
A LIVING COMMUNITY

by

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How to be the church? This was the new, urgent question facing the followers of Jesus after Pentecost. The book of Acts shows how the new believing community responded: 'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, the breaking of bread and to prayer.'

These few hundred, and soon several thousand, new Christians found they had been made a living community through Jesus' resurrection and the Holy Spirit's outpouring at Pentecost. Something new and dynamic was happening. Both believers and non-believers sensed the unusual stirring, the feeling of a new movement being born.

Yet, as with all God's work in history, the Spirit's new work was mediated through the old. The new Christian community had roots in the Old Testament and in God's ancient chosen people, Israel. Even Peter on the day of Pentecost made the connection with God's work in the past: 'This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel.' King David himself, he said, was Jesus' forerunner and looked ahead to the New Israel.

Jumping across twenty centuries to today's world is not impossible or strange, for it is the same Spirit of Jesus who works in the church today. As with the believers at Pentecost, so today the church is at root the community of people who confess Jesus as Lord and commit themselves to live for God's kingdom. Jesus spoke for all time when he said, 'Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.'

But Christians today, even in new Christian communities, do not exist without connection to the past. Like the first-century believers, the contemporary church is heir to God's work in history – not only in Christ and in the Old Testament, but through two millennia of Christian history as well.

Community and history

The New Testament relates the birth of the Christian community. It gives enough information and insight for believers to understand how the church is to function. The Bible is not an

organizational manual or book of discipline, but the church's charter and source of renewed life. Many of our questions about the early Christian community are left unanswered, and this is how God meant it to be. God intends his disciples to live by the spirit and the foundational truths of his written word, not by specific details of form and practice.

The church is "a mixed society. It is not a community of saints and dedicated persons, but a society of sinners at every variety of spiritual development."
Max Warren

Already in the New Testament we find variety in the church. The Jerusalem church, pictured in the early chapters of Acts and briefly elsewhere, was significantly different from the more diverse community at Antioch. It was made up of a different blend of people, and was probably also different in worship and organization. When Paul and his missionary group set out from Antioch, they planted new church communities throughout much of the Mediterranean world. We learn of these new communities in Paul's letters as well as in Acts.

The New Testament writings show that at the basic level of truth, principle and spiritual dynamic these communities were quite similar. But at the level of custom, culture and specific practice they varied greatly. Also, the New Testament writings reveal a growing understanding that, whatever form it takes, the church is the body of Christ, the New Israel and the community of God's people.

It seems to be by God's design that the limits of the New Testament were set where they were, and that other early Christian writings were not included in the canon. Writings such as 1 Clement and the Epistles of Ignatius, valuable as they are, already show a hardening of church organization (somewhat different, in fact, from each other). Such emerging patterns need not be taken as hard and fast rules for the church in all

times and places. God's plan is that the church should be a living community, which means openness and obedience to God's Spirit in each time and place. And this kind of responsiveness to the Spirit means, as history shows, both faithfulness to God's work in the past and openness to new patterns and forms as circumstances change.

“Shut in upon itself, the great concern of the Christian community is to preserve its immunity and safeguard its existence.” Abbé Godin

Very early in Christian history, however, tensions arose between the church's life and the forms embodying that life. This was inevitable. We could think of it as the tension between the church as an organism and as an organization, or between the charismatic and institutional sides of the church. It is the tension between the new wine of the gospel and the old wineskins which contain it. This tension is always present: the tension between, on the one hand, being the authentic community of the Spirit and, on the other hand, using appropriate means and structures for living as God's community in a particular society and culture.

From one angle this is, in fact, the story of church history. Often the church has grown and prospered, creating or adapting structures to carry its life and witness. Some of these forms have been compatible with the New Testament picture of the church; others less so. Church structures have often provided institutional stability. But they have also often dampened the church's spiritual vigour and hurt its witness.

The Church's nearly exclusive reliance on Latin for many centuries, for example, effectively locked up the church's real power. Similarly, the growing split between clergy and laity, ('clericalization'), with all authentic witness and authority pretty well reserved for male clergy, reduced the church's vitality to only a fraction of the New Testament dynamic. At the same time, the growing institutional power and prestige of the church, especially after the conversion of the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century, gave the church the feeling and appearance of success.

From this perspective, the Spirit's vital work in history has been to re-create the church as a living community, calling it back to its biblical life and roots. Church history involves a whole chain of movements of spiritual renewal in the church.

The history of every Christian tradition is dotted with such examples of spiritual resurgence. The various traditions, in fact, themselves generally trace their origin to times of spiritual renewal in the church. When we think of events such as the Protestant Reformation, the twelfth-century evangelical awakening, the revivals in eighteenth-century England and America or twentieth-century Africa – these are but the more visible high peaks in the panorama of God's work throughout history.

At the same time, no one of these movements or renewals can be taken as fully normative or permanently authentic, because none was perfect in itself. Each was rooted in a particular history and culture. And each in time found its own ways to institutionalize and compromise its own vision. So the constant challenge before the church is to let the Spirit apply the word anew to its present life. We must find ways, in our generation, to be the living community so powerfully sketched in the Bible.

THE COMMUNITY OF GOD'S PEOPLE

The Bible pictures the church in a variety of ways. First and foremost, it is the body of Christ. It is the bride of Christ; the flock of God; the living temple of the Holy Spirit. Virtually all biblical images for the church suggest an essential, living relationship of love between Jesus and the church. This underlines the key role the church plays in God's plan. It emphasizes the fact that 'Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her'. If the church is the body of Christ, the means by which Christ the head is able to act in the world, then the church is an indispensable part of the gospel. Salvation inescapably involves believers with the life of the church.

The Bible shows the church surrounded by particular cultures, struggling to be faithful, but sometimes made less effective by unnatural alliances with paganism and Jewish legalism. In the New Testament, the earthly and heavenly sides of the church fit together in one whole. We are not left with one perfect, spiritual church and another compromised, human organization incompatible with it. The church is one; it is the one body of Christ that now exists both on earth and 'in the heavenly realms'.

To understand the church more fully, we need to look at three ways in which the Bible sees the church.

Historical and universal

The church fits into God's overall plan to unite all things in Jesus Christ. The church is the people of God which God has been forming and through which he has been acting down through history. In this sense the church has roots that go back into the Old Testament, back even to the fall of humankind. Its mission stretches forward into all remaining history and into eternity.

Its story is the church's historical dimension. But it has also a universal dimension. This space-time world is really part of a larger, spiritual universe in which God reigns. The church is the body given to Christ, the conquering Savior. God has chosen to put the church with Christ at the very centre of his plan to reconcile the world to himself.

The church's mission, therefore, is to glorify God by carrying on in the world the works of the kingdom which Jesus began. This gives the church a broader service, continuing the ministry Jesus had 'to preach good news to the poor. . . to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour'.

"Evangelism is just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread." D. T. Niles

Charismatic rather than institutional

The church is, in a broad sense, an institution. But it is more fundamentally a charismatic community. That is, it exists, by the grace (*charis* in Greek) of God and is built up by the gifts of grace (*charismata*) bestowed by the Holy Spirit. As seen biblically, the Christian community is not structured like a business corporation or a university, but like the human body, on the basis of organic life. At its most basic level the church is a community, not an organization.

God's people

Looked at this way, the universal and the charismatic are united, and the church is seen both within the world and reaching beyond the world.

Since the church is the people of God, it comprises all God's people in all nations, including those who have now crossed the space-time boundary and live in the immediate presence of God. But the people of God must have a visible, local expression where people come together in a reconciled and reconciling fellowship. And at this local level the church is the community of the Spirit.

The church finds its identity in this unified, complementary rhythm of being a people and a community, both within a city or culture and within the larger world-wide context. People and community together constitute what the New Testament means by the Greek word *ekklesia*, the called-out and called-together church of God.

The biblical pictures of body of Christ, bride of Christ, household, temple or vineyard of God and so on, reveal the basic idea of the church. These are metaphors, however, and not definitions. While the church is a mystery and escapes adequate definition, the phrase 'the community of God's people' seems to come closest to capturing the reality suggested by the various images the Bible used for the church.

The twin concepts of community and peoplehood emphasize some vital truths:

- **The church is people**, not an institutional structure.
- **The church has a corporate or communal nature** which is absolutely essential to its true being. It is not just a collection of isolated individuals.
- **Being a community and a people is a gift from God** through the work of Jesus Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The church is not created by human techniques or plans. It is made the people of God through what Jesus Christ has done. This reality opens the door to the possibility of a truer and deeper community than humanity can know in any other way.

The concept of peoplehood is firmly rooted in the Old Testament. It underlines the objective fact that God has been acting throughout history to call and prepare what Peter characterized as 'a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God'. The idea is closely related to the concept of the covenant.

The Greek word for people is *laos*, from which comes the English 'laity'. This means the *whole* church is a laity, a people. Here the emphasis is on the universality of the church – God's people scattered throughout the world in hundreds of specific denominations, movements and other structures.

Seen as the 'people of God', the church is the inclusive, world-wide, corporate reality of the multitude of men and women who, throughout history, have been reconciled to God and to each other through Jesus Christ. God has been moving

in history to draw together a pilgrim people. When we look at it from a historical or universal perspective, the church is the people of God.

On the other hand, the church is a community or fellowship, a *koinonia*. This is an especially New Testament emphasis and grows directly out of the experience of Pentecost. If peoplehood underlines the continuity of God's plan from Old to New Testament, community calls attention to the 'new covenant', the 'new wine', the 'new thing' God did in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. This idea focusses on the church as local and visible, on the close personal encounters of its common life. Seen as a charismatic organism, the church is the community of the Holy Spirit.

Steward of God's grace

God has given his people two great resources:

- **The physical world** of space, time, persons, nature and material things;
- **His own Spirit of grace.**

The church is charged with the task of being a good steward of these resources. Peter tells us that believers should be 'good stewards of God's varied grace' in using their spiritual gifts. As a

charismatic organism, the church is to employ carefully the gifts it has received, to serve and glorify God.

God has graciously saved us through what Jesus has done, applied to us by the Holy Spirit. This provides the basis for the church's community life. The pure light of God's 'varied grace' is then broken down as it shines through the church, as light through a prism, producing the varied, multicoloured *charismata*, or gifts of the Spirit.

The Greek word Peter used for God's 'varied grace' often expresses the idea of 'many-coloured', as in the variety of colours in flowers or clothing. This suggests that the pure, intense but invisible light of God's glorious grace is made colourfully visible in the diversity of spiritual gifts in the Christian community.

This is how the Holy Spirit gives the church its diversity within unity. The church is built up as its members use their spiritual gifts. As Paul puts it, 'The whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.'