

Christ's Living Church—Today

This little book does not set out on some theological or ecclesiastical witch-hunt, but rather it is written for us to come to some honest assessment as to where we are and what we are as Christ's church in today's world. Every local church has its critics of that local church, but this is not what we have in mind. Criticism may be negative, hurtful, and greatly harmful. What I trust will happen to readers of this book is that they will seek to get back to the foundation of the church by Christ and the Spirit, and see afresh the power of the gospel which launched the early church and has gone on initiating local churches ever since.

Geoffrey Bingham



New Creation Publications Inc.

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INTRODUCTION

His Living Church Today

For some time the substance of this little book has been in my mind but not put on paper. I consider it most important that the material should be set out in a small book so that it can be easily read. Some years ago I wrote two books, *Christ's People in Today's World*¹ and *Christ the Conquering King*.² The first book deals in quite some detail with the subject of the church, but many today do not read books which have detail. I am hoping that those who read this present small volume will then go on to read both the books here stated.

Two problems have always presented themselves to the church, namely deficient doctrine and consequent deficient or wrong practice of the Christian faith. With this in mind I wrote a book *Truth the Golden Girdle*³, and for a manual-type teaching volume *The Things We Firmly Believe*.⁴

¹ NCPI, 1985.

² NCPI, 1985.

³ NCPI, 1983.

⁴ NCPI, 1992.

These books were intended to be of practical help to interested persons. It is rarely, however, that church members examine the faith and practice of their local congregation and, for that matter, their denomination.

This little book does not set out on some theological or ecclesiastical witch-hunt, but rather it is written for us to come to some honest assessment as to where we are and what we are as Christ's church in today's world. Every local church has its critics of that local church, but this is not what we have in mind. Criticism may be negative, hurtful, and greatly harmful. What I trust will happen to readers of this book is that they will seek to get back to the foundation of the church by Christ and the Spirit, and see afresh the power of the gospel which launched the early church and has gone on initiating local churches ever since.

The book has been written so that readers can go through the text without interruption by references or diversions from the basic material. Some may read it through without any reference to the notes, and that, for them, will be sufficient. Others will read it through and then go through a second time, and use the notes which substantiate statements made, and in some cases give amplification to the claims and argument. Yet others may be readers who read both text and footnotes as they go. None of this matters. I hope readers will form a clear picture of the initiation of the church by Christ, the factors which brought it into being, and which strengthened, sustained, and matured it.

All of this should be helpful and useful. Sometimes the church needs judgement to bring it to its senses. Sometimes it needs reformation and must be led into this. Often it needs to be revived by some sovereign act of God. All of these things will happen because Christ is the Head of the church and loves it. At the same time he calls us to be

thoughtful, obedient, watchful, and those whom he can use to bring about the changes needed within the churches.

I hope many will read this small volume. I hope it will be of help to persons and also be used in group study or in preaching series. I pray the Lord of the church and of the harvest that this book will help to awaken His people who are sleeping and to encourage those who are awake and working.

Geoffrey Bingham

PART ONE

The Lord and His Church

HE WHO BUILDS

Jesus told Peter and the disciples as they journeyed on the road to Caesarea Philippi, 'I will build my church.'¹ What a weight there was in those words—and still is. Jesus intended the disciples to know there would be a church—a new *qahal*², a new *ekklesia*—and it would be a *new* church. Not as 'the church in the wilderness' (Acts 7:38) under Moses, but a church under the New Moses. Israel was under the bondage of the latest Egypt—Rome—but this Redeemer would lead them into the new Promised Land, the Land of Rest.

Of course, all this was not immediately clear to them—it would later be worked out by the apostles and prophets and become a rich reality to the new church. For the

¹ Matthew 16:18. The verse 'And I tell you, you are Peter [*petros*] and on this rock [*petra*] I will build my church' has caused much debate. It seems best to see the *petra* not as *petros* (Peter) but as the confession of Peter that 'Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God'. This is the true foundation (cf. Eph. 2:20; I Cor. 3:11).

² *Qahal* is the Hebrew word for congregation and *ekklesia* is the Greek.

moment the news stunned them. They knew the old *ekklesia*—Israel itself. They looked to a renewal of the Kingdom of God to Israel (cf. Acts 1:6) and doubtless *qahal* and kingdom had been closely associated, but Jesus was saying, 'I will build a people for myself'. He had said this immediately after the revelation given to, and uttered by, Peter, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' That revelation was enough to awaken the disciples to whom Jesus was, and what powers lay with him to effect what he said he would do.

We have two advantages over the disciples as they were on the road that day. We have all the wisdom that comes from hindsight. In this decade of the twentieth century, we can look back in contemplation of the resource materials the apostles gave us which are now laid out before us. We can work our way through them. The disciples could not have comprehended that what history has shown us has come to pass. They had not yet heard all things from the lips of their Lord, and they had not been able to utilise those materials.

COMING TO SEE THE FACT OF THE CHURCH

In the Gospels—and especially in John's Gospel—figures of the church are given. Jesus is the good Shepherd who gives his life for his sheep¹, who knows them and calls them by name, and who feeds them through his appointed disciples. He is the Vine and his people are the branches, bearing fruit as they abide in him.² He is the Son of the

¹ John 10:14–18.

² John 15:1–10.

Father, and in him they are the family of God.¹ Through his death all the children of God scattered abroad will be brought together in one family², for they come to the Father through him, and can anticipate being in the household of God.³ In fact his death will be the new exodus by which he will lead his people out of present bondage into true freedom.⁴ Perhaps more than anywhere in the Gospels the shape of the church is shown in John 17 as the Lord prays for his own. Here the church is the elect body of Christ's people, is militant in this world, reveals the unity of God in its own internal unity and its oneness with God Himself⁵, and is finally the church glorified.

The Acts present us with the fact of the church—its birth at Pentecost, its growth, its message going into all the world, its oneness with Christ its Lord who is taking them to the ends of the earth to proclaim the gospel, and by it to draw in his elect people. In the Epistles a full rationale of the new *qahal* or *ekklesia* is given. The life of the new fellowship in the Father, the Son and the Spirit is set forth. The internal structure of the church with its elders, deacons, and ministering members is shown under many figures, such as the Family⁶—the Household of God⁷—the Temple⁸, The Bride of the Lamb⁹, and so on. Finally, the Book of the Revelation sets out the people of God as being that body which is occupied with 'the word of God and the

¹ John 14:1–10.

² John 11:45–53; cf. Isaiah 43:1–7

³ Cf. note 6 below: Matthew 11:27; Hebrews 2:10ff.

⁴ See Luke 9:3 where *departure* means *exodus* in the Greek.

⁵ See especially John 17:20–26.

⁶ Ephesians 2:18; 3:14–15; 4:6; I John 3:1–2, 10; etc.

⁷ I Timothy 3:15; Hebrews 3:1–6; cf. John 8:31–36.

⁸ I Cor. 3:16; Ephesians 2:21–22; I Peter 2:4, 5; etc.

⁹ Ephesians 5:21–33; Revelation 19:6–8; 21:2, 9–11.

testimony of Jesus'.¹ It is the church which lives in the world and has to face the opposition of the red dragon, the beast, the false prophet and the system called 'Babylon'², so that its life is not an easy one. Even so, under its Lord, it overcomes the red dragon, the beast and the false prophet, refusing the mark of the beast and preferring martyrdom to the domination of Babylon. Ultimately the church triumphs in Christ, is shown as Christ's beloved Bride and, following the marriage of these Two, it is seen as the Holy City of which God and the Lamb are the light, are the Temple and Rulers, attended as they are by the church which is now called 'a kingdom of priests'.³

It is good to see and understand this fact of the church, its function, its history and its fruits. If we live daily in this perspective, then—as members of the church—we have a better understanding of who we are, what we are about, and what will be the fulfilling goal of our actions.

THE BIRTH OF THE CHURCH

Acts chapter 2 gives us a full description of the birth of the church. Both John and Jesus emphasised the need to be baptised in (or with) the Holy Spirit.⁴ The gift of power⁵, the gift of the revelation of the Son and the Father⁶ as well as the gifts of love, unity and fellowship would result from this baptism. Both the Acts and the Epistles show that the church had all these gifts and many more beside. Such

¹ Revelation 1:9; 6:9–11; 12:17; 20:4.

² Revelation chapters 12–18.

³ I Peter 2:9–10; Revelation 1:6; 5:10; 22:5.

⁴ Matthew 3:11; John 1:33; Acts 1:5, 8.

⁵ Acts 1:8.

⁶ John 16:12–15.

gifts would enable the church to survive in the face of the odds against it. Not only would it survive, but it would become powerful in bringing fallen humanity to God, and, under its Lord, finally achieve the victory described in the Book of the Revelation. Jesus had said, 'I will build my church.' In Acts 1:1–8 Jesus had told his disciples that they would be baptised in the Holy Spirit¹, receive power and become witnesses to him throughout all Palestine and then to the ends of the earth. A similar message was given in the final sections of the four Gospels², even though often in different words. The apostles would go into all the world, would preach the gospel to every person, would preach repentance and the remission of sins, would baptise nations into the Triune Being of God, and would teach them what Christ had taught them as his disciples. Acts 2 tells us the following things:

- (a) The waiting 120 persons were all filled with the Holy Spirit, having been baptised by him.
- (b) All present heard—via the various tongues in which the group were speaking—'the wonderful works of God'.³
- (c) Peter explained to the astonished audience the meaning of the phenomena they were seeing. All was

¹ How easily the mind slips over the words '... you shall be baptised with the Holy Spirit'. This was to be the event of all events for the apostles and the rest of the one hundred and twenty (Acts 1:15). It was to bring in the new era of the day of the Spirit, the day of the Kingdom. See my *The Day of the Spirit* (NCPI, 1985). If we do not understand the coming of the Spirit we will be left with human experience of power, human reasoning only.

² See Matthew 28:18–20; Mark 16:14–18; Luke 24:44–47; John 20:19–23.

³ For an exposition of the significance and the nature of tongues (i) as a sign on the day of Pentecost and (ii) as one of the *charismata* (spiritual gifts), see my *Spirit-Baptism: Spirit-Living* (NCPI, 1990).

in accordance with a prophecy in Joel, chapter 2.¹ This meant that they were now at the commencement of 'the last days'. The Spirit was being given to create the prophetic community.

- (d) Peter explained that the crucifixion of Jesus was not a terrible accident, but had been planned by God² Who Himself had witnessed to Jesus by the doing of signs and wonders.
- (e) Peter told the listening thousands that Jesus had been raised from the dead—particularly according to the words of Psalm 16³—and God had raised him up to His throne, from which Jesus was now sending the Spirit, not only pouring him out at Pentecost, (Acts 2:33; cf. 5:31–32), but in Samaria (Acts 8:14–18), Caesarea (Acts 10:44; 11:17), and Ephesus (Acts 19:1–7), as indeed throughout all this present age, the age of 'the last days'.
- (f) Peter further explained that Jesus was now Lord over all things in accordance with the words of Psalm 110:1f.⁴ Israel must now see Jesus as its Lord, as well as Lord over all things.
- (g) The effect of this message was to cut to the heart⁵

¹ Joel 2:28–31.

² See Acts 2:22–23; 4:27–28. Jesus had explained to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus that this was how it had to be (Luke 24:25–27). He had told the disciples three times in Mark's Gospel that the death of the Cross was indispensable (8:31; 9:31; 10:33). They, too, had been scandalised by the thought of the Cross.

³ Psalm 16:8–11. This Psalm must have been widely known. Paul also used it in Acts 13:35.

⁴ This Psalm was well known to the Christians. It is used some 27 times in the Acts, Epistles and the Revelation.

⁵ The listening 3,000 were cut to the heart and received forgiveness of sins. The Jewish Sanhedrin heard the same message from the apostles (Acts 5:33) and 'when they heard this they were enraged and wanted to kill them'. These occasions comport with John 20:23 in regard to the forgiveness and retention of sins. At Pentecost forgiveness came, but in the Sanhedrin the sins were retained.

those who heard what they had done—crucified Christ. So afraid were they that they asked the apostles, 'Brethren, what shall we do?'

- (h) Peter's response was, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'
- (i) The response of 3,000 of the hearers was to do just that—repent, be baptised, so receiving both forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit. By baptism they separated themselves from the crooked generation which had crucified Christ and would not repent.
- (j) The new pattern of living¹ formed itself into four significant activities: (i) devotion to the apostles' doctrine; (ii) devotion to the new fellowship; (iii) devotion to the breaking of bread²; (iv) devotion to the prayers, i.e. gathering at the temple for the hours of prayers.
- (k) All who heard came into fear, and many signs and wonders were done by the apostles.³
- (l) A new experience of fellowship—the fellowship of the

¹ We ought to recognise that the new warmth of love is linked with the forgiveness of sins. Three thousand persons found the utter cleansing of their guilt and pollution and were liberated to live in the love of God brought to them by the Spirit (cf. Rom. 5:5). All too easily do people assume the forgiveness of God—as though it were of no great cost to Him, i.e. that the matter of the Cross was so simple!

² This is generally understood to be celebration of the Lord's Supper in the simplest way possible at each communal meal. In I Corinthians 11 we find mention of 'the love feast', which may have been the same thing, though at Corinth the practice was being abused by some. Some scholars think it was not the eucharist but was spiritual social fellowship of the simplest nature, the same as Acts 2:46.

³ For a useful understanding of the matter of signs and wonders see my *God and Man in Signs and Wonders* (NCPI, 1988).

Spirit—manifested itself in sharing of what they possessed, in sharing meals in one another's homes, and in a new life of praise to God.

- (m) All the while God was adding to the fellowship, day by day, 'those who were being saved'.

This is what we call 'the birth of the church' or—in the words of Christ—his building of his church.

THE NATURE OF THE NEW COMMUNITY

Jesus had said, 'I will build my church.' As we have seen in Acts 7:38, the church in the wilderness, which then became the church in the promised land, was built by God as His holy people. Now Jesus was building his new church. We need to see that there was continuity with the old *ekklesia* because *everyone* who was baptised, forgiven, and received the Spirit on the day of Pentecost was a Jew. No one was a Gentile (non-Jew).¹ There was discontinuity with the old *ekklesia* because baptism separated the new believers from 'the crooked generation', i.e. the generation which had rejected Jesus as Messiah and had crucified him. Chapters 4 and 5 of Acts show the Sanhedrin—the official ruling parliament of Israel—as rejecting officially the risen Christ, the event of Pentecost, and the actions of the apostles as being acceptable to Israel.

Whilst the Christian community in Jerusalem continued to worship at the Temple, and did not dissociate itself from their nation, the time came when the association was dissolved. Historically this may have taken place at the

¹ Acts 2:5–11. Some readers forget they were all Jews.

destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70¹, but essentially it took place at Pentecost.² Those interested in the outcome of the Jewish rejection of Christ should read Romans chapters 9 to 11 where Paul discusses it quite brilliantly.³ Those who wish to see the difference between the covenant under which Israel had lived, and the new covenant system under which the Christians live, should study the Epistle to the Hebrews in detail.

An Excursus on Understanding the Church

We have a problem in trying to understand the nature of the apostolic church. This has come about by the happenings of church history.⁴ The early church knew the problems of heresies, divergences from the apostolic truth which happened very early in the life of the Christian community. 'Heresy' had a different meaning from the one it has today.⁵ Sometimes heresy was developed by syncretising other religious systems or philosophies with the

¹ That was the year when Titus invaded Jerusalem and decimated it, the Temple being wholly destroyed. Since then the Jews have never offered bloody sacrifices because the true altar was destroyed.

² Even after Pentecost the early Jewish Christians saw no need to separate themselves from the Jewish congregation. Paul's call for separation in Acts 2:40 did not mean a literal ecclesiastical separation.

³ The terms of 'old Israel' and 'new Israel' are not used in the NT. Galatians 6:16 is interesting where the term the 'Israel of God' is used, and must refer to all who are accounted as true Israelites by God, whether or not they are Israelites by blood-birth.

⁴ All Christians should read church history, and, if possible, in detail. It is the account of their church for the past 2,000 years. We can learn much both from the churches successes as well as unfortunate excesses.

⁵ The Greek word heresy (*hairesis*) technically means choice, but in the NT it has the idea of 'a part', a group holding certain ideas, having the suggestion of self-will. A heresy was really an aspect of truth much over-emphasised. In I Corinthians 11:9 Paul uses the word, and the context shows that heresies were not actual schisms from the main body of the church, but parties within it.

apostolic truth.¹ Sometimes it was simply an over-emphasis on a truth. This was a form of reductionism, i.e. viewing the whole of truth through one aspect of it.

As history developed, so there came a split in the Eastern and Western churches as the Creeds were hammered out, and as the claims of the Church of Rome—as against the Church of Constantinople—to be supreme were argued. Gnosticism also formed its sectarian structures. The Reformation saw a resurgence of New Testament doctrine, and since doctrine and practice (praxis) are intimately linked, changes in church structures and polity developed. Following the Reformation the doctrine of 'the priesthood of *all* believers' seemed to be interpreted as 'the priesthood of *every* (that is, *each*) believer'² and this gave rise to much independent thinking, so that various denominations came into being. The different polities—e.g. episcopalian, presbyterial, congregational—meant that governmental views of the church were many.

A Christian growing up in today's denominations may think the early church existed along such lines. The term 'church' then evokes images far from that of the New Testament church. One danger is that the present shape (or shapes) of the church may be read back into the early church. This would be unfortunate. Whilst there is no call for churches to conform to a paradigm such as the early church may appear to present, the paradigm might become

¹ One of the most virile of heresies was gnosticism—a dualistic heresy, denying the Incarnation as real. The apostles taught against mingling the truth with such evident falsehood.

² It may well be that in one sense every (each) believer is a priest, but the concept is corporate in Exodus 19:5–6 and I Peter 2:9–10. That is, the church is not an aggregation of single priests but as a body constitutes a priesthood. In any case the congregation is only priestly because Christ the head is the Priest, just as it is prophetic because he is the true Prophet, and royal because he is King.

a tyranny, particularly if the *power* the early church knew should be missing from the imitators of that church.

It is essential, then, that we look at the early church within its own context, its own constitution, its own functionality and its own operations, and this without any intention of imitating it. If it is possible for us to get to its essential nature, then that could be very useful. If we could be one with it in its essential power and its true (teleological) goals, then we might well see revival in our churches.¹

The aim of this exercise is to help us divest ourselves of the modern ecclesiastical images and models that we have, and enable ourselves better to understand the church that Christ built at Pentecost and of which he is Lord today.²

THE CONSTITUTION OF THE NEW COMMUNITY

The Book of Acts shows us that the apostles were the primary leaders of the church. That the apostolate³ (the twelve apostles as a group) was important is shown from the reading of Acts chapter 1. The apostles saw it as essential to fill up their number which had been reduced by the suicide of Judas Iscariot. They used the system of drawing lots, with prayer—an ancient method in Israel—and chose Matthias.⁴ Now there were twelve, a number significant in

¹ Many writers on NT ecclesiology have abstracted the forms of doctrine, worship and practice as they existed in the apostolic church and have set them out as the pattern to which churches should conform. This results in a codification of form, and often develops a harmful legalism in practice. The freedom and spontaneity of the Spirit is missing.

² Here we are not thinking in terms of *modes* so much as terms of *principles*. Modes may well change from generation to generation but principles do not.

³ Sometimes called 'the apostolic college'.

⁴ Debate naturally has arisen regarding Paul's inclusion in the apostolic college. It is asked whether the choice of Matthias by lots was legitimate. It seems that much of this must be speculation and so be pointless. Doubtless the thirteen had apostolic ministry.

the sayings of our Lord¹, in Israel, and delineated as special in the Book of the Revelation.² Acts 1:15 shows that the group of Christ's people in Jerusalem was at least 120. There may have been many more in Galilee.³

Acts chapter 15 shows us that at Jerusalem the church had apostles, elders and people. James the elder, who was not an apostle⁴, spoke eventually on behalf of the apostles and elders, but said, 'Therefore my judgement is . . .', which shows that the leading elder was able to make a pronouncement himself. Following this the apostles and elders together decided to choose leading men from their midst to go to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas and declare the decision of the Jerusalem church. In I Peter 5:1 Peter described himself as a 'fellow elder'.

The apostles were 'sent ones' and they moved out into regions beyond Palestine. Paul's appointment as an apostle was a personal one executed by Christ himself.⁵ Apostles alone had the apostolic truth, i.e. the truth as given to them by Christ. In effect this truth was the interpretation of the events of Christ in the light of the Old Testament, the interpretation of the Old Testament in the light of the events of Christ, which produced that teaching which was the product of these two elements of interpretation. Whilst the apostles had the authority of apostolic truth, yet all Christians came to know this truth and teach it, so that they, too—without being apostles—were conveyors of apostolic

¹ For example, Luke 22:30.

² See the 24 elders, the 144,000, and mentions of twelve gates and foundations in chapter 21. All these are significant.

³ Cf. I Corinthians 15:6, where five hundred brethren are mentioned as having witnessed the Lord's resurrection.

⁴ There an apostle James was killed by Herod (Acts 12:2). James the Elder was the brother of Christ (cf. Matt. 13:55; I Cor. 15:7; Gal 1:19; 2:19). It is also thought that he was the author of the Epistle bearing his name.

⁵ See I Corinthians 15:9; Ephesians 3:8; Romans 1:1; I Corinthians 1:1; etc.

truth. This apostolic truth is known to us today even though the apostles have long died. Indeed, we have no other authentic truth.

Ephesians 4:7–11 shows us that there were ministry gifts¹ of 'apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers'. Scholars debate whether (i) 'apostles' there nominated were the original twelve apostles who were uniquely apostles, not to be replaced when they died; and (ii) there was a lesser order of apostles who were not to be confused with the apostles but yet fulfilled a function of communicating the truth as the apostles had done², and who were seen as 'sent ones' and as such were not prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers but apostles. The matter of prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers we do not need to discuss here, simply observing that they were of the true essence (*esse*) of the church and not merely a good thing to have (*bene esse*).

Many passages in the New Testament tell us the nature of elders and deacons.³ It is clear that there was a system of elders and that the church needed them. Following Pentecost there were elders of the church in Jerusalem. Where the apostles went they ordained—or caused to be ordained—elders for the churches. There is also an indication of another order called 'deacons' or 'servants'.

¹ The term 'ministry gifts' is used to distinguish them from the *charismata*, but Paul includes the *charismata* along with the ministry gifts in I Corinthians 12:28–30. Even so, the ministry gifts are really the gifts of persons to the church, whilst *charismata* are referred to as 'manifestations of the Spirit' rather than of spiritual persons. See my *Spirit-Baptism: Spirit-Living and The Day of the Spirit* for a fuller treatment.

² This would appear to be the case, since Barnabas, James and Andronicus seem to be included as apostles, but it is clear that the original apostles had an authority given by Christ directly, which was not the case with the persons we have here named.

³ See Acts 14:23; 15:6, 22; 20:17–32; I Timothy 3:1–7; 5:17–19; Titus 1:5–9; I Peter 5:1–5; cf. I Thessalonians 5:12; Hebrews 13:7, 17. See also my little book *Shepherds of the Flock* (NCPI, 1985).

In fact all members of the church were 'ministers' or 'servants'¹, but the deacons were a special group of these.²

All members of the church were given one or more special gifts by the Holy Spirit. These were known as 'charismata'. They were 'manifestations of the Spirit', and not manifestations of persons themselves. The gifts helped in the well-being of the members of the church—known as 'members of the body'. The gifts were only used *in* love and *for* love, otherwise they were useless.

The church members were known as 'disciples', a term more used by those outside the church than in it, and as 'brethren', a term more used within the church than by those outside it. 'Brethren'³ presupposed God as Father and all members as belonging to the one family, i.e. 'the household' or 'family' of God.

The church was not an equalitarian or democratic system. Leaders—known variously as 'elders', 'overseers', 'bishops', 'pastors'—led the church. Even so, they were under Christ who was Lord of the church, and the Spirit who was Christ's *alter ego*, i.e. his 'other self'. The church was also said to be 'in the Father'.⁴ We gather, then, that the constitution of the church was not a political one.⁵ The church was not an organisation, but rather a living organism. Nevertheless it was the most remarkable functional

¹ Cf. Ephesians 4:12. The term 'servant' or 'ministry' (*diakonia*) is often used for all God's people.

² The nature and work of deacons is outlined in I Timothy 3:8–10. It is often supposed that the seven serving at tables in Acts 6 were deacons, but this is doubtful. The use of the verb 'to serve' does not necessarily make them deacons. In fact Philip was an evangelist and Stephen a great preacher with prophetic power, and one who did signs and wonders—qualifications not even hinted at in I Timothy 3.

³ Brotherly love is mentioned with strong significance in the Epistles.

⁴ See I Thessalonians 1:1 and II Thessalonians 1:1.

⁵ By this we mean the church was not conducted in accordance with a fixed polity. Constitutions always lead to legal difficulties, however fine they may appear to be. They often are devised because there is no true understanding of the Lordship of Christ and the Spirit.

unit that had—and, indeed, has—existed. The essence of it was its relational nature. Hence the use of the words 'love', 'unity', 'fellowship', 'body' to show its essential nature.

THE ACTION OF THE EARLY COMMUNITY

This action was both internal and external: internal in the manner of life carried out, and external in the function for which the church was—and is—in the world. The internal action was the way of life of the community. We have seen what we might call its polity—its leaders, the ministries and the gifts, all working together—but the polity was a functional one and not one of legal order and domination.¹ The members of the church 'obeyed from the heart the form of teaching to which they were committed'.² Their working together must be seen in regard to the relationality which has its basis in the Triune Godhead, and in the oneness of the community which is explained under the 'seven unities' Paul nominates in Ephesians 4:1–6. The church was born in oneness and continues in the same. As we have said, the words—ideas and their practice—of 'love', 'unity', 'fellowship', 'family' and 'reconciliation' are essential to the life of the church.

The fruits of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost and the identifying baptism in which all were involved brought forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit which immediately brought relief to the conscience, joy to the heart,

¹ Note that when local churches form or structure a constitution, it is fraught with many perils and problems. In seeking to preserve the church against heresy and wrong practices it often brings a deadly legalism with it, and this may lock in or lock out those who are practising members, though not—according to the constitution—members constitutionally.

² See Romans 6:17.

and peace to the mind of all. Later called 'the flooding of the heart with God's love by the Holy Spirit' the event issued in the sharing of the goods the community possessed.¹ An even more dramatic description of this principle is seen in Acts chapter 4 where the community is described as 'of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common'. The immediate result was, 'And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all'.²

That is, the richness of relationships meant that the apostles could speak out of something substantial in true human relationships. How substantial they were is shown by the further statement, 'There was not a needy person amongst them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold, and laid it at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need'. This statement warrants thoughtful pondering. So do the first eleven verses of chapter 5, which describe what Ananias and Sapphira were about—wittingly or unwittingly—to destroy the purity of love and fellowship with their attempt to show

¹ I am aware of the limited value of this present book in not enlarging on the deep and vast significance of repentance, faith, the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit, where we desire to see new and powerful life in our churches. I would recommend my little book *The First Principles* (NCPI, 1983), which is a helpful resource to use when seeking to emphasise these basic principles of Christian initiation and church living.

² We have to recognise here the fact that houses and property that were sold were of deep significance to the owners. Such property represented the family inheritance. Inheritance was enormously significant for those in Israel, since it represented being part of the kingdom of Israel, which represented—in their thinking—being part of the very Kingdom of God. Thus they no longer looked to Palestine—as such—but rather to 'a city having foundations whose builder and maker is God', i.e. 'the Holy City to come'. According to Revelation 21:7 the inheritance spoken of so much by the NT letter-writers was the inheritance to which they looked, i.e. the new heavens and the new earth. They lived in this world in the manner Paul describes in I Corinthians 7:31.

themselves as a genuine part of this wonderful loving fellowship. This hypocrisy being uncovered and destroyed, the church lived on daily in prayer, the apostolic doctrine, the fellowship, and the breaking of bread, whilst at the same time it was ever so strong in proclamation of the saving word of Christ.

Chapter 6 in its first seven verses is also a revelation of how the church lived. The apostles had shared in the work of the daily distribution but knew that they needed more to devote themselves 'to prayer and the ministry of the word'. Others were appointed to do the work of serving at tables, but they also proved themselves in the new situation as being not only servers but as men 'full of faith and the Holy Spirit'. Among them were evangelists such as Philip, and persons of power, faith and grace such as Stephen, who, 'full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people' and his disputants 'could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke'.

The absence of committees¹, planned strategies, attempts to curry favour with the population and refusal to be part of the 'crooked generation' system speaks well of the new community of Christ. Their burning zeal to share the message of 'Jesus is Lord! Jesus is Saviour!' speaks of both the inner ecclesiastical worship and devotion and the compassion of the community to the outer world.² As 'Jerusalem and all Judea' gave way to 'Samaria' and then to 'the end of the earth', i.e. 'the Gentiles', so the church grew and flourished in its inner and outer life and action. By the end of Acts the gospel has been preached in many places.

¹ This is not to say that committees may not have their value, but the early church was not dependent upon them. It looked to the personal Lordship of Christ and the Spirit, especially as this was mediated by the eldership. Of course the church was not, and still is not, a democratic institution, but one which was holily (lovingly and responsibly) hierarchical.

² See I Thessalonians 3:12; Galatians 6:10; I Timothy 2:1f.; I John 2:2.

In the Epistles Peter can address 'the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia', and Paul can speak of having fully preached the gospel 'from Jerusalem and as far round as Illyricum', whilst in another place he speaks of the sound of the gospel having gone out into all the world.¹ Certainly the church was ablaze with the good news, was sure Christ reigned over all history, and it strongly lived in that assurance.

THE GOALS OF THE NEW COMMUNITY

This title may read strangely to us. Our churches certainly have goals but often they are short-term ones, ones related to the local church—its size, growth, actions and reputation, and even its morality—but the goals we are about to speak of are related to God's plan in history for history, the Lordship of Christ, as well as development in maturity of its members. These three elements are of the one piece, as we will see.

God's Plan in History For History

Ephesians 1:3–14, among other references, shows us that God planned before time that His people should be holy, that they should be His sons, and that this should happen in Christ, in whom they are accepted by God. His plan for the fullness of time is to unite all things in Christ—nothing will not be headed up in him and by him. This will mean that all he does with the Jews and the Gentiles will be to His glory. In order to effect all this the church has

¹ I Peter 1:1; Romans 15:19; 10:18.

been given the fullness of Christ, by Christ. This ultimate unity will mean nothing is left unreconciled, unfilled and 'un-unified'. A tremendous goal: an unbelievable concept!

Jesus' Lordship

Jesus is Lord of all things, over everything, over all rulers, principalities and powers, so that there is nothing which is not under his control and direction. This means that all history is in his hands—something God has given to him. He uses this Lordship to defeat all that is evil, and to bring to glorification all that is obedient to him. It is impossible that Satan and other personal evil forces should ever triumph over Christ. Moreover, he is 'head over all things *for* the church'. Finally the Son will deliver the Kingdom to the Father that God may be all in all. Another way of saying this was, 'at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father.'¹

The Glorification of the Elect People of God

One of the goals of Christ—and therefore of the church—is the glorification of the true children of God. This glorification is something God will *do* to, and for, His people, but with that glorification is included the gift of inheritance. His people were once promised they would inherit the earth, but the final inheritance is 'the new heavens and the new earth'. So then the people of God's household will be conformed to the likeness of His Son,

¹ I Corinthians 15:24–28 illustrates this. Revelation 5:1ff. shows that Jesus is the Lord of history, since the book of history is his to unseal and activate.

will come into 'the liberty of the glory of the children of God', and will have full fellowship with God—those who even now have 'fellowship with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ' to some degree, whose lives are 'hid with Christ in God' and who are, even now, 'partakers of the divine nature'.¹

These three goals are really the one: the revelation of God's true glory to the whole of creation. The church which knows God by *faith* through His revelations of Himself, which lives in His *love*—as commanded—has as a tremendous driving force the virtue of hope.² This has been from the beginning, but in Christ it is so vitalised that the church casts off worldly care and ambition, and lives daily in hope.

THE CHURCH IN TRIBULATION AND SUFFERING

Lest we think of the church as a community unscarred by the world around it, always triumphant in the face of adversity, we need to think afresh and with understanding. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus foretold the fact that his people would be persecuted. In John, chapters 15 and 16, he warned them that to be one with him was to invite persecution. He also gave other warnings. The Book of the Acts describes some of that persecution, and the Epistles also talk about it, Paul's key word being 'They that live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution'. Peter's First Letter speaks much about the suffering Christians must undergo. Paul also speaks of this suffering. Jesus,

Paul and Peter all speak of it as a cause for joy and not morbidity, angry reaction, or of hurt to be cultured and kept in mind. All saw it was a privilege to suffer for the gospel's sake.

The suffering mostly arises from the opposition of Satan, his principalities and powers, and those men and women who belong to his world system. This is brought out dramatically in the Book of the Revelation where the red dragon, his clone the beast, the false prophet, and Babylon all oppose the believers, so that many of them are martyred for 'the word of God and the testimony of Jesus'. The blood of the martyrs is found in Babylon the unholy city—that world system which is the opposite, and the opposer of the holy city of God.

We look at this fact of tribulation in order to understand that Christians will never escape suffering, though—of course—they do not need to fear it. At all times 'greater is he who is in [believers] than he who is in the world', and 'this is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith'. Believers overcome 'that old serpent the devil' by 'the blood of the Lamb, the word of their testimony', and so much so, that 'they love not their lives unto death'. Humbled under God's almighty hand they can—in faith—resist the devil and he will flee from them. Christ overcame both Satan and his evil powers—along with his world system—at the event of the Cross. Moreover, it is Christ, the slain Lamb, who has the seven-sealed book of history. He, alone, opens it, and thus judgements are poured out on evil humanity, evil systems, and evil powers. Ultimately the devil and his angels are cast into the lake of fire. Red dragon, beast, false prophet and Babylon are defeated and destroyed.

It is in this faith that the Christian church meets conflict. Ultimately it will be seen to have come through much

¹ I John 1:3; I Corinthians 1:9; Colossians 3:3; II Peter 1:4.

² In the NT the three virtues—faith, hope and love—are never found apart. They form a triad which itself is the dynamic driving of the believer.

tribulation and its members to have made their robes 'white in the blood of the Lamb'. Whilst evil powers have weapons, 'the weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power to destroy strongholds', i.e. strongholds of evil.¹

Paul, in II Corinthians 4:7–15, gives a beautiful account of what suffering does for those who are persecuted. In effect he says that it increases—not decreases—their faith. They are more emboldened to speak the word of truth. No matter how much the suffering, he can still call it 'our light momentary affliction' and points out that it is 'preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison'. He also says, 'The suffering of this present time is not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in [to] us.'

So then, the life of the church—wonderful as it may be—is not without tribulation and suffering; yet these things are also gifts as they assist in the process of our glorification.

JESUS: LORD OF THE CHURCH; LORD OF HISTORY

We have already stated these two things, emphasising their significance. Now we have to enlarge our focus to see that all that matters in history is what Jesus and his church are about. In regard to the past, Jesus told his disciples he was the fulfilment of all prophecy. 'Beginning with Moses and the prophets, he interpreted to them *in all the scriptures* the things concerning himself'; '. . . everything written about

me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms concerning me must be fulfilled'. He had told certain hearers, 'If you believed Moses, you would believe me for he wrote of me.' Paul said that his message was of Christ's death and resurrection, 'according to the Scriptures,' and told King Agrippa that the apostles 'were saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass.' Peter spoke of the Spirit of Christ being within the prophets when they predicted 'the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory'. The angel told John the Seer that 'the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy'.

We have seen that the apostolic truth was the Christ-events fulfilling the prophecies, and this brought into view the gospel now created. There were still events to come which the prophets had forecast and which Jesus was to fulfil. The primary one was the winning of the nations. Jesus had told his disciples to baptise the nations into the Triune Name. He had told the apostles in the upper room that 'repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his [Jesus'] name amongst all nations'. These nations would include Israel, Samaria and the rest of the nations (the Gentiles). Christ was to be 'A light to lighten the Gentiles and to be the glory of thy people Israel'.

In Psalm 2¹ the Messiah-Son-King was to ask God, and He would give him 'the nations for his inheritance and the uttermost part of the earth for his possession'. Acts 1:8 makes sense in the light of this promise, for the witnessing to Christ is to go to 'the uttermost parts of the earth'. So also must the preaching of repentance and forgiveness of

¹ All of this material is amplified in my book *The Clash of the Kingdoms* (NCPI, 1989).

¹ This Psalm is one of the most powerful keys to the nature of Christ and the church. Quoted significantly some 21 times in the NT, it was obviously strongly present in the thinking of the apostolic people of God. It is not untrue to say that it scarcely figures at all in present Christian thinking.

sins be to all nations, as does the baptising of all nations into the Triune Name.

In other words, *what Christ is about in history is bringing the nations to salvation and inclusion in the true people of God. Christ is about that and so his church is about that. They are one under his Lordship—one with a view to accomplishing God's mission to the nations.* If this is not understood then the church is not understood. Indeed, Christ is not understood.

When the church is not in the work of proclaiming Christ to the nations, turning them into disciples, and teaching them what Christ had told the apostles to teach, then the church will not truly be the church. It is *in the going* that the church is really the church. Christ gave the fullness of himself to the church that it might fulfil the will of God for creation—via the gospel.

'Through the Church the Manifold Wisdom of God'

This is part of a quotation in Ephesians 3:7–11:

Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace which was given me by the working of his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; that *through the church, the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known* to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose which he has realised in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The church, then, is to be the agency through which God works out His plan and communicates it to celestial powers. As the church is obedient to God, as it obeys its

present Lord—its Head—and as it proclaims the gospel, and lives as the holy people of God, so then, the church is truly the church in all essence. Where this is not happening the church is lacking, and perhaps so much so, that the Lord who moves amongst the golden candlesticks¹—i.e. Christ the Lord of the churches—will rebuke the church, and he may even take its candlestick out of its place, i.e. cause the church of that location to cease.

CONCLUSION TO PART ONE

We have now completed our survey of Christ's church—the one he has built, and is continuing to build. We have seen the prediction of it being built, its birth at Pentecost, its constitution, its life, nature and action as well as the great goal to which it moves. We have also thought upon the function of Christ and the church to win the nations of the world, so that the Son can give the Kingdom to the Father, and so God be 'all in all'.

This leads naturally to our second section where we examine whether in practice we are being the church², if not at all, or if only partly, so that we can understand what is required to bring back the church to its apostolic freshness, and so be part of the great programme Christ is fulfilling in all the world.

¹ Cf. Revelation 1:12—2:15. Candlesticks and lampstands have the same meaning.

² This sort of examination may not seem to be a very useful ecclesiastical introspection, but in II Corinthians 13:5 Paul enjoins the Corinthians, 'Examine yourselves, to see whether you are holding to your faith.' This principle is essential. It pertains not only to personal faith, but also to the corporate life of the church. We have to see whether all is well within our church. This self-examination means the Lord of the church will not have to rebuke us as he does the faulty churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3.

PART TWO

Christ's Church in True Action

HOW DID CHRIST BUILD HIS CHURCH?

How did Christ build his church? We have seen how he built it. He first did that work—through his Cross and Resurrection—which would enable men and women to have a saving gospel. This being proclaimed in the power of the Spirit, men and women being convicted, they could (i) repent, (ii) be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and (iii) receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This being done, they could come into eternal life, know their sins to be forgiven, and so be flooded with the love of God by the gospel and the Spirit himself. Thus the community would be born.

It can be seen that this did not only happen in Jerusalem at Pentecost, but wherever the gospel was preached, whether in Palestine or in the lands of the Gentiles. The continuing preaching of the gospel brought the continuous growth of the church. It would appear that there is no other way of churches coming into being, and the whole church of Christ covering all the nations.

HOW IS IT THAT CHURCHES OFTEN DO NOT COME INTO BEING?

If what we have said in the paragraph above is the way churches are born, then why is it that sometimes this does not happen—even when the gospel is preached? There could be a number of reasons. Christ could not do many works in Nazareth because of their unbelief.¹ He often said, during his ministry, 'He who has an ear to hear, let him hear.'² It could be that people are not hearing.

It could also be that whilst we think we are proclaiming the gospel, we may not be doing so. Today we have many 'adjectival' gospels. For example, we have a social gospel, we have a healing gospel, we have a benevolent gospel, we have a works gospel. Doubtless the true gospel has elements that are social, benevolent, healing (and so on), but no adjective should be supplied other than we find in the New Testament. It is simply 'the gospel of God' or 'the gospel of Christ' or 'the gospel of salvation'.

In horror, Paul spoke to the Galatians of a gospel they were hearing which was 'no gospel', a 'perverted' gospel and one 'contrary to the one which you received'³, i.e. contrary to the gospel he had preached. It must be kept in mind that the gospel was 'a stumbling block to Jew and folly to Gentiles'. By nature of the case, the gospel is objectionable to many. Where the work of Christ leaves nothing for the hearer to do but to repent, believe, and receive the gift of salvation the ego is affronted. Justification by faith is a scandal to the religious self-justifying

¹ Matthew 13:58.

² Cf. Luke 8:8–21; Revelation 2 and 3.

³ See Galatians 1:6–11; I Corinthians 1:23.

ego of Man. The evangelist may be greatly tempted to add some ingredient to his preaching which mollifies the ego of Man. For example, he may make repentance and faith works which the hearer does in order to obtain salvation. Both repentance and faith are gifts of God, and whilst a human being does have to repent and believe, he does this by the grace of God.

It is essential that the proclaimer of the gospel does not merely follow an evangelising formula. He must have come via conviction of sin, via a revelation of the Cross, and so have a deep experience of forgiveness of sins and justification by faith. Nothing less will equip him sufficiently to preach the gospel, and to bring men and women into new life. Even to have had a deep experience of conversion does not mean that an evangelist continually and automatically lives in the fullness of Christ's redeeming work. He needs to come—time and again—to view the passion of Christ, and to understand it.¹ Many an evangelist—afraid of the reactions of his hearers—has toned down the sharp outlines of the gospel, or has gradually substituted another—more attractive—gospel, but, by nature of the case, he can never succeed in genuinely moving men and women.

Another element which causes proclaimers to moderate their 'gospel' is the constant opposition it arouses in some hearers. Paul's passage of II Corinthians 4:1–15 ought to be pondered many times. Some preachers come to the point of thinking, 'Enough is enough! There is only so much that the human spirit can bear!' How wrong is this

¹ In I Corinthians 9:15–27 Paul speaks of his constant attention to the matter of preaching the gospel. He does everything to keep the matter alive to, and in, himself. In II Corinthians 4:1 he speaks of having the ministry as 'a mercy of God'. Elsewhere he refers to it as a matter of God's grace given to him.

conclusion! Paul shows that the more the opposition is, the more one is convinced of the gospel, and the more powerfully one can proclaim it, i.e. 'death is at work in us, but life in you'.

We have shown, then, that often churches do not come into being because the gospel is not strongly, clearly, and faithfully preached.

LET US LOOK TO OUR GOSPEL

It is a good exercise for any one of us to ask himself or herself, 'What is the gospel?' The gospel is the good news that in accordance with the Scriptures the Son of God has become man, and having proclaimed the reality of the Kingdom of God has offered himself up as a propitiatory sacrifice for the sins of mankind, in order to reconcile them to God, and—out of his achieved Lordship—to give them salvation and eternal life via repentance, faith, the gift of forgiveness of sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Whilst one could further expand this description, it is—as it is—a good working one. We must ask ourselves if this is the way we understand (i) man's need of the sacrifice of the Cross and Christ's resurrection, and (ii) the effects of that gospel where there is repentance and faith.

My own experience over many years is that some preachers miss the evil nature of sin, and of the necessity of nothing less than the sacrifice of the Cross to redeem man from his terrible and lost plight. They fail to understand the holiness of God that is affronted by sin, and the need for a work of the Cross which will utterly free a human being from the pollution, penalty and powers of sin. If the proclaimer has not himself (herself) been gripped

by the word of the Cross how can he (or she) grip others? If grace is not a glorious matter to the speaker, how can it be so to the hearer?

A preacher should never take it for granted that any person in his audience necessarily has understood the gospel. It should be asked whether the Lordship of Christ has confronted that person, whether the work of the Cross and the triumph of the Resurrection has been made plain, and whether there has been the genuine response of repentance and faith with the reception of forgiveness and the Spirit. It is not *lectures* on the Cross, the Resurrection, repentance and faith which will necessarily bring hearers to understand these things and respond to them. There must be preaching, confrontation, and all this with fire being in the belly and the bones of the proclaimer.

LET US LOOK AT OUR CHURCH

If we are going to look at our own church we need to be careful. Criticism is not what we have in mind. Whatever the state of the church, criticism will not be helpful. Every local church has a history and sometimes that history contains certain events, happenings, and relationships which can hinder the quality or strength of the fellowship. We saw in the early chapters of Acts that two things were present: (i) the rich effects of the gospel which brought love and unity to all believers, and (ii) the powerful proclamation of the gospel when the proclaimers were part of so warm and loving a community.

When we read the second and third chapters of the Revelation, we see advice which Christ and the Spirit gave to the churches. We note that only two of them did not

receive rebukes. These two were commended. The various states of the other churches are doubtless reproduced in some of our own churches today. The rebukes and the prescriptions set down for the erring churches are valuable for us. Let us remember that Christ and the Spirit did this rebuking—not certain members of the church. It is useful to see what were the deficiencies and problems, and what were the prescriptions for their correction and healing.

The Epistles are also a great source of exhortation and help. Our purpose, now, is not to go through these, but to see that at various times members of churches are called to awake out of sleep, to put off deeds of the darkness, to clothe themselves with light, the armour of light, to tighten their belts, i.e. be prepared for battle, to become alert, to get into the conflict. Paul tells Timothy to stir up the gift that is in him¹, i.e. to fan the dying embers into a flame and then into a roaring fire. All of the Scriptures inform us that we can get into a drift, can be slothful, can even forget the glorious things that have happened such as the forgiveness of sins: 'he has forgotten that he was purified from his old sins'.²

It seems amazing that we can drift so much.³ I Corinthians chapter 10, and Hebrews chapter 3, amongst others, show we can backslide grievously. There is evidence that some members of the early church reverted to pagan practices and to pagan immorality, and yet rationalised their action as not wholly wrong. We need not pursue this line, but a group of sluggish believers or a 'rotten apple' in a church can bring spiritual dullness and neutralise the

¹ II Timothy 1; cf. Romans 12:11; Ephesians 5:18.

² II Peter 1:9.

³ Hebrews 2:1-2.

vitality present. Such need to be renewed in the spirit of their minds, to put off things which belong to the former corrupt humanity, to come back to abiding in Christ, to desire holiness of person and living, to be renewed in the experience of the first love, and to be surprised afresh by forgiving, loving grace. So one could go on: these are the exhortations of the Epistles, and they need to be heard and obeyed. We should keep the picture of the early church before us, emulate their beginnings and their way of life. Of course, we must neither idolise nor idealise the early church, but we must live in the same stream of life as did they. Then we will see a renewal, and perhaps a powerful revival. In any case we will be living as a church can live and ought to live.

LET US LOOK TO OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST AND HIS WORK

The church does not exist for its own self. It is not an entity which is an end in itself. It is the true company of faithful people, and the word and the sacraments continually keep it in life. However, as we have observed, a church can go from generation to generation with its pattern of worship and relationships, and yet be no more than any secular service club. Service clubs cheerfully confess that that is what they are. The church does not claim it is a service club. Yet it can be just a social unit with its teaching programme and other programmes filling up its life, being repetitive in practice, but virtually producing nothing of what we have been claiming is the authentic life and action of a church. Young people may—from time to time—modernise it a bit, stimulate it to new forms of

action and worship, but essentially nothing may change.¹

When we go back to our Pentecostal model and the modes of living and service of the early fellowship, then we are struck again by the dynamic conversion of the members, and their care for one another, yet always with the proclamation in mind— i.e. proclamation of the gospel to those outside of Christ. If the church is not vital from the conversion or renewal of its members, and if its sights are not set upon the nations and the mandate to go and preach the gospel to all, then the church will not be living in the fullness that is intended for it. It may be vigorous in its planning, in its programmes, in its groups which meet for various activities—even Bible study—yet unless it is essentially a *going* church, it will not truly be a 'going' concern.

There are churches which seem to be going concerns, yet if the gospel preached is examined, it may be seen that this or that congregation is a church starved of grace but heavily supplied with law. It may be a church which is gracious and benevolent, and filled with good advice, and is even endowed with seemingly useful therapies. It may just be that a church is the result of excellent organisation, good human relationships, and perhaps things to do which fill up the time of its members, and generate interest. It may be just an entertainment church—linked with sport, interesting things to do, group clubs, and other forms of entertainment. The church at Sardis was told, 'You have

¹ Young people have always sought to modernise the churches, since they find them so old-fashioned and dull. They think this will bring them to life, but the principle of Romans 12:1-2 is the only means by which it will be renewed—if that is what is required. Whilst we must always seek to speak in contemporary fashion, we do not have to think in contemporary modes, for often these are foreign to the true thinking of the gospel.

the name of being alive, and you are dead.’¹ A useful exercise for every church that has the reputation of being very alive would be to ask itself whether it were not, in fact, dead!

CONCLUSION TO PART TWO

We could have had further analyses of weak and ineffective churches. We could have had more prescriptions for the renewal of their life and action, but that is not the point of this little book. Its purpose is to awaken ourselves to what the church is under Christ's Lordship, how it came into being, the factors that gave it life, and the way of life and action in which it was occupied, that we, too, might be properly occupied.

Take, for example, the four elements which emerged on the day of Pentecost, namely attention to (i) the apostles' teaching, (ii) the fellowship, (iii) the breaking of bread, and (iv) the prayers. Although we have said little regarding these, and what they were then, yet these should still be four outstanding factors in the formation and ongoing life of the church. In the West we have fallen into the idea that church is a service once a Sunday, with perhaps an evening service or group study, and that other Bible studies or group meetings may be added, but that all these things, together, constitute the life and action of the church. For some, it is simply one service a Sunday and the occasional use of the sacraments. Unlike this image, the early church would meet every few hours at the time of the prayers of the temple. They certainly met daily, and almost certainly

¹ Revelation 3:1.

morning and evening. They would even need to do this in order to share what was happening, some of it being persecution and family rejection. They ate their meals from house to house, i.e. they had 'house fellowship', and very powerful it must have been. The apostles' doctrine was no small thing—the whole gospel had been formulated, and worldwide vision for proclamation was part of it. Jesus was Lord over all the world, the kingdom of Rome being a part of that! The fellowship indicated the rich unity we find in chapters 2 and 4 of Acts, and this included mutual help and caring, the daily distribution and care of the poor, the widows and the orphans.

If we compare that with our present ideas of the church, doctrine, fellowship, prayers, and the breaking of bread, we may find we are some distance from the early church. We recognise the many difficulties existing in the early church—the Epistles name most of them—but even so, the early Christians had a dynamic entrance into the Kingdom as the basis of their lives, and 'great grace was upon them all'. They also had a foundation for the disciplined life of their community.

This statement brings us to the leadership of the church: that is, with Jesus as Lord, the Holy Spirit as the one who brought constant revelation of the Father and the Son¹, that same Spirit who brought the power of Christ's life to the church², and through whom were not only signs and wonders done, but conviction of sin, righteousness and judgement, and the great action of repentance, faith and conversion. Even more, the life of Christ was constantly kept in the heart by the Spirit through whom love, unity,

¹ John 16:12–15.

² Acts 1:8; Ephesians 3:16; cf. I Corinthians 2:4–5; I Thessalonians 1:5; etc.

fellowship, worship, prayer, and the use of both spiritual gifts and weapons continually obtained.

The leadership of Christ the Lord, and the Spirit the Lord¹ was in direct control of the leadership of the elders, and the aid of the diaconate. This relational fullness through the gospel, through word and sacrament, brought discipline to family and community relationships. Those who proclaimed the gospel were fortified by the life of the church, as the church was strengthened by the ministry of the proclaimers.

Under the knowledge of the Lordship of Christ—the sovereignty of God—the church did not fear the world situation, did not seek the world's approval, and was not disturbed by the international turn of events so constantly confronting it. Thus it was Christ who built his church, Christ who was Lord over all for it, Christ who gave it its fullness, and Christ who led it on to share in his conquest of the nations by the sharp sword which is always going out of his mouth.

I suggest to those who are really interested that they go over these pages time and again, that they read the notes appended to verify what has been written and to enter fully into the New Testament, where the principles of bringing churches to birth, stabilising church life, church action, and church maintenance by Christ and the Spirit are readily recognisable.

A good exercise would be to get the local church to read the first half of Acts and compare the life of the church in its apostolic days with the church now, in its modern setting and with the accretions which almost 2,000 years of operations have brought to it. As I have said, this little

¹ Cf. II Corinthians 3:17–18.

book is only an introduction to the wider issues of Christ's church, but at least it is an introduction.¹

¹ I would like to suggest the reading of some of my books, namely *Christ's People in Today's World* (NCPI 1985); *Christ the Conquering King* (NCPI, 1985); and *The Day of The Spirit* (NCPI, 1985).

PART THREE

The Praxis of the Local Church

THE APOSTOLIC PRAXIS

By *praxis* we mean that form of action and practice which is the outcome of the teaching of the apostles, and which is consistent with such doctrine. We mean it could never be other than the natural expression of the teaching given. We have seen that the first expression of it was at Pentecost. Almost without thought four principles were followed:

- (a) They devoted themselves to the Apostles' doctrine.
- (b) They devoted themselves to the fellowship.
- (c) They devoted themselves to the prayers.
- (d) They devoted themselves to the breaking of bread.

We have seen that all these things immediately issued in the selling of their possessions—as they wished—and the daily distribution to the needy, especially the widows and orphans. This was not even a great departure from Israel's forms of care for the needy, but it was radical in that many

of them sold their continuing inheritance. This was the evidence of their love, and the presence of the unifying Spirit of love. This was indeed 'the fellowship' working out—the *praxis* of unity.

We see that the teaching, i.e. 'the Apostles' doctrine', was not merely the formal basis but the dynamic cause of the unity and love, as also the drive for 'the prayers' and the living substance of 'the breaking of bread'. We have mentioned in Part One that in our generation we are apt to form our images of the church from the local church we have attended, or even from the denomination in which we have grown. This 'image' may be other than the Apostolic one—not that we are saying the Apostolic communities and congregations should necessarily be a stereotype for us, or even a paradigm. We are saying that wherever Christ is Lord of his church¹, and wherever the Spirit is present in freedom, then the four elements we have just named will be present, and present together. In other words, there will always be a tendency for the church to present itself after the Apostolic fashion.

THE PRAXIS OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

We now come to the heart of the matter: the present action of each local church. We see that we will discern its value and action by the four apostolic principles named above. Is

¹ Christ, of course, is always Lord of the church, but that Lordship is not always recognised. Likewise, the Spirit is always present in the Body of Christ, but he is sometimes grieved by the life of the church (Eph. 5:18; cf. Isa. 63:10) and his flow can be quenched (I Thess. 5:19–20). Thus, of the seven churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3, only two churches receive full commendation. This does not mean Christ is not Lord, or the Spirit is absent. Neither is ineffective, but churches may be reproved, judged and even chastised. We have to seek to detect how things are with the local church in which we are members.

there strength or weakness in *doctrine*? Is there a truly biblical approach, or are there other bases for teaching such as human thinking, modern ways of assessing values? Is the centrality of the Cross and the Resurrection, the Atonement and the consequent regeneration of persons present, or has some kind of humanism crept in? The life of prayer must rise from true doctrine, so we ask whether our prayer life is rich, worshipful, petitionary and intercessory? In practical fact, do those who come into the church as strangers sense the old Apostolic vibrancy, life and power, or can much that is taught and much that happens be explained along lines of human thinking and human action?

Again, when strangers come, do they sense the love of the leaders and congregation, or are they subjected to ecclesiastical patterns—stiffness, ceremonial, detached worship, the silence of formality, or the intrusions of boisterous individualism? Is the church worldly in that there is little difference between it and the world about? Would strangers notice the quiet distinctiveness of an assured spiritual fellowship, and the hand of God upon it? We could ask many such questions, especially if we were to read the Book of the Acts and compare our churches with what seemed to be those of the Apostolic age. Yet we need to remember all the admonitions, reproofs, corrections and encouragements that are contained in the New Testament Epistles. The churches were far from perfect. Emerging from a society which was idolatrous, pagan, and to a great degree pleasure loving and immoral, many new believers had to learn a different way of life. For this reason it is helpful to read Ephesians 4:17–31.

Supposing we discover weaknesses, deficiencies, shortcomings and irregularities in our local church, what can we do about them? Where do they come from? How can they

be rectified? In principle we know that the Apostolic doctrine, proclaimed in the apostolic way will give birth to churches, which will then have the four elements we keep naming. Yet these spring directly from the Lord of the church, and from the presence of the Spirit. We have to go back—time and again—to Acts 2:38, which speaks of the powerful origins of the new community. If we have moved from these, then the problems will consequently arise.

THE LEADERSHIP OF THE NEW COMMUNITY

This will be a point where we can detect some of the shortcomings—or good elements—of the local church. We will see this in far more detail when we study the Eldership in detail.¹ The leadership of the local church was present from the beginning, as we see in Acts 15 where the 'apostles and elders' considered a matter regarding the admission of the Gentiles (cf. Acts 11:22), and James the Elder (probably the elder Elder) gave his judgement (vv. 13–21) and that was received as final. In Acts 14:23 elders were appointed in the churches Paul and Barnabas had founded, and we assume that was always the case (cf. Titus 1:5). In I Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9 there are explicit statements about the sorts of persons who qualify to be made elders. In I Timothy 4:14 the laying on of hands by elders is mentioned, and likewise in James 5:14–15 prayer by the elders—with anointing—for the healing of sickness. It would seem that persons mentioned in I Thessalonians 5:12–13, I Timothy 5:17 and Hebrews 13:7, 17 are elders.

¹ See especially *The Shepherds of the Flock* (NCTM, 1985), and *For Pastors and the People* (NCTM, 1989). These two books have ample material on Eldership and other pastoral elements of the local church.

Instructions to elders are richly given by Paul in Acts 20:17–35.

The sum of eldership is that such should be godly persons, leaders in their own homes and families, able to teach, preach and admonish, that they must discern false teaching and practice and put an end to it, that they are over the congregation in the Lord, should protect and feed the flock but not domineer over it, that they keep watch over the souls of their people, giving account for them, that their faith should be imitated, that they should be supported by the congregations financially although they themselves should not work with money in mind. The twenty-four elders in the Book of the Revelation are a paradigm—a sort of archetype—for elders within the churches. The eldership is corporate in that it is not a collection of individual elders so much as a fellowship sharing the oversight, caring for the whole life of the church.

The church, then, is under the elders. Where the elders are faithful the life of the church should be strong and healthy. If a church is deficient in true spiritual and practical living and proclamation, then responsibility lies with the elders. At the same time churches are responsible for their own condition—this being made evident in Revelation chapters 2 and 3. Both elders and the people are really one unit. In the Epistles certain individuals are mentioned who try to subvert the work of leadership, of faith and of practice.

It would seem that elders can also betray the church—being wolves in sheep's clothing (Acts 20:17–31), and elders should thus discern one another. It would seem that elders, bishops and pastors are the one, and since they are called shepherds they must help the flock whilst the flock responds to their leading.

THE PROBLEMS OF INDIVIDUALISM, REFUSAL TO BE SUBJECT TO AUTHORITY, ETC.

The selection of elders has to assure that the men chosen are themselves persons of humility and not of domineering or weak nature. Christ is the Chief Shepherd and they are subject to him—'the great Shepherd of the flock'. Hence Peter had first to love the Lord before he could feed Christ's sheep and lambs (John 21). Discipline was obviously administered by the elders who were the leaders, and it would have been loving but firm discipline.

Modern problems in regard to discipline are these:

- (a) churches are often considered to be organisations and not organisms—living entities;
- (b) the idea of democracy, equalitarianism and so on have attacked the idea of leadership. There is no headship, and even Christ's headship is not looked upon as authoritative, but simply as benign. Discipline under these conditions is difficult to effect;
- (c) where discipline is applied, members simply change to churches where it is not;
- (d) modern individualism entirely discounts the corporate way of living. The interrelationship of all members is neglected for the opportunity to extend oneself egotistically. If one cannot have prominence then one removes oneself to another church where the situation is considered better;
- (e) the modern view that any and all beliefs should be allowed with tolerance destroys the uniqueness of the gospel, and so of true faith and practice.

We should note that willing subjection to authority is quite

rare. We are always seeking to come to terms with such. It is not surprising that the early church faced exactly these problems. One can only speak with authority when one is under authority, i.e. that of Christ the Head and Shepherd of the church. This authority is present even when delegated to the eldership which is a pastoral, shepherding entity ordained by Christ to carry out his work.

CONCLUSION TO PART THREE

There are many elements of pastoral and community ministry that can be discussed, but for the moment we should keep in mind the life of the community. It is the witnessing body which seeks to proclaim the gospel, to bring persons to belief and new life, and then foster them, helping them to grow in the faith, and to learn right practice.

There is no unit of humanity so precious, wonderful, life-transforming and person-healing as the church—the local church. Men and women coming to it should sense something other than what the world can provide. Men and women of all races and views should be welcome. The church should not accept multiculturalism as a principle for its life: all men and women are one in Christ Jesus. Whilst in the good sense its members should be 'all things to all others', yet it should never allow sexual, racial and social divisions even though it may recognise the facts of gender, race and sociality.

PART FOUR

The Local Church Living in Wisdom

THE CHURCH TAUGHT TO LIVE IN WISDOM

Wisdom is a vast subject throughout the Scriptures. In Romans 1:18–32 we read that man rejected God and so rejected His wisdom. God, of course, is wise, having His own wisdom, though not in the way humans have wisdom (Rom. 11:33–36). Man, then, lives in his own so-called wisdom, which is really foolishness; for his mind is darkened, and his thinking futile; that is, in regard to truly knowing God, Man and creation, and thus in understanding true life. We may talk about a 'general wisdom' of man which is common to all human beings. This is often called 'common sense' but most cultures have accumulated a sort of wisdom by which human beings live. As we will see, Man uses 'general wisdom' in seeking to make life tolerable and useful. There is a so-called wisdom of man which seeks to go beyond this, but always evidences itself in terrible ways, e.g. sin, crime, ambition, violence, perversion—and so on.

In Acts 6:3 men 'full of wisdom and the Spirit' were sought to serve in the daily distribution, so that wisdom was most important. In the churches members are to walk

not as unwise men, but as wise, being wise as to the will of the Lord (Eph. 5:15, 17); they must avoid being 'wise in their own conceits' (Rom. 11:25; 12:16); they must 'let the word of Christ dwell in them richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom' (Col. 3:16). Paul sought to teach every man in all wisdom, so that he might bring him to maturity (Col. 1:28), and he seeks wisdom for his listeners so that they might understand the full plan of God (Eph. 1:17f.), for it is through the church that the manifold wisdom of God is known to angelic powers (Eph. 3:10). He tells the Colossians that they are filled full in Christ because in Christ are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (2:9–10; 2:3). James urges his readers to live in the wisdom of God and seek it as a gift from Him (James 1:5; 3:17). Paul speaks of a wisdom which can be proclaimed to those who are mature in the faith (I Cor. 2:6–10).

All of this assures us that we should mature in wisdom, know the wisdom of God, and walk in it, for God's wisdom is not only His full knowledge of all things, but His way of creation, of covenant, of salvation, of glorifying His people and of ultimately renewing the creation. To live in wisdom is to live in the revelation of the truth—the very truth which sinful man suppresses so that he will not have to walk that way (Rom. 1:18ff.). We have seen this way of wisdom is that of Acts 2:42ff., and there is no other way. A study of Revelation chapters 2 and 3 shows us churches which walked in un wisdom, i.e. foolishness, and they were judged by Christ and rebuked by him accordingly.

CHRIST OUR WISDOM

The Son who lived eternally with the Father was also a partaker with Him in the wisdom that created, that brought

covenant into being, that brought salvation to the world by his incarnation. Being the Logos he was also the wisdom of God, but as incarnate he needed to 'grow in wisdom', which he did (Luke 2:40, 52). Solomon was known as the wisest of all human beings who had lived, but Jesus was 'greater than Solomon' (Matt. 12:42).

When Colossians 2:3 speaks of the 'treasures of wisdom and knowledge' being hidden in Christ, and Ephesians 3:8 of 'the unsearchable riches of Christ', then this is saying that the mystery of God—His plan, will and counsel—are not only *in* Christ but *are* Christ. He is the basis of all God's wisdom in creation, covenant, salvation, glorification and the ultimate regeneration of the creation. It all comes from him and through him, and so to depart *in any way* from Christ is to depart from wisdom. We now look at His wisdom in salvation.

God's plan for salvation was Christ and his death and resurrection. This is brought out clearly in I Corinthians 1:10—4:8, and we purpose in this section to see:

- (a) there is the wisdom of God which is Christ crucified;
- (b) there is a wisdom of the world which is that of (i) the Jew, and (ii) the Greek;
- (c) there is a wisdom in the church which appears to be the wisdom of God but it is really the wisdom of the world.

The wisdom of God which is Christ crucified is something stated by Paul but which he does not seek to prove. His readers know his claim to be true. Only 'the word of the Cross' drew them into salvation. He repeatedly says that Christ crucified is the power of God and the wisdom of God. *He knows no other power: he knows no other wisdom.* By contrast there is a wisdom of the world which is

foreign to the Cross. Jewish worldly wisdom seeks signs, i.e. it wants proof of the wisdom of God to be shown by special acts or signs. To the Jews the Cross is a religious scandal: it is the sign of utter weakness, not the sign of power and wisdom! The Greek wisdom is an intellectual one, and no rationalising of the Cross can make it the wisdom and power of God. The Greek seeks such in intellectual wisdom.

In this section Paul shows that only the weak can understand the power and wisdom of the Cross, since they have no signs to show that, i.e. *other than the sign of the Cross!* The folk at Corinth were not looked up to as great religious persons of wisdom, nor as outstanding Greek intellectuals. Probably the Corinthian Christians had to agree that they had not been outstanding in wisdom and power. However, something had happened which made them think they were 'a bit special' in both power and wisdom. They had special teachers of power and wisdom—Paul, Apollos and Cephas—and they were drawing from *them*.

PAUL KNEW ONLY ONE WISDOM AND POWER: CHRIST CRUCIFIED

We note that in no way did Paul try to appeal to his listeners by means of 'eloquent wisdom'. In I Corinthians 1:17 he said the use of such would empty the Cross of Christ of its power. I Corinthians 2:1–5 needs to be studied:

When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that

your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Paul had to deliver the word of the Cross as it was essentially, and in its simplest form, i.e. its *only* form. It was reality and not rhetoric he used. The effects of the message rested entirely upon its sincere delivery. Human wisdom strives for effects and uses every device possible. In fact, one can take the word of the Cross and by subtle means help to satisfy the mind of the sign-seeking Jew and the wisdom-seeking Greek, but then the scandal and foolishness of the Cross would be dissolved and it would not be the true word of the Cross.

WORLDLY WISDOM AT CORINTH

Paul—in all his discourse from I Corinthians 1:10 to 4:8—was not simply dealing with the matter of the word of the Cross, but with the worldly wisdom which *had become part of the life* of the Corinthian church. Some of the members looked to convincing others of the authentic nature of the gospel and the action of the church by a 'wisdom' which was linked with 'sign-power' and wisdom (intellectual, and even, perhaps, gnostic and esoteric) which would not appear to be foolishness.

How was this the case? Put briefly it was this: each who lined up behind his particular teacher (Paul or Apollos or Cephas) believed that teacher was the wise one, so that to be taught by that one was to obtain wisdom. The Corinthians had a strong eye to two things: (i) power, as in signs and wonders and special acts, and (ii) special taught wisdom. In II Corinthians certain men came to the church who could do great signs and wonders, so much so

that Paul seemed outclassed. Throughout the two Epistles Paul puts himself down as weak. When teaching he was 'in weakness and much fear and trembling'—certainly not an example of power-success and intellect-success!

The various party-members put up their special teacher as the full matter of wisdom. Paul quickly demolished the teachers as being *anything*. Christ was all. Besides, true believers already had everything—teacher or no teacher—and so teachers were but the servants of the members, and all they could minister was the wisdom of God, not wisdom that was special and peculiar to any one of them. If the teachers did not have special power and wisdom, then neither did their followers. Paul insisted he had a wisdom for the mature, but he could not teach them this wisdom since their faith stood in the wisdom of men and not in the power of God. Each 'school' had its own brand of 'power' and 'wisdom'.

This showed that the Corinthians had fallen back into 'sign-power' and 'intellectual wisdom'—the very heart of the mischievous wisdom of the world.

FALSE CORINTHIAN WISDOM AND THE CHURCH TODAY

Let us apply this worldly wisdom to our local church. Is it trying to prove itself by 'power', presentation of unusual signs and wonders to confound the non-sign people, the non-power people; positive thinking; high intellectual application of theology and the use of new exclusive hermeneutics (the new priestly sacerdotalism), and the like? Some churches have 'a name that they live', but inwardly they are decayed. Often theology has vaporised, truth decayed,

the world's contemporary mores and cultural elements dictating how the church should talk and act.

We must get back to Godly wisdom, and this will only happen when first there comes fear of God (Prov. 1:7)—great awe at His holiness and majesty, His righteousness and redeeming love and faithfulness. We must come back to the simplicity of personal weakness in order to know both the power and wisdom of God—'Christ crucified, the power of God and the wisdom of God'.

PART FIVE

The Local Church and its Continuity in History

THE PEOPLE OF GOD— PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

The eleventh chapter of Hebrews shows us that there have always been the people of God, i.e. people of faith, and these have always known God. Abel is nominated as the first man of faith to act. The patriarchs who received the promise of covenant were men of faith, and Israel became the true covenant people. In the New Testament Christ is the mediator of the new covenant (Heb. 9:15), and we know the new covenant people constitute the church. As we have said, the community of Christ is comprised of all men and women of faith, and has its local expression as the church when his people gather together. The church is always conscious of its history and looks back always to Abel, the patriarchs, and Israel, and then forward to 'the

day of the Lord' when all things will be summed up in Christ. We have already looked at these things. Now we seek to etch these matters clearly in our thinking so that we can be a community conscious of its past, present and future, and of its place in this present era, and all of this world. We keep reminding ourselves that local churches can be hidebound, formal, egocentric, without apostolic vision for all peoples and races, and without comprehending the present movements of history. Most of all, churches can be so 'present oriented' that they they do not look at the future—God's *eschaton* and *telos*, i.e. His closing era and His glorious goal for creation. The local church suffers deeply when its vision is foreshortened to the local situation.

JESUS CHRIST IS THE SAME YESTERDAY, TODAY AND FOR EVER

In the Book of the Revelation God is spoken of as 'the beginning and the end, the first and the last', as the One 'who was and is and is to come', and as 'the Alpha and the Omega', and the Lamb is also known by these titles (cf. Rev. 1:8, 17; 2:8; 3:14; 22:13). This means, of course, that God has always been acting in history (John 5:17) and at no point of time is He not active.

It is into this activity—in Christ—that the whole church is geared. We have seen that Jesus is Lord over all history and that principalities and powers see the plan of God and the wisdom of that plan in the action and motions of the church (Eph. 3:9–11). Jesus indicated that, in Matthew 28:19–20 and related passages. He would be with the church—as Lord of the church (Eph. 1:20–23)—until 'the

consummation of the age', i.e. the day of the Lord (Acts 2:20), the unification of all things in Christ (Eph. 2:9–10; cf. Col. 1:19–21). We repeat: if the local church is not aware of this and does not live and operate in this stream of history, then it becomes moribund, and dies. It may continue as a strong organisation, but it does not as a living organism (cf. the seven letters in Revelation chs 2–3).

THE EARLY CHURCH AWARE OF THE ESCHATON AND THE TELOS

The Acts and the Epistles—to say nothing of the Book of the Revelation¹—show the apostolic church had both the *eschaton* (the last era) and the *telos* (the final goal) in mind. On the day of Pentecost Peter spoke of this last day (Acts 2:17–21), in Acts 3:19–26 the *parousia* of Christ was proclaimed, in 10:42 and 17:31 ultimate judgement by Christ was foretold and pronounced. The church at Thessalonica was born in what we might call 'eschatological teaching', even from the beginning (I Thess. 1:10) and the Epistles all refer to 'the last things'.

Within this scheme of things the Lordship of Christ was prominent, for Christ was bringing the nations of the world under his control by the Gospel. Ethical life was tempered and inspired by the truth of the Kingdom of God. Without godly living one could not inherit the Kingdom. At the same time God's true people were already within the Kingdom (Col. 1:13; Rom. 14:17; I Cor. 4:20). The battle

of the kingdoms (Christ's and Satan's) kept Christ's people alert to the continuing conflict they met daily.

THE FORWARD LOOKING OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

The battle for the nations (cf. Ps. 2:6–8; Matt. 28:19–20; Rev. 7:9f.; 21:27–22:5) was the struggle in which the church lived daily, but it kept the promised end in sight. Life, then was vitally present. The church also looked for the triumph of the Lamb—the Rider on the white horse who is 'King of kings and Lord of lords', by whom the red dragon, the beast and the false prophet would be destroyed.

Ever shining was the glorious hope of (i) resurrection and everlasting life, (ii) glorification of the body and of the whole creation, (iii) the inheritance of the new heavens and the new earth, (iv) the future lived in the holy city under God and the Lamb where all pain and sorrow and death would be banished and (v) the new identity as 'a kingdom of priests unto God' and their reigning over creation forever. Whilst some of these things might seem to many to be insubstantial, they were—and are—most substantial to the people of God, especially when they see that all around them is only 'change and decay', constant change in fashions, and no goal of glory—God Himself.

Hope is one of the three great driving forces spoken of in the New Testament, that is, along with love and faith. God is love and so we have faith in Him because He has revealed Himself—principally in and through Christ—and in having faith in Him we know Him more and more as love. His love is also expressed in His promises—the five expectancies we have named in the paragraph above. So then, the local church lives in faith, hope and love.

¹ We know that the Book of the Revelation was not written until the end of the first century but we have reason to believe its message—in principle—was well known to the early church. In any case, it is available to us.

**THE BURNING QUESTION:
DO WE LIVE IN FAITH, HOPE AND LOVE?**

We are asking whether the local church is oriented outwards to all the world, or centred in itself. We ask whether it is going out to all the world or building up its own local situation, even if giving a nod to the world mission of Christ. Is it seeking to expand its own perimeters without seeking to be the true servant of the King to all men, and is its love in this sense 'known of all'?

Again, does it have faith in the programme of God and the Lamb? Does it live in the ethos and understanding of the Book of the Revelation which speaks of worldwide judgements, catastrophies and calamities, or is the local church a kind of local 'ivory castle' in which there is ecclesiastical comfort, but no real participation in the suffering of the human race, compassion for men and women who are outside of Christ and therefore no sharing in their misery and guilt?

Finally, is the local church dynamic in hope? Does its hope take it through trials and sufferings because of the promise and vista of glory before it? Is the church part of the great yearning to see Christ, to love his appearing, to see the climax of victory over evil powers, and release into the glories of the holy city, the new life, the rich and high ministry of the 'kingdom of priests unto God'?

These are the questions we should be asking ourselves in our local churches. These great 'eternities' are the high matters we should be occupied with in our fellowship under the Father, the Son, and the blessed Holy Spirit.