

# The Church in the Bible

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Today there is a universal manifestation of a deep-seated desire for unity on the part of the various members of a divided Christianity. This has prompted on all sides a return to the sources, and in particular a reassessment of the data to be found in the New Testament. "What is the Church?" is a question of paramount interest today among Christians who are earnest about their faith. The question is all the more imperative at a time as at present when many people are clamouring for a churchless Christianity.

It should not come as a surprise that after twenty centuries of geographical and historical development of the different Churches there should still be a need to enunciate a more precise definition of the true nature of the Church which Christ founded and the apostles began to build. Human thought is constantly undergoing evolution and accordingly our concept of the Church has through the centuries evolved. Since the Church is a living body, we can speak of this development of the notion of the Church as "the self-awareness of the Church." This evolution is, and should be, naturally governed and clarified, first and foremost, by faithful adherence to the words and thought of Jesus Christ.

## The Church and the New Testament Writings

Hence it is to the New Testament that we should look primarily, if we wish to ascertain what the Church considers herself to be. For the New Testament is simply the written record of the testimony by the apostolic Church to Jesus Christ. Now, testimony and specially that of literary authorship is a self-disclosure. Hence we may rightly expect that the apostolic Church, already in existence some twenty years before any of the New Testament writings was composed, has impressed her distinctive personality upon these writings which have been written by her members, under her direction and marked with the seal of her approbation.

It is good to recall here also the fact that the New Testament writings were put together in the course of the years that constituted the formative period of the life of the Church. During this period, under the impact of unique experiences and by specially aided theo-

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logical reflection, the Church grew in the knowledge of her own nature and her mission in this world.

Therefore we could say that the Church is present everywhere in the New Testament, even where it is not manifest in concepts and imagery. If it is the Church that gave birth to the New Testament writings, they all bear witness to its existence and life. Prior to any theology of the Church there stands the reality of the Church. Consequently a discussion on the teaching of the New Testament regarding the Church will have to take into account not only the explicit statements and express pronouncements about the Church, but also the New Testament writings themselves as expressions of the Church's life and as bearing witness to the way the Church viewed itself. Hence it may not be proper to exclude some of the New Testament writings as having nothing to do with the Church or with ecclesiology.

### **Evolution in the concept of the Church**

Even if all the New Testament writings bear witness to the reality of the Church, we cannot ignore the fact that there were certain facets of the character of the Church which were unknown or only half-consciously realized at the beginning of the formative period of the apostolic age. The early community of Jerusalem, created by the revolutionary events of the first Christian Pentecost, cannot be expected to have reached the stature of the Church as she reveals herself in the letters of St. Paul. And even within the body of the Pauline writings we may find a certain evolution in the concept of the Church. Again the picture of the Church which is discernible in the Johannine literature will be seen to possess a depth and a dimension that is not yet perceptible in the thought of St. Paul.

Such attention to and evaluation of the historical process through which the Christian revelation has been communicated to us is, together with the discerning and analysis of the many and varied literary forms found in the books of the New Testament, a notable characteristic of twentieth century New Testament scholarship. If it accumulates new problems and new difficulties, it also supplies new aids and helps to exegesis. In fact, the study of the historical process involved in the formation of the New Testament is one of the outstanding contributions which our era can make to the understanding of the Christian revelation.

### **The literary critical approach and ecclesiology**

The literary critical approach to biblical studies, though it apparently presents a threat to all the traditionally held theories and presuppositions of an over-literalistic approach to the Bible, is really a challenge to be open to the truth and accept it, no matter where it may be found. Thus it prepares the way for a sincere search after truth by all people of good will and consequently it forms a com-

mon ground for discussion for the members of all Christian denominations. As regards ecclesiology I may point out three areas where historical criticism may have a bearing.

### 1. *Jesus' teaching on the Church*

Granting that the essential Gospel structure is the kerygma of the early Christian teachers and preachers, we are faced with the critical question of distinguishing Jesus' position from that of the apostolic preaching of the Christian communities that preserved it and from that of the evangelist who recorded it. This will be important especially with regard to texts dealing with the Church and ecclesiological elements.

In this respect the Gospel of John may be of crucial importance, being the latest of the four Gospels. The Gospel of John could be, in fact, of extreme importance for the study of the historical development of New Testament ecclesiology. This is especially true in the present critical exegetical situation where some qualify the Fourth Gospel as anti- or non-sacramental or ecclesial (Bultmann) while others speak of it as the most sacramental or ecclesial of all Gospels (Barrett and Cullmann).

### 2. *The ecclesiology of the Acts of the Apostles*

The Book of Acts is very important in the study of New Testament ecclesiology. If the Lukan picture of the Jerusalem Church, its organization, its ideals of community life and poverty is perfectly at home on the Palestinian scene of the thirties, the Lukan organization of the Book of Acts from the viewpoint of a more fully developed theology of the second half of the first century demands a careful critical study to uncover the earlier ecclesiological insights that are preserved for us in this book.

### 3. *Pauline ecclesiology*

When treating the ecclesiology of Paul, we should note that the assumption that the Pastorals are post-Pauline remains an assumption, with strong arguments for and against. Even if the Pastorals should prove to be pseudepigraphical, their unknown composer might have felt that their theology was close enough to Paul's to warrant the assumption of the Pauline mantle. So we must be careful to draw a sharp line of demarcation between Pauline ecclesiology and that of the Pastorals.

## **Continuity with Jesus' teaching**

Did Jesus give a detailed blueprint for a Church, which the apostles could take up in different situations? It is difficult to imagine that Jesus indicated already the details of ecclesial development. The apostles and their followers had to work it out confronting the diffe-

rent times and situations. But we have to admit a sort of continuity with Jesus' teaching through his Spirit being active in the Christian community: "When the Spirit of truth comes . . . he will not speak on his own authority . . . he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (Jn. 16:13). So the new stages and developments of the New Testament ecclesiology have to be traced back to Jesus himself through his Spirit, who constantly brought out the meaning of Jesus, his words and works, for the new circumstances, times and places in which his followers found themselves.

### **Not uniformity but unity**

It is obvious that New Testament ecclesiology (as theology for that matter) does not present a picture of linear progress towards a uniform position. There are strong differences in outlook found among the various New Testament traditions. It is true that many of the developments are complementary, filling in a large picture of the Church. But there are clear differences in ecclesial perspectives from author to author in the New Testament writings. Further in the same author we may find various ecclesial perspectives. For instance, the Book of Acts presents the Hellenistic Christians demanding a Church organization different from that of the Jewish Christians. So we cannot think of a uniformity in New Testament ecclesiology.

### **The universal Church: a communion of individual Churches**

A quick glance at the Church in the New Testament will show that the Christian community in different places is simply called *ekklesia* with no question of precedence or correlation (Acts 5:11; 8:1; 11:22; 12:15; 13:1; 14:27). It is also to be noted that the singular and the plural are used promiscuously. Therefore it is not simply one Church that divides up into Churches. Nor does the sum total of the Churches produce the Church. But the one Church is present in the different places. The expression "the Church that is in Corinth" (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1) is meaningful. Therefore the Church as presented by the New Testament is not a highly centralized organization of the monarchical pattern, but a fellowship of different Churches taking root in different places and peoples with different ecclesial perspectives.

### **Variety in institutional and structural organization**

When we look at the picture of the early Churches as found in the New Testament, it is surprising to notice that there is very little interest in the institutional and structural elements. In fact, the New Testament presents a variety of Church structures. If in the Church of Jerusalem we find a collegial structure of members gathered around the Twelve (Acts 2:42-45; 4:34-35), in Antioch we have a leadership of prophets and teachers (Acts 13:1-2). In Ephesus the Church was headed by "elders" (Acts 20:17) who were also called

“bishops” (Acts 20:18). This shows that the Church can take any structural set up provided it does not go against its nature as the Church of God in which the enduring reality of the saving act, which God accomplished in Jesus Christ, is present. This immediately draws our attention to the enduring and unifying elements in the Church.

### **Unifying elements in the Church**

Whatever be the diversity of ecclesiological perspectives, we cannot neglect the unity in faith that is present in all stages of development of New Testament ecclesiology. Therefore we should try to discover also the common and unifying elements found in the diverse ecclesiologies of the New Testament. If we neglect these common elements in favour of diversity, we would fail to give a complete picture of New Testament ecclesiology. Here I would like to mention a few common characteristics that seem to underlie the concept of the Church in the New Testament.

#### **1. Continuity with Israel**

There is a deep consciousness throughout the New Testament that the Church, Jewish or Gentile, is rooted in the Israel of the Old Testament. The many parallels between the Christian community and Israel are indicative of this, for example: Jerusalem, the centre of the Church from where it grows out; the symbolism of the Twelve; the Jesus-Moses parallelism; the title *ekklesia* reflecting the *qahal* or *‘edha* of the Old Testament all point to this continuity with Israel. As Israel was the “Church of God” in the Old Testament, so is the Christian community the “Church of God” in the New Testament (cf. 1 Cor. 1:2; 10:32; 15:9). Hence without a study of the Old Testament concept of the “Church” or “community,” the ecclesiology of the New Testament will remain imperfect.

#### **2. Evangelization: “raison d’être” of the Church**

Luke, the theologian of the Church, gives the outline of his theology at the very outset of his second book, the Acts of the Apostles: “So when they had come together they asked him, ‘Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’ He said to them: ‘It is not for you to know the times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth’” (Acts 1:6-8). Here we have a description of the time of the Church, which is a time between the time of Christ and the End. The purpose of that time is to have the witness of Christ carried to the ends of the world by the community of the disciples led by the “apostles,” and the power behind their witness will be the Spirit. Here we have a clear indication that the Church is a community of disciples bearing witness to the Risen Christ and his Gospel. Therefore evangeliza-

tion becomes the *raison d'être* of the Church. It is, in fact, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize.

### 3. *Apostolicity*

In all the Gospels the missionary commissioning is connected with and consequent to the living encounter of the Apostles with the Risen Christ and their experience of him. The very existence of the Church is thus to be traced back to the ministry of the unique witness of the Apostles (1 Jn. 1:1-4). Therefore the faith of the Church has to be in permanent harmony with their decisive testimony. It is in this context that we have to understand Paul's preoccupation with linking his experience of the Risen Lord with that of the Twelve.

Though the distinction between "the Twelve" and "the apostles" (as referring to the wider group of those "sent" to preach the Risen Christ) is reasonable, to deny that the Twelve were "apostles *par excellence*" would be hypercritical. Later they came to be called "the Twelve Apostles." Paul himself recognized the privileged position of "those who were apostles before me" (Gal. 1:17). The Church to be authentic has to be faithful to this apostolic testimony. Hence apostolic succession belongs to the essence of the Church. Of course, it is not to be understood as merely a succession of persons, but as a succession of faith and its profession. It is primarily a question of awakening again and again the faith that was first awakened through the original testimony of the Apostles and of making this faith known in the Church. This apostolic succession belongs to the whole Church and has manifested itself in manifold ways throughout the centuries and in all countries in the continuous process of baptizing and being baptized, through faith and obedience to the apostolic testimony, through the community of worship and in the Eucharist and in the fellowship and unity of the Churches. Hence apostolicity belongs to the essence of the Church.

### 4. *Service of the Word*

As soon as they were filled with the Spirit, the apostles began to proclaim the Word (Acts 2:4). Their main role was to continue to be at the service of the Word (Acts 6:2-4). It was those who received the Word who were baptized and formed the Church (Acts 2:41). Every member of the Church preached the Word when opportunity arose (Acts 4:34; 8:4). In whatever form the Word reaches her, the Church lives by the Word and finds her identity in ministering to it. The Church is practically identified with the Word. In the Acts of the Apostles we are told that "the Word grew" or "increased" or "was strengthened" in places where actually it is a reference to the growth or increase of the Church (Acts 6:7; 11:24; 13:49; 19:20). The deepest identity of the Church is to be found in the Word and its power. The Church is always at the service of the Word and is carried forward herself by the power of the Word.

### 5. *The Spirit: the Animator of the Church*

It is the Spirit that is the power behind evangelization (Jn. 20:21-22; Lk. 24:49). The early Church's conviction of the eschatological outpouring of the Spirit, and of the operation of the Holy Spirit in her, is so evident from various points of view that this bond with God's Spirit is an essential feature of the Church. It is the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost that marked the inauguration of the time of the Church (Acts 2:1-47). Through the Holy Spirit, the Lord directs his earthly community, sends the Church preachers and pastors, and effects her building up and growth (Acts 9:31; 20:28; Eph. 4:11-16). In short, the whole life of the Church, her growth, her joys, her prophetic endowments, all reflect the dynamism of the Spirit.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have tried to draw the attention of the venerable members of this conference to certain points that we should take into account when discussing the theme "The Church: its Dimensions in the Bible." Both the Old Testament and the New Testament have to be taken into account in this discussion. The discussion on the Old Testament and the intertestamental concept of the community will be an essential preparation for discussing the New Testament concept of the Church. The papers on the Synoptics, John, Acts and Paul will certainly bring out the rich and varied ecclesiological perspectives of the New Testament. I am sure that our study and discussions at this conference will enable us to get a deeper insight into the beautiful diversity and the wonderful unity of the Church in the New Testament. This, I hope, will help us to understand better the nature and mission of the Church in this world and consequently to live our Christian commitment in a more effective way in the world of today.