

THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH

by Joseph R. Shultz

Ecclesiology and the Future of the Church. The future of the Church is directly related to the strength of the teaching of the doctrine of Christ.

The Lord of the church, Jesus Christ, is the only basis of the true church. The "establishment" of the church is not in its organization or historic manifestation but in its Lord. The power of the church is not in its membership, but its Master. The resurrected Christ — at the right hand of God — is the only "establishment." The Lord of the church came "to give His life a ransom for many," and "who, being in the form of God thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men; and, being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death on the cross" (Phil. 2:6-8).

The Church does not try to glorify itself but seeks to subordinate itself to its witness, placing itself without any reservation in the service and under the control of that which is the Lord's. However, it seems that the characteristic temptation and trend of the church is in representing itself rather than the justification-sanctification which has taken place in Jesus Christ. An analysis of our time might well reveal that in no era since the Reformation has the evangelical church endangered its witness with the image of "establishment," even to the mitigation of the truth that its existence is only valid as it points beyond itself and to the living Christ. Never before has the church had so many vested interests which it guards often under the guise of tradition and sacred doctrine.

The teaching of the Christological doctrine as foundational to ecclesiology precludes establishment and predicates the provisional nature of the church. The church is always moving toward the *eschaton*. Certainly the basic interpretation of Eph. 4:11-15 is that the very vocations in the church — apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers — are established for its provisional nature, "till we all come." It is provisional because it has not yet attained final achievement, nor will it ever do so. The church, like the apostle Paul, must say, "I count not myself till apprehended; but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:13, 14).

The church is always a movement, — a movement with a goal —

established in the person and work of Christ. The movement continues in history and becomes universal insofar as its conclusion is the glory of its Lord. We must resist the semblance of a church whose primary aim is self-glorification. In history the "movement" of the church has displayed inherent power to challenge both those within and without its membership.

The church is the provisional "today" in the eternal truth — "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb. 13:8). The provisional representation of today is validated only as it is related to the "yesterday" and the "forever" of Christ. For the Christian this is the point of reference which gives meaning to both history and time. Because of the church's stance in time, its "fitting" is always made relevant by its Lord. In other words, the methods of the movement of the church are always made applicable by the representation of Christ in time. In this sense the church is never completely fitted (*Katapti ov* - a perfectly adjusted adaptation)¹ for its task, but is always being fitted by the quickening power of his Holy Spirit. The dynamic of the Spirit must bring relevance to the methods of the movement of the church, if there is going to be relevance.

Edification and the Future of the Church. What is the meaning of the New Testament term "edification" as applied to the church? In the Septuagint the word *oikodomai* appears 17 times. In St. Paul's epistles *oikodoma* occurs 14 times. Of course we know that the basic meaning of the term is "the act of building." The term *oikodomos* is a builder, an architect. The derived term *oikodomia* is a building of a house. Earlier usage of the term *oikodoma* was as an abstract noun, but in time the noun had a tendency to become concrete and is found here in a rather transitional sense. Paul's usage of the term in relation to the church caused its meaning to become "edification."²

God is the builder of the church. Christ declares, "I will build my church. . . ." (Matt. 16:18). The passage in II Corinthians 5:1 is very interesting in this topical context: (*Oikodoman ek theou echomen, oikian acheiropoiaton*) "A building proceeding from God as builder." The direction of action and the power of operation is strongly felt in the first part of the passage, then the result of the operation is afterwards expressed. God, the architect of heaven and earth, is also the architect of the church upon the earth in time. He is not only at the cornerstone in His son Jesus Christ, but He also remains as the one providing the elements of the building and the one setting them in their proper place. He is not one who simply puts up His sign on the job and then becomes an absentee foreman, but one who remains active day and night in heaven and in earth concerning his community of faithful (cf. Psalm 139). It is God in

Christ through the Holy Spirit who concretely directs the activity and determines the actions of men in this work of building and growing in Himself. The Christian community is what it is in as much as He is present, speaking and acting as the chief architect.

Thus, what is commonly described as "edification" is more essentially the sanctifying work of God in the Christian community. Edification is the process of both proclamation and the progressive results of that proclamation. The adoration of God in Christ through the Gospel is basic to the building and growing of the *ecclesia*. This interpretation and emphasis brings greater correlation between the New Testament terms building, body, and temple. This basic interpretation, however, must be guarded from becoming centered anthropologically rather than christologically. In other words, in an ultimate sense Christ is the author and the finisher of the edifying process of the church and man enters into the process by praise, prayer, and worship.

In ordinary construction and growth there are usually finished works; however, in the Christian community there is always a progressive movement upon that which is already established. In the church there is no such thing as a finished task. Every work and activity in a sense is a repetition of that already taken place and that which is to come. The Christian community looks for and waits upon the completed edifice which will be consummated only in the eschaton.

Evangelism and the Future of the Church. The evangelism of the church is not just predicated upon an historic distant command, but by a present distinct work of grace going on in the world through the Holy Spirit. Of the many scriptural passages which could be cited, II Corinthians 5:17-20 is selected:

"Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creation; old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to Himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them, and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now, then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us; we beg you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God."

In this great passage we are met with the singular truth that *we* enter into the work of *Christ*. We do not initiate or control evangelism, nor are we the continuance of the incarnation of Christ, but simply participants in the ministry of the reconciliation of God in Christ. In the earlier verses of this section we learn that repentance, faith, regeneration, new creation, is due to what God has done for us. Paul describes the process in saying, "God recon-

ciled us to Himself through Christ," which in fact brings us to the point of genuine evangelism.

God effected our reconciliation, which by its essence makes us ambassadors of reconciliation. The present participles, "engaged in reconciling to himself," "engaged in not reckoning to them their transgressions," reveal that God is busy transforming enemies into friends. This work of God is occurring. It is now in process and is the basis of Christian evangelism.

The last part of the 19th verse transfers the work of the ministry of Christian evangelism from Christ to the Christian: ". . . and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation." The present participle in the first part of the verse gives way to an aorist: "hath deposited it in our charge." This true evangelism has been placed into our hands by God, God is doing this wonderful work, through His ambassadors bringing reconciliation and pardon from sin to the world, "in them," the individuals in the world. From this passage we begin to realize just how much is conveyed to us. The very word of reconciliation (deposited with us) is a mighty word! How dare anyone alter, change, or reduce this word committed unto them. How dare we act as if *we* were dealing with men, or let men think they are dealing only with *us*. Must we not then be very careful of this high office? Ambassadors are absolutely responsible to their king.

The specific term "*euaggelistas*," evangelist, is rather limited in the New Testament (Acts 21:8; Ephesians 4:11; II Timothy 4:5). The picture of an evangelist from these passages is of one who spreads the Gospel in new places. We have the example of Philip who first worked in Samaria (Acts 8:6-14) and who also worked along the coast up to Caesarea (Acts 8:40). It seems that the New Testament evangelists are nearer to our modern missionaries in ministry and work.

A complete understanding of "evangelism" must be taken into account when forming its methods. In other words, we tend to use the same methods for those who never heard the Gospel before and those who are immunized by having heard it so many, many times. From the strict New Testament sense can we really say that in communities where the Gospel has been preached many times, evangelism is not a primary work? Perhaps God is trying to tell us today that in those communities where there are many good churches teaching the genuine Gospel of Christ, edification should be its primary purpose, enabling the evangelists to go out into the new places where evangelism is a primary need.

Sometimes these "new places" are in the "old places" such as inner-cities, university campuses, transportation terminals, and communication medias. Isn't it conceivable that it might be to the

greater glory of God for a local church to rent space at O'Hare Airport, or Cleveland Hopkins, or Washington National and establish a chapel with 24-hour, seven-day-a-week Christian service than to sit through more "saturating" services? Can evangelical churches justify more brick and mortar? Or should we admit that its easier to set up brick and mortar than to seek out living souls?

The factors for future effective evangelism are described by various scholars. In Thielicke's book, *The Trouble with the Church*, he writes of "The Decay of the Language of Preaching." This speaks to us today.

Again and again at Easter services I am shocked by the casual, matter of course way in which the news that Christ is risen is taken. Anyone who has really grasped what that means would be rocked in his seat. And at least a few times I also noticed the shaking of the foundations that occur when a powerful sermon really communicates the meaning of the Easter message. When that message dawns on us we are suddenly surrounded by life, where before we had our mortgaged past at our back, and ahead of us only a future beset with anxieties. Then life suddenly looks different, and then a man will also live differently.

To suggest that the language of preaching is decayed is not to suggest that we are to disregard all "Biblical" language, nor to restring the common words in a new sequence which may bring confusion and even heresy. Francis Schaeffer has put it well: "The general evangelicals are often articulating slogans rather than communicating ideas." Carl Henry remarked, "the element missing in much evangelical theological writing is an air of exciting relevance." However, the language of our day must be understood and, to a degree, included in forms of evangelism. Certainly evangelicals who place such weight on the very words of Scripture have the equal responsibility of "selecting specific words" in preaching and evangelism. Is it a fair indictment to say that evangelicals who are so careful with scriptural words are the most careless in their words of preaching and teaching, and that liberals who are so careless with the words of Scripture are so very careful with their words of preaching and teaching? Evangelism in the 20th Century demands specific preparation and careful use of Scriptural and Gospel preaching.

Times demand diversity of method and do not allow for the emphasis of one method to the demise of another. Modern evangelism must face the historic fact of change. How much artificial conservatism, and how many later interpretations and constructions, conceal the sober fact that even what seems the most solid form in which the community has existed and still exists in time are no less radically subject to decay and destruction than all other forms of human historic life? These forms may go back four or fourteen

centuries, but their continuity does not constitute a genuine basis on which one may know the truth of the promise of Matthew 16:18.

Finally, it is the Bible which has always spoken afresh to each new generation. It is the Scriptures which uphold the church; it is not something which Christians can fabricate by their own Bible lectures and Bible studies . . . not even by the Scriptural principle, but by the very power of Scripture itself. It has been stated that it is not only Spirit who creates, sustains, and extends the church but according to Ephesians 6:17 it is the sword of the spirit, the word of God, which protects and defends it. And it is a true phenomenon that both the community and the world are reluctant to allow the word to be spoken unto it in its original and authentic form; however, it is only as this comes to pass that the world will know Him.

FOOTNOTES

¹Lightfoot on I Thess. 3:10. *Katapti ov*, "fitting together" in its classical use, is reconciling political factions; its use in surgery is for setting bones. In the New Testament it is used of bringing a thing into its proper condition, whether for the first time, or as more commonly, after lapse.

²J. A. Robinson, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians*, pp. 164-65.