preach the gospel. That preaching was their main activity seems clear, both from what is said about Philip, who was a traveling evangelist in Palestine, and from what Paul says about the need to preach the gospel if anyone was to hear it and come to faith. It is the special task of the evangelist to engage in primary apologetics, explaining the meaning of Christianity and defending its worldview in the face of ignorance and possible opposition. That is what Philip did when he spoke to the Ethiopian eunuch, and it seems that he went on to preach the gospel all along the coast of Palestine, in towns where it had not previously been heard.

Evangelism remains a vital ministry in today’s church, which is often disadvantaged by an unwillingness or inability to engage outsiders with the gospel. An evangelist has to keep abreast of contemporary trends in intellectual life and in popular culture, and must know how to deal with the questions and problems that arise from them. At the same time, he must be faithful to the gospel message and know how to transpose it into the language of his hearers. In a world where the main emphasis seems to be on dialogue and mutual understanding between different religions and philosophies, and where it is considered to be in poor taste (to put it mildly) to try to persuade others of the rightness of your own point of view, evangelism is more needed than ever. The Christian gospel can never be reduced to the level of one religious or philosophical option among many. It commands attention by its uniqueness and demands a response from those who hear it. It is the special gift of the evangelist to remind us of those things and to present the message of Christ in a clear and challenging way to all who are in need of the salvation it brings.

Pastors are named specifically in only one of the lists, but a number of things mentioned elsewhere (such as exhortation and even the discernment of spirits) could probably be put in this category, since that is a vital part of pastoral ministry. The specific duty of a pastor is to shepherd those who have responded to the preaching of the gospel and to guide them along the pathway to spiritual maturity. It is almost always the case that there are things a new Christian has not heard or has failed to grasp, and part of the pastor’s job is to fill in those gaps, so that spiritual weakness may be avoided. Another thing that he must do is prepare the young Christian for the spiritual warfare in which he will soon be engaged. It often happens that people who have responded to the gospel are soon afterwards put through a time of testing, in order to see how



strong their commitment really is. At times like that, the pastor is especially needed to provide support and give direction to the person undergoing trial. Even at a later stage, spiritual guidance remains an important part of every Christian's life, and no congregation can thrive without pastors to help it along the way.

Next to pastors come the teachers, who seem to have been appointed for the instruction of new converts, but who were probably preachers as well, since there is no sign that New Testament teachers merely lectured in the way that a modern instructor might. The whole point of teaching was to persuade the hearers to accept the message, although there is no doubt that catechetical instruction was also necessary for that to be effective. We can see this from the Acts of the Apostles. Paul had great success in the synagogues, where his audiences had been prepared by years of teaching from the Old Testament, but he had very little success when he went to Athens, where the locals had received no such teaching and did not understand even the basics of what he was saying. To put it another way, preaching about Abraham and his faith is of little value if people have no idea who Abraham was and why he matters to us today. The more people know about the Bible, the more effective preaching based on it will be. This is especially true in our modern world, where the presuppositions of the Christian faith concerning the nature of mankind and the need for salvation are often little understood, or are even totally rejected by the secularism rampant in once-Christian lands and among the non-Christian religions and ideologies dominant elsewhere.

Failure to understand even the basic principles of Christianity impedes the spread of the gospel and runs the risk of causing serious misunderstandings. This can be seen in many mission contexts, where syncretistic forms of Christianity, mixed with local religious traditions, have occasionally sprung up and been very influential. The early church had its gnostic heretics who did this, and today there are the Kimbanguists in Congo and the followers of Sun Myung Moon in Korea, among others, who follow in their footsteps. It is sometimes said that Christianity in Africa today is a mile wide but only an inch deep. If this is true, it must be the result of preaching based on inadequate or nonexistent teaching. People have been converted in huge numbers, but they have not studied their faith in depth and are therefore unable to apply it in everyday life. What is true of Africa is increasingly true elsewhere as well, as basic Christian instruction is no longer given in the way that it once was, and there are more and more people who are as ignorant of what Christians believe as were the Athenians whom Paul addressed.

Next in the list come miracle workers and healers. Though not identical, there would appear to be a real overlap between these two, not least because most of the miracles done by Jesus and his disciples involved some form of healing. There is no question that the early church knew miracles and had a (non-miraculous) healing ministry as well, but it is not clear that there were particular people who were identified as having the gift of healing. Paul seems to assume that they existed. We have to take his word for it, but it is impossible to say who they were or how they operated. Probably they were discreet in exercising their ministry, which explains why we know so little about it. In the modern church there are "faith healers" who appear from time to time, but their reputation is not usually very good, and the church is extremely cautious about recognizing miracles. We do not deny that they occur, but they are rare. Professional healing ministries are more common and generally well respected, but confidentiality is obviously



important. We seldom hear much about them, and if miracles occur we are unlikely to find out. Nevertheless, their continued existence shows that this form of ministry still operates today and brings its particular gift to the wider witness of the church.

After healers come helpers and administrators, two categories that can probably be linked together and were most likely related to the diaconal ministry established by the apostles to relieve them of such duties. Support staff remains crucial to the working of any church, and it is important to remember that their ministry is a spiritual gift as much as any other.

Finally, we come to speaking in tongues and their interpretation. In recent years, more attention has been paid to this than to all the other spiritual gifts combined. Yet Paul was quite clear that it was, and presumably still is, the least important of them all because, by itself, it is of no benefit to the church as a whole. Paul had no problem with this gift as a form of personal devotion, and he himself possessed it to an unusual degree, but he was very clear that it should not be overused in public worship, and that is the main thrust of his remarks about it.<sup>32</sup>

Speaking in tongues began on the day of Pentecost, when it had a functional purpose, enabling people from all corners of the Roman empire to hear the gospel message in their own language. Later manifestations of the phenomenon did not have that purpose, but were a sign that the Holy Spirit had truly descended on believers.<sup>34</sup> In the Corinthian church, tongues were a regular part of worship and Paul did not forbid them, though he strongly encouraged those who had the gift to use it responsibly and to seek interpretation, so that others might also be edified.

In later times speaking in tongues seems to have died out, and for centuries the phenomenon was regarded as defunct. Occasional outbreaks of it were treated as hysteria and were discounted, so much so that by the beginning of the twentieth century it was generally assumed that any such manifestation must be false. That, however, began to change as speaking in tongues returned to a considerable section of the church and new Pentecostal denominations were formed. These churches came out of the holiness movement of the nineteenth century, which stressed the need for a “second blessing” that would be the seal of the Spirit in the life of the believer, protecting him from sin and guaranteeing his future salvation. In the 1960s, Pentecostal phenomena spread to the mainline denominations, including the Roman Catholic Church, sometimes to the discomfiture of old-time Pentecostals, whose theology was generally more conservative and identifiably Protestant. In this form, it is generally known today as the charismatic movement and is distinguished from classical Pentecostalism because it has no connection to the holiness movement, nor is it necessarily tied to a conservative theology. In general terms, the charismatic movement appears to offer a release of inner spiritual energy to those who participate in it rather than a “second blessing” in the traditional sense.

What can we say about this phenomenon? On the one hand, we have to admit that speaking in tongues can no longer be regarded as defunct or dormant in the life of the church. It may be true that glossolalia, to use the official term for it, can be psychologically induced, but this is unlikely to account for every manifestation of it. If that were the case, the charismatic movement would probably have faded away by now. On the other hand, however, charismatic churches seldom follow Paul’s advice to keep the phenomenon strictly under control and in its place. On the contrary, they often tend to make it central to their self-identity and sometimes try to insist that people must demonstrate a charismatic gift if they are truly filled with the Spirit.



Furthermore, the range of these gifts has expanded considerably and without any biblical warrant, to include seeing “pictures” and even barking like a dog. Alleged “prophecies” can be given great weight in these circles, and the emphasis sometimes seems to be on what is strange and even bizarre. It is hard to know what all this has to do with the real work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer, except that we are saved by the shed blood of Christ and not by extraordinary manifestations claiming to come from the Holy Spirit. If that emphasis is lost or obscured, the phenomenon cannot be of God because it takes people away from the centrality of the cross and the atoning sacrifice of Christ.

## THE MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH

Alongside these charismatic gifts are two orders of ministry that were established by the apostles for the maintenance of the local church as a functioning community. As far as we can tell from the evidence, the first to be established was the order of deacons, followed by that of elders, or “presbyters.”

The diaconal ministry originated when it became clear that the apostles could not minister to the daily needs of the congregation because that left them with no time to pray and preach the Word. They therefore appointed seven men “of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom,” to take over their pastoral duties and leave them free to evangelize. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that this division of labor was rigid. Very soon after they were appointed, we find deacons like Stephen and Philip preaching the Word. Stephen was the first person to lose his life for his Christian faith because of his bold witness to the gospel,<sup>38</sup> and Philip could claim to have been the first Christian who took the gospel to the ends of the earth, as he preached to the Ethiopian eunuch. Later on, Paul instructed Timothy to appoint as deacons men who were sober, honest, and well-grounded in their faith. He also insisted that their wives should be respectable women and that their children and households should be properly supervised. He was well aware that the reputation of the church was at stake in the appointment of its deacons, and he wanted Timothy to make sure that whoever assumed that office would be a credit to the faith of Christ.<sup>40</sup>

Deacons played an important part in the life of the early church, but since New Testament times their role has often been undervalued and obscured. In the Middle Ages, and still today in those churches that have retained the medieval orders of ministry, a deacon is little more than an apprentice priest, seldom serving for more than a year in that office and sometimes for a much shorter period. In other churches, the office of deacon is usually given to lay people who do the work on a part-time, unpaid basis. Inevitably, such an arrangement limits the scope for developing the office and contributes to the widespread feeling that pastoral administration is somehow inferior to preaching and teaching. Few areas of church life are in greater need of reform than this one, but the experience of centuries is not encouraging. A full-time diaconate would be the ideal, but despite occasional attempts to create one, there is little sign that it will become the norm anytime soon.

We do not know precisely when eldership came into being, but it was not long after the emergence of deacons. The New Testament evidence seems to suggest that, at the very



beginning, the apostles themselves were the “elders” of the church at Jerusalem, but if so, that situation did not last long. By the time a council met there to deal with the question of Gentile converts, probably around A.D. 48 or 49, there were elders in the Jerusalem church in addition to the apostles, and the practice of appointing them to head local churches had apparently become the norm elsewhere by that time. There seems to be no doubt that this practice was taken over from Judaism, where there were elders in every synagogue as well as in Jerusalem, where they formed a recognized group that operated alongside the chief priests and the scribes.<sup>44</sup> The elders seem to have acted mainly as guardians of tradition with acknowledged expertise in the law. It is possible that, if any of the elders in the synagogues where Paul preached followed him and became Christians, they also became elders in the newly founded churches, though we cannot say whether that was an established pattern. Certainly those churches had elders appointed by Paul before he moved on elsewhere, and it is hard to see where they would have acquired the necessary spiritual maturity if it were not from the synagogue. On the other hand, if Gentiles were appointed elders in the churches, as they apparently were, they could not have been Jewish elders beforehand, although they would probably have been “God-fearers,” the name given to Gentile adherents of the synagogue who worshiped the God of Israel without becoming Jews.

Elders were held in high esteem, and it seems that the apostles were happy to apply the term to themselves when writing to different churches, and to regard the elders in those churches as their equals. This would have meant that elders were engaged in the same preaching and teaching ministry as the apostles, but while the apostles had a roving commission to all the churches, as did their personal assistants like Timothy and Titus, there is no indication that an elder in a local church could or did exercise this ministry elsewhere.

It seems probable that the elders were regarded as overseers of their churches and that the two terms could be used interchangeably of them. Thus, we find that Paul gives instructions to Titus, telling him to appoint “elders in every town” on Crete, and then goes on to describe what their qualifications as overseers ought to be. These qualifications are virtually identical to those required of deacons, the one possible difference being that overseers were also expected to “be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” Otherwise, elders had to show the same level of spiritual maturity demanded of deacons and to be a good advertisement for the faith in their local communities.<sup>49</sup>

One question not directly addressed in the New Testament is how many elders there were in any given church, and whether one of them took precedence over the others. The word is normally used in the singular only when it refers to an apostle, and the general impression is that each local congregation had a number of people who exercised this responsibility. It stands to reason that one of them must have presided over their meetings, if only to keep order, but there is no indication that there was a particular individual appointed for that purpose or that one elder exercised authority over the others. Leadership at the local level seems to have been collegial, though we cannot say how that operated in practice. Did everyone have to agree on everything, or was a majority vote enough to carry a particular motion? No doubt consensus would have been sought as much as possible, as the proceedings of the Jerusalem council indicate, but whether that was achieved everywhere, and what happened if it was not, is impossible for us to say.<sup>51</sup> Paul and Barnabas were sent to Antioch at the council’s request, but no sooner had they



got there than they fell out with each other and parted company, which is perhaps indicative of what transpired when there was serious disagreement.

As long as the apostles were alive, this form of church government seems to have continued unaltered, but after they died a change took place. In every congregation, it seems that one of the elders rose to prominence as the chief overseer, who took special responsibility for preserving and proclaiming the apostolic message. Timothy and Titus may perhaps be regarded as their prototypes, not least because they exercised a ministry of oversight in churches other than their own. As the church grew and established new congregations, this overseer extended his ministry to them as well, even if there were also local elders appointed to govern them. In this way, the classical system of bishops and dioceses gradually took shape. Every major city had its bishop, who would be responsible for all the congregations in it and in the immediate neighborhood. Not surprisingly, special importance was soon being attached to the bishops of the biggest cities, a pattern that was formally established after the legalization of Christianity in the fourth century. At the top of the hierarchy were the three bishops of Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch (in that order), who were given the honorary title of “patriarch.” Later on, Constantinople was added to this list (in second place, immediately after Rome), and Jerusalem was tacked on at the end because it had been the first church, though by that time it was of no special importance. Individual dioceses were also grouped into provinces headed by an archbishop, a system that is still found today in most of the historic churches.

Compulsory celibacy for bishops (and archbishops) was imposed in 692, and has remained the norm in both the Roman and the Eastern churches. At the time of the Reformation, the Protestants who broke away from Rome approached this inheritance in different ways. Where they could, they often kept the medieval system of bishops and archbishops, as the modern Anglican and Lutheran churches demonstrate. Where that was not possible, largely for political reasons, the Reformed churches reorganized themselves along what seemed to them to be biblical lines. Generally speaking, they revived a presbyterian system of collective leadership, usually with one of their number appointed as president (or “moderator”), who served for a fixed term. Disputes arose about how far, and in what way, the presbyters of one congregation would be accountable to those elsewhere, and further division resulted between those who opted for greater centralization and those who preferred more local independence. But these differences apart, the basic structure was similar in most non-Episcopal Protestant churches, and that remains the case today.

Is there a biblical case to be made for having bishops or their equivalents in the church? We cannot decide this question simply by examining the meaning of the words “elder” and “overseer” in the New Testament, nor by the fact that the apostles, the only people known to have exercised authority beyond the bounds of a single congregation, occasionally identified themselves as “elders.” The people most like a modern bishop are Timothy and Titus, Paul’s assistants who had a supra-congregational commission like his but without enjoying full apostolic authority. The practical advantages of having someone with general oversight over a group of churches become apparent when trouble erupts in one of them that only a neutral but authoritative observer can resolve. This is what the apostles often did, and there is no reason to suppose that the need for an umpire is any less today than it was then.



It is also good to have someone with recognized authority who can speak for the church as a whole and coordinate its activities by calling the elders together and presiding over their deliberations, and it can be useful for the elders to have someone to turn to for pastoral advice and support, as the New Testament elders turned to the apostles. Having said that, the historical reality is that bishops have often failed to live up to their responsibilities, and some of them have become tyrants when they have been allowed to rule unchecked. The ministry of oversight can work only if it is organically tied to the body of the church and answerable to it. Granting anyone unfettered power and life tenure is a recipe for disaster, and it certainly cannot be justified on the biblical principle of the need for congregational oversight.

One problem that the Reformers had to confront was that, during the Middle Ages, the ancient eldership had given way to an order of ordained men who were no longer answerable to the local congregation, but who could exercise their functions wherever the bishop sent them. At the same time, the way these functions were understood had also changed. In theory, the elders remained responsible for teaching the faith and rebuking error, but many of them were barely educated and hardly suited to such a task. Instead, they focused on baptizing babies and celebrating Holy Communion, which became the central act of Christian worship. As time went on, that came to be understood as a re-presentation of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, with the result that the elder assumed a role analogous to that of an Old Testament priest. The collegiate aspect of this priesthood was maintained at the diocesan level, but in local churches there was usually only one man appointed to the task. After 1123, the Western church required priests to be celibate as well as bishops, which greatly increased the distance between them and their flocks.

At the time of the Reformation, all Protestants abandoned compulsory celibacy, and the teaching role of the eldership was once more brought to the fore. The more conservative Anglican and Lutheran churches continued to use the word "priest," but the others preferred less tendentious terms such as minister or pastor. But there is one feature of the medieval system that has continued almost unchanged in virtually every Protestant church. This is that the pastor retains a unique place in his congregation, even when there is a body of elders which is theoretically supposed to share his authority. These elders, like deacons, are mostly part-time and unpaid, whereas the pastor is generally a full-time professional, which gives him a built-in advantage. Attempts to resurrect the New Testament form of eldership have been pursued more seriously than attempts to revive the diaconate, but they have not succeeded very well, and the residual legacy of the medieval priesthood is still very much with us in the church today. Members of the church are told to be submissive to their leaders, but given the diverse pattern of leadership in many congregations and the relative ease with which those who are unhappy can go elsewhere, this biblical precept is hard to apply in practice.

**[RCB Notes: Based on my study of scripture, I disagree with the conclusions of this next segment.]**

One question that has surfaced in modern times is whether women can be admitted to these forms of ministry. As a general rule, the more emphasis a church places on the status of its ordained clergy, the less likely it is to approve of women's ordination. Because of this, many Protestants see restrictions placed on women as a legacy of the rejected Catholic past and believe



that the time has come to grant women full ministerial equality with men. The difficulty is that this is not the teaching of the Bible, which maintains a distinction between the roles given to men and women in the life of the church that effectively excludes women from the eldership, though not from the diaconate.

Those who argue in favor of women's ordination have employed all kinds of ingenious arguments in order to get around the witness of the Bible. At one end of the spectrum are somewhat eccentric claims that Junia was an apostle, that Mary Magdalene was the first person to see the risen Christ and therefore was also an apostle,<sup>58</sup> and that the Greek word for "head" means "source," with no implication that there is any underlying authority involved. Rather more serious is the argument that there is "no male and female" in Christ, and so no distinctions should be made between them in the church.<sup>60</sup> Appeal is made to cultural conditioning (that of the ancients, of course, not ours!) and to something called the "trajectory" of biblical thought, which maintains that freedom in Christ was gradually breaking down ancient barriers, and so we are entitled to go further than the New Testament does in trying to achieve this aim. Despite such ingenuity, however, the Scriptures are perfectly clear and straightforward on this matter. Paul did not mince his words when he wrote to Timothy,

I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

Two things must be observed about this. First, Paul is talking about the eldership (teaching and exercising authority) not about participation in worship. He was certainly prepared to let women pray and prophesy in the church, insisting only that they should cover their heads as a sign of their submission to the authority of men. It might be argued today that there are more culturally appropriate ways of signifying that in modern Western society, where the significance of covering the head has been lost, but the principle remains valid even if it requires new forms of expression in our particular circumstances.

Second, the Bible gives two reasons why women must submit to the authority of men. The first has to do with the order of creation and the second with the way in which the human race fell away from God's plan. Some people try to argue that the death and resurrection of Christ has reversed the effects of the fall, but this instruction was given after that, so clearly Paul did not think that the sin of Adam could be ignored. Even if that were the case, though, the creation ordinance would remain in place, and it is the more fundamental of the two. Men and women relate to one another the way they do because of how they were made. Women are not inferior to men, but they are different, and that difference must be respected. When it is not, the result is liable to be chaos, as happened when Eve was deceived and Adam allowed himself to be persuaded by her. It is to fulfill the creation mandate and to avoid the pitfalls of disobedience that this command has been given, and it is for that reason that women cannot exercise an eldership role in the church.

Lest anyone think that this gives special privileges to the man, let us consider what Paul had to say in a different context. Talking about marriage, he said that wives should submit to their



husbands as their heads, just as the church submits to Christ as its head. When he speaks to the men, however, he tells them to love their wives and to sacrifice themselves for them, just as Christ gave himself up to death so that the church might live.<sup>64</sup> It is a tall order, but those who are called to a particular honor are also called to greater self-denial, and no one more so than the shepherd (pastor) who is expected to lay down his life for his sheep.

## THE WORSHIP OF GOD

Among the main tasks assigned to ministers of the church today is the conduct of public worship, though whether this was the established pattern in New Testament times is not clear. We know that the early church worshiped together, but who presided at their services and how they were organized is not known. To some people this is problematic because they do not want to do anything that is not specifically authorized in Scripture, but when it comes to the public worship of God, there is simply not enough in the Bible to dictate what our order of service should be. As a result, every church is obliged to supplement what is found in the New Testament with provisions of its own that it regards as being compatible with biblical principles.

In the modern world, worship falls into two main types—liturgical and nonliturgical. Broadly speaking, the more a church has retained its medieval heritage, the more likely it is to be liturgical, since that was the norm before the Reformation. Liturgical worship grew up over many centuries and was eventually codified in a number of different forms. During the Reformation, the churches that retained those forms reduced their number and standardized them still further, with the aim of protecting the uniformity of the church's doctrine by making sure that everyone worshiped according to the same pattern. The key to understanding liturgy is to recognize that it is designed to provide both breadth and depth in our devotional life. A good liturgy will cover all the main biblical and doctrinal themes in a way that allows the worshiper to memorize them and reflect on them more deeply over time. Usually it will include a regular cycle of readings from Scripture based on the Christian year, which begins at Advent and continues through Christmas and Easter, culminating with the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The time from then until the next Advent, which is nearly half the year, is not specifically organized and may be devoted to other doctrinal themes.

By its nature, liturgical worship cannot be sampled on a casual basis. It demands commitment and yields its benefits over time as its principles and emphases are absorbed by the worshiper. For this reason, it is often unappealing to the young and to those who want instant spiritual gratification, whereas older people can become very attached to it and resent changes that interrupt the flow of their prayers and distract them from concentrating on God. Liturgical worship can also nourish congregations who lack a good preaching and teaching ministry as it helps to make up for that defect. This is not ideal, of course, and liturgies were not composed for that reason, but Christians who are deprived of spiritual nourishment in other forms have good reason to be grateful for the liturgies which they have learned and that sustain them in such times of dryness.



Supporters of nonliturgical worship often argue that it is superior to any liturgy because it is “free.” To their minds, this means that it is more in tune with a community that lives in the Spirit, but this is not so obvious if we compare the two styles objectively. Nonliturgical worship tends to be much more predictable and monochromatic than liturgical worship is because the spontaneity needed to keep it fresh is hard to maintain over time. Liturgical churches may have a bewildering variety of prayers to choose from, and its ministers can easily get caught up in minute details of order, but nonliturgical ones usually end up with a “hymn-sandwich” pattern (hymn, prayer, hymn, reading, hymn, etc.) which is often meaningless. Even in charismatic churches, it is astonishing how repetitive the “voice of the Spirit” can sometimes be in practice! Practicalities to do with the use of time and the need to ensure a standard of doctrinal orthodoxy may work in favor of adopting a common liturgy, as was done in ancient times and still continues in many churches today. Useful and practical as liturgies can be, however, they should not stifle the practice of private prayer, or of prayer by individual members of the congregation. Even the best of forms can be abused, and if prayer becomes mere repetition it ceases to fulfill its proper role in the life of the church.

Our modern worship must reflect the teaching of the apostles, but it is not bound to follow their practices in every detail. Even if that were possible, it would impose a rigidity on the church that would hamper its mission in the world because so many of those practices were geared to the needs of their time, and our needs are often quite different. Equally dangerous is the habit of reviving “traditions” gleaned from an ancient source and grafted onto the modern church in the name of authenticity. There may be some substance to this, but such artificial revivals can easily distort the meaning and intention of the original (possibly without realizing it) and hamper the mission of the church. A good example is the growing tendency in some Protestant churches for the clergy to wear vestments that reflect the fashions of the late Roman empire but which have no connection to modern life. There may be some advantage in having church officers dressed in a kind of uniform so that other people will know who they are, but to choose one that is totally out of step with the modern world, to invest it with theological meaning, and then to insist that everyone must wear it is absurd and damaging to the church’s credibility as the bearer of an eternal message, as relevant to our times as it was to those of the fourth century.

Whatever pattern of worship we adopt, we must ensure that all things are done “decently and in order,” so as not to bring shame and disgrace on the church. In principle, any church member is free to exercise his spiritual gifts in the congregation, and opportunity should be given for that. In the New Testament, open prayer was something that everyone was entitled to take part in, and the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs was encouraged as a communal activity. Circumstances will inevitably dictate how this is done, and what is possible in a small gathering may be unworkable in larger churches. Here we have to rely on sanctified common sense, and we may be grateful that the Bible gives us the freedom to adapt our practices to the needs of each community and congregation.

At the heart of Christian worship are the ordinances that we normally refer to as “sacraments.” The word “sacrament” derives from the Latin word for “oath” and was originally applied to baptism, which was seen as analogous to the oath a Roman soldier took on entering the army. The church was the army of the Lord, and by submitting to baptism, a believer was



swearing allegiance to him. The word “sacrament” does not occur in the New Testament, unless we take the Greek equivalent (*mystērion*) in this sacramental sense, which does not fit the contexts where it occurs, and which most scholars believe is an incorrect translation of the word. By the fourth century, however, *mystērion* was coming to be used of what we would now call the sacraments, and a whole theology has subsequently grown up around it.

The Western understanding of the sacraments was codified by Peter Lombard (d. 1160) in his *Sentences*, which became the theological textbook of the Middle Ages. Peter categorized the sacraments as means of grace and declared that there were seven of them, apparently because he thought that seven was a sacred number. Neither this definition nor this categorization was ever officially approved by the church, but the influence of the *Sentences* was such that it was taken for granted and used as the basis of debate by all sides in the Reformation era.

Peter Lombard subdivided the seven sacraments into five and two, depending on whether they were intended for every Christian or only for some. The five universal sacraments were baptism, confirmation, penance, Holy Communion, and extreme unction. The other two were ordination and matrimony, neither of which was necessary for any one individual to have, and both of which could not be held by the same person. Because Peter believed that the sacraments were the means by which the church dispensed the grace of God to its members, he saw their administration as the main function of the ministry of bishops and priests. One of the oddities of Peter’s categorization is that of all the seven “sacraments,” only one—Holy Communion—is a regular act of public worship, though in the Middle Ages even it tended to be privatized, with priests performing the ritual by themselves or with only the tiniest of flocks.

The Protestant Reformers restructured this sacramental system on a different principle. In their minds, a sacrament was an extension of the preaching of the gospel, and if an ordinance did not do that, it had no right to be called by that name. Given that the word “sacrament” does not appear in the New Testament, it is possible to argue that their restructuring was no more biblical than Peter Lombard’s had been. We must certainly be careful about lumping together ordinances that are not connected in the Scriptures, but at least everyone agrees that baptism and Holy Communion proclaim the gospel of Christ and are found in the New Testament. The other five have either been abandoned on the ground that they developed out of a misunderstanding of biblical teaching, or have been relegated to a different category. Confirmation, for example, continues to be used in churches that practice infant baptism, but it is now usually regarded as a completion of that baptism and not as a distinct sacrament in its own right. Penance and extreme unction are no longer practiced on a regular basis, although there is clearly nothing wrong with repenting of one’s sins or with prayers for the sick and dying. The difference is that these things are no longer ritualized or integrated into a system of confession to a priest, followed by specific acts of contrition determined according to the gravity of the fault being atoned for.

Ordination and matrimony are both ordinances of the modern church, but Protestants do not regard them as mutually exclusive. Ordination is a public recognition by the church of a particular ministry, but it does not confer a special status based on the reception of some additional grace, and cannot be interpreted in sacramental terms. Matrimony is also practiced by the church (which was not the case in New Testament times), though in most countries there has been



growing interference from the state that has led to a number of complications. Generally speaking, the church recognizes the validity of a marriage performed by the state and does not repeat the ceremony, which means that in countries where civil marriage is compulsory, the church can only bless a union so contracted.

The church is also obliged to accept civil divorce, but it does not dissolve marriages, so that a divorced person who remarries during the lifetime of a previous spouse is committing adultery in the eyes of the church. Unfortunately, it is often difficult to enforce this in practice, and some divorced people are remarried in a religious ceremony, in defiance of the Bible's teaching on the matter. In some churches marital discipline is so lax that remarried divorcees may even be admitted to preaching and teaching offices, a scandal which threatens the moral integrity of the Christian community and compromises its witness to the wider world. Same-sex unions, which are recognized by some civil jurisdictions as marriages, are forbidden by the Bible and cannot be legitimately performed or blessed by any Christian body, though again, lax enforcement of this means that these things do occasionally happen, and there is a vocal body of liberal protesters who want the church to abandon the truth of the gospel and recognize such immorality as legitimate.

## THE LORD'S SUPPER

The most important sacrament, and the one that ordinary Christians are most likely to take part in on a regular basis, is Holy Communion, also known as the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, or the Mass. The different names reflect different theological traditions, and it is difficult to find one that is genuinely neutral. Evangelical Protestants tend to prefer "the Lord's Supper," which was also the term preferred in ancient times. Scholarly ecumenists go for "Eucharist," and those of high church inclinations say "Mass," even though this word is nothing but a corruption of the Latin word *missa*, which occurs at the end of the service in the dismissal of the congregation (*ecclesia missa est*). It has no theological meaning in itself, but it signals to participants that the celebrant holds to the Roman Catholic doctrine of eucharistic sacrifice, and Catholics continue to use it for that reason. In whatever guise, the Lord's Supper has always been the central act of Christian worship, though the forms it takes and the frequency with which it has been celebrated have varied widely over time and have been the subject of much controversy.

Its origin goes back to the Last Supper of Jesus and his disciples, when he broke bread and gave it to them, telling them that it was his body which was to be broken for them. He also passed around a cup of wine, telling them that it was his blood, which would be poured out for them. Whether this Supper was a Passover meal has been disputed, but that there is a connection with Passover is clear from the fact that Christ was called the Passover Lamb.<sup>74</sup> After his resurrection, Jesus accepted the hospitality of two men whom he had met on the road to Emmaus and to whom he explained the events of his crucifixion, which had taken place just a few days before. He was not recognized by them until they sat down to eat and he broke bread, a clear reminder of what had taken place at the Last Supper. The text does not say that this was a celebration of Holy Communion, and given that as soon as the men recognized him, Jesus vanished out of their



sight, it almost certainly was not, but the breaking of bread was enough to trigger their memories, and the symbolism of this has passed into eucharistic worship.

Later on, we find Paul giving the Corinthians details of how the Communion service should be conducted. It is virtually the only time that he refers directly to words that Jesus uttered before his resurrection, which indicates how significant that occasion was. We are given the impression that the memorial of Christ's death was celebrated frequently at Corinth, probably weekly and perhaps even daily, and that it may have been part of a wider fellowship meal, known today as the agape feast. Whether that was true (or typical of the early church in general) is hard to say, but the focus was always on the remembrance of his death and the promise of his future coming. Before long, that was the only purpose of the Communion meal, which then became stylized in the life of the church as part of its worship. As far as we know, only baptized believers were admitted to the Lord's Table because Holy Communion was understood as representing the gift of the Holy Spirit to live the Christian life in conformity to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Having died and been raised to new life with Christ in baptism, the believer was expected to go on growing in that new life by constantly being brought back to the foot of the cross and challenged again to take it up and follow him. Anyone who did not understand this and who ate and drank without "discerning" the Lord's body was bringing down damnation on himself and even risking sickness and death.<sup>77</sup>

Oddly enough, the earliest Christian witnesses outside the New Testament tell us far more about baptism than they do about Holy Communion, perhaps because conversion was seen as more fundamental to the Christian life. Whatever the reason, it is not until the fourth century that we start to find extended theological reflection on the Lord's Supper, which by then had become the centerpiece of an increasingly elaborate liturgy. It was universally acknowledged that Christ was present in the celebration, feeding his people. That this was done by the mediation of the Holy Spirit was also agreed, though it was not explained precisely how that happened. Only much later, during the Middle Ages, did theologians venture to describe what went on in the Supper, and when they did so they concentrated on what supposedly happened to the elements of bread and wine. A minor controversy erupted in 692 when the Council in Trullo legislated that only leavened bread should be used in the ceremony, since (according to the council) unleavened bread was too Jewish. Unfortunately, the Western churches mostly used unleavened bread in the form of wafers<sup>79</sup> and continued to do so, sparking a controversy that lasted until the Council of Florence in 1439 and continues in some circles to this day. Silly and unnecessary as it was, this dispute is a reminder to us of the deep sensitivities that have always attached to the rituals surrounding this sacrament, where even the smallest differences in practice can provoke a reaction from those unused to the new practice, and where theological significance can be accorded to almost anything, whether or not this is justified. Sorting out the core doctrine from the pious practices that surround it has never been easy, and in different ways this problem continues to affect the church today.

It was not until the ninth century that the first suggestion of transubstantiation arose. Transubstantiation is the belief that, when the bread and wine are consecrated, their substance changes into the body and blood of Christ, even though their outward appearance (the so-called "accidents") remains the same. This theory was based on the physics of Aristotle, and became



untenable when his view of matter was discarded, but that has not prevented the Roman Catholic Church from insisting on it and building an array of devotional practices around it. By itself, transubstantiation might have been less important had it not been connected with another development, which was the progressive integration of the Old Testament into the life of the church. By the sixth century, church buildings were being erected following the blueprint of the Jerusalem temple as described in 1 Kings 6–7. The dignity that attached to the priesthood of the Old Testament was applied to the Christian clergy, even to the point of assigning them tithes on the Old Testament model. It is therefore hardly surprising that the functions of the Old Testament priesthood were transferred to the clergy of the Christian church, who came to be seen as men who offered sacrifices to God in the same way as those who served the ancient Jerusalem temple had done.

There was, however, one big difference between ancient Jewish priests and their Christian counterparts. The Old Testament priesthood was hereditary, in line with the nature of the Jewish dispensation through the generations of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The New Testament church was not a nation in the physical sense but a new kind of human community. The Mosaic law had specified that the priests should not have a portion of the Promised Land to call their own, because they were to be scattered among all the tribes of Israel and were meant to live off their tithes. This was reinterpreted in the medieval church to mean that the Christian priesthood was to remain celibate (and therefore to have no inheritance). The introduction of a doctrine of transubstantiation greatly increased the mystique of the Christian priesthood, underscoring not only the difference between the Old and New Testaments but (more importantly) the superiority of the priests of the New over the Old. After all, anyone could sacrifice a lamb for the sins of the people, since no special power from God was required for that. But only someone endowed with the power of the Holy Spirit could turn bread and wine into Christ's body and blood, an act that quickly became known as "the miracle of the altar."

As that belief grew stronger, supplementary devotional practices grew up around it. Consecrated bread and wine was reserved in the church and venerated as if it were really the body and blood of Christ. Sometimes they would be placed in a "tabernacle" (another throwback to Old Testament imagery) and taken around the streets to encourage popular devotion to them as if they were Christ. Thieves would steal the consecrated bread, known as the "host," and use it for the occult practice known as the black mass, on the assumption that it contained some spiritual power that they could manipulate. So sacred did the bread become that lay people were forbidden to touch it; it could only be put directly on the recipient's tongue by the priest. The cup was gradually withdrawn from the people, possibly originally as a hygienic measure in time of plague, but eventually as a theological principle. When this was objected to as a nonbiblical practice, theologians cleverly concluded that the blood was contained in the body, so that whoever received the bread was receiving Christ's blood as well. Meanwhile, the priest continued to drink from the consecrated cup, thereby enhancing his status as a mediator between God and the people. All this was a far cry from the New Testament picture of the Last Supper, and it was inevitable that when the Reformation came, it would focus on the Mass and the practices surrounding it as one of the chief abuses that had to be put right.



Unfortunately, even before the Reformation got off the ground, there was a disagreement between Martin Luther and the Swiss reformer Huldrych Zwingli that continues to reverberate to this day. Both men agreed that transubstantiation was a false and untenable doctrine, but they differed about what ought to be put in its place. Luther continued to focus on the real presence of Christ in the sacrament, and to locate that presence in the elements of bread and wine. He differed from the Roman view, however, in believing that Christ was present in, with, and “under” the elements of bread and wine, not by a process of transubstantiation but in a way that we now call “consubstantiation.” In Luther’s view, the body and blood of Christ were spiritually present in the Supper and linked to the elements by association. The bread and wine remained what they were, but they conveyed the body and blood of Christ as a spiritual reality, which was attached to their natural substance in such a way that the person who consumed the physical elements partook of the body and blood of Christ, whether or not he believed in him. Those who ate and drank worthily were blessed by this, but those who did not were condemned and exposed to numerous perils, including disease and death, as Paul had said.

Zwingli, on the other hand, said that bread and wine remain what they are and cannot become anything else. In the Lord’s Supper, they serve as a remembrance of Christ’s body and blood without being or becoming those things in any way. The benefit of the Supper was to be found in its value as a memorial, a reenactment of the death of Christ that was supposed to stir the hearts of believers to seek him spiritually in their lives. Those who were convicted of the meaning of his death would benefit from the sacrament, whereas those who failed to discern this would get nothing out of it.

These differences were taken very seriously and led to such bitterness that they almost killed the Reformation before it started. A mediating position was developed by Martin Bucer and transmitted through his disciple, John Calvin, to the wider Protestant world. Bucer and Calvin rejected the consubstantiation theory because it focused on the elements rather than on the recipients, but they did not like the memorialist ideas of Zwingli either. What they wanted was a *via media*, something that would retain the spiritual value of the rite without falling into medieval superstition or some approximation thereof. The solution they came up with was to tie the celebration of the Lord’s Supper to the preaching of the Word of God. The message of salvation in Christ was never a purely intellectual thing. Included in it was the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, and so it was necessary to include the body in the message of the gospel. This was done by means of the Lord’s Supper, when believers took the death and resurrection of Christ into their bodies by means of the sacrament. But since the bread and wine contained no supernatural powers that could do anything to transform the body of the recipient, this benefit had to be understood in a spiritual way, as the promise of the resurrection of the body that would occur when the Lord returns. This is why Paul stressed the eschatological dimension of the sacrament—it looked forward to the consummation of all things, as well as backward to the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

In the meantime, the function of the Supper is to reinforce the message that the new life in Christ reaches into every part of our being. There is no division between the religious and the secular, the spiritual and the material. Everything comes under the lordship of Christ and everything must be subjected to and transformed by him. The Supper is indeed a memorial, in



the sense that it recalls the historical sacrifice of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection on the third day. But what took place on a single occasion in time and space has now been taken up into the heavens, where the risen, ascended, and glorified Christ pleads for our forgiveness by presenting his broken body and poured out blood to the Father as the propitiation for our sins. This heavenly reality is brought home to us by the Holy Spirit, who uses the elements of bread and wine in the Supper as a means of making us aware of what Christ is doing for us and of challenging us to accept it for ourselves. It has an eschatological dimension that is easily ignored, but which Paul was careful to emphasize in his instructions to the Corinthian church. The Lord's Supper faces both ways—it looks back to the sacrifice of Jesus in time and space and forward to the consummation of that sacrifice in eternity. What Jesus did once for all on the cross he is now doing eternally in heaven. We cannot go back in time to ancient Palestine, but that does not matter because we are seated in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, and it is in that context that we partake of the Supper of the Lamb who was slain.

The believer who partakes of the Supper on earth is demonstrating his commitment to the mediatorial work of Christ for him in heaven, and he benefits from it accordingly. The person who takes the bread and wine but does not acknowledge its significance eats and drinks damnation to himself because he does not discern the Lord's body. To attempt to bring that body back to earth by some kind of transubstantiation is to try to bypass the work of the Holy Spirit. Those who do this may not be diminishing the mediatorial role of Christ as such, but by attempting to gain access to it by material means they are subverting the work of the Spirit and denying people access to the very thing that they are claiming to provide. This was the true scandal of the Mass and the reason why Bucer and Calvin condemned it as idolatrous—it tried to replace a heavenly and spiritual reality with an earthly caricature that promised access to it but actually denied it, just as Satan had promised access to God for Adam and Eve but actually cut them off from him. Only when this is understood can the vehemence with which the Reformers attacked the medieval church be properly appreciated, and only then can we understand why it is so important not to lose sight of their vision in our own worship and practice. If the Lord's Supper is central to our worshiping life as Christians, this is because it is one of the chief means by which God draws us closer to himself in the power of his Holy Spirit, whom he has sent to proclaim the truth of the gospel of Christ which the Supper so eloquently reveals to us. Distort that and we are lost; remember it and we shall find that the Lord's Supper is a blessing given to us by God so that we can ponder and experience his love more deeply than mere words could ever allow.

## THE BOUNDARIES OF BELONGING

Who has the right to participate in the Lord's Supper? In principle this would seem to be an easy question to answer, in that all baptized members of the church should be welcome as communicants at the Lord's Table. In practice, however, things are not that simple. For a start, infants who have been baptized have generally been refused permission to receive Communion until they have made a personal profession of faith and been confirmed as church members. This is a sensible precaution in churches that practice infant baptism, and can be defended on the



ground that a communicant must be able to “discern” the Lord’s body, which presumably means that he must be able to understand what he is doing. However, there have always been those who believe that there should be sacramental consistency—anyone who has been baptized should be admitted to the table as well. In the Eastern Orthodox churches infants are given Communion after their baptism but then they usually do not receive it again until they are older and able to take it for themselves. This precedent is sometimes cited by liturgical reformers in the West, but it is of limited value because regular Communion is much less common in the Eastern churches and refraining from taking the sacrament is not as odd as it would be in most Protestant or Roman Catholic congregations today.

One of the effects of modern liturgical reform has been to make Holy Communion the chief form of worship in many churches on a Sunday morning, but although this can be justified in liturgical and theological terms, the effects have been far from uniformly positive. The biggest problem is that when Communion becomes the norm, it is difficult, if not impossible, to exercise any spiritual discipline. The New Testament tells us that we should prepare ourselves to receive the sacrament by sorting out our affairs before we come, but if we are expected to receive it as a matter of course every week, that is very difficult to do. The structure of most modern services also makes it virtually impossible not to receive the Communion when it is offered, which can create embarrassment when there are visitors present who, for one reason or another, do not wish to participate. Opting out of Communion has become more difficult, and preparation, with the discipline which that implies, is virtually unknown. Contrary to the intentions of the liturgical reformers, the sacrament has been trivialized and devalued by overuse, and so its significance in the life of the believer and the congregation has been obscured.

Difficulties can also occur with members of other churches. Most Protestant denominations are happy to admit anyone from another church to their Communion table, but this is not true of Roman Catholics or Eastern Orthodox, whose authorities not only refuse to admit others to their tables but forbid their members from receiving Communion in other churches. The logic behind this is that these churches believe that they and they alone are the true church, and it is only within the communion of that church that the sacrament has any meaning. Protestants rarely claim that their denomination is the true church to the exclusion of all others, and so are usually prepared to admit nonmembers, especially if they are visitors from elsewhere. The consequence of this is that, if the decision to partake is generally left up to the recipient, no discipline can be exercised. This tendency has even been stretched to the point where some Protestants hold Communion services outside the church context altogether, where no oversight or discipline is possible.

This is clearly an unsatisfactory situation that has to be addressed at the level of principle and then put into practice. The authorities of the church have a responsibility to ensure that, as far as they are able, Holy Communion should be confined to those who are ready and prepared to receive it. It should always be accompanied by the preaching of the Word and by a sufficiently clear and strong exhortation to repent and turn to Christ, because forgiveness and reconciliation is basically what it is all about. When these things are lost sight of the sacrament is profaned, the Holy Spirit withdraws his blessing, and the church loses a precious opportunity to help its members grow in the love of God for them.



In years gone by, exclusion from the church was marked by excommunication, which meant that the sacrament was withdrawn and the person so affected was excluded from the fellowship of others. A few small congregations still practice this, but on the whole it has disappeared from the modern church, which tends to accept whoever is prepared to come. The advantage of this approach is that it does not discriminate unfairly against those who might come into conflict with church authorities. In England, for example, it was once customary to excommunicate people who failed to pay their tithes or who were held to be in contempt of an ecclesiastical court, and there was considerable abuse of the practice in contexts that were essentially secular.

Today we have gone to the other extreme and seem to be prepared to admit people who have no discernible belief at all or who are living openly immoral lives. The effect of this is that the credibility of the church is compromised to the point where it is impossible to maintain any kind of standards at all. Yet it is clear from the New Testament that those who did not believe the doctrine of the church or who lived immoral lives in defiance of its teaching were excommunicated and not allowed to pretend that their behavior was compatible with Christian discipleship. Unless and until the modern church recovers that sense of discipline it will be weak and ineffective, unable to feed its members with the food of the Holy Spirit's teaching and unable to preach the gospel of Christ to an unbelieving world.