

What is the Church. . ?

. . . our Preference or God's Purpose?

" . . . just as Christ also loved the church and gave himself up for her; that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present to himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless" (Ephesians 5:25 27)

I had been brought up to 'go to church'. When I became a Christian, there seemed to be very little connection between the reality of personal faith in Jesus and the routines of 'church'. Somehow the two were linked. The Bible was there, Jesus was referred to, but in going there every Sunday to the age of 11, no-one had ever told me that I needed to be involved personally, or even could be!

As a Christian teenager I began to feel that 'the Church' was a great lumbering dinosaur which seemed to stand in the way of real Christianity. I went on dutifully going along on a Sunday morning but 'church' was certainly not a vital part of my spiritual development.

Then there was a new minister who preached the gospel. By now, I knew what an 'evangelical' was, knew that I was one and was delighted to find that this new man and his assistant were both evangelicals. Surely now there would be changes, and the church meetings would become much more like the summer camp where I had come to the Lord!

Well, some things changed but the old machinery still seemed to grind very slowly. Maybe 'the Church' was not an irrelevant dinosaur after all, but it was certainly an institution in need of reform and repair.

By this time I had been invited to go to various special meetings and had discovered other denominations. (I had obviously had a very

sheltered upbringing!) They seemed interesting, often more lively, but the people were very gracious and encouraged me not to leave my 'home church'. Now the phrase 'the Church' had become shorthand for the C. of E. and the others were just 'other churches' in my thinking. They all had different ways of doing things and it seemed that which one you decided to be part of was just a matter of preference, probably greatly influenced by your family history. There were real Christians in most of them but none of them were perfect, so it was hardly worth bothering about changing, especially if your vicar was an evangelical.

I got the feeling that the Bible had little or nothing to say about church life. The books and Bible reading notes which I read certainly avoided saying anything dogmatic or controversial about the church, usually fitting as comfortably as possible into the existing diversity of 1960's evangelical denominationalism.

As I grew a little, read more books, got involved in witness and evangelism and read more of the Bible, I began to discover that, far from having nothing to say about church life, the New Testament was full of it. Many of the verses which I had taken to be just applied personally were obviously written to churches for them to take to heart **together**. 'Church' was evidently not just a sort of happy byproduct of personal faith, it was the main goal of the gospel. I needed to put aside my history and preconceptions and see what God had in mind for the Bride that he had chosen as the partner for his Son!

As it says in the text from *Ephesians*, the Lord Jesus loved the Church so much that he gave his life for her. At the time, this Church was barely in existence, just eleven men who did not really understand what was going on and quite a number of disillusioned followers, but it was still Jesus' consuming passion and had been during his earthly ministry as well. Although the church did not fully come into being until after his death and resurrection, when he had ascended to the Father and sent the Holy Spirit, this verse shows us that it was always the direction of his life. His passion for it is clearly seen in **John 17**, where he pours out his heart to

his Father for those who have followed him and for those who will put their trust in him through them.

John 17 also helps us to see who is in the Church – it is those who have put their trust in Jesus. Even though the infant Church has hardly drawn its first breath when Jesus prays, his description of his disciples gives us a clear impression of the Church as he sees it.

For a few moments, let us forget our ideas of ‘church’ and look at what God has to say about it.

The Greek word itself should help us to see – ‘ekklesia’, ‘a called out assembly’. It was not a religious word but described any coming together of people who had responded to a call. It is used in Acts 19 to describe both the riotous crowd in the theatre and the legal courts which could have been used to settle any arguments. For you to be in an ‘ekklesia’, two things had to have happened. Firstly, there must have been a call and secondly, you would need to have responded to it. For all the noise in Ephesus, if you had not responded to it, you would not be in the ‘ekklesia’ in the theatre. The same would apply to anyone called to the law courts.

It is clear from the New Testament that the Church only included believers, those whom God had called through the declaration of the good news of Jesus and who had responded to that call. It would have been hard to find a more descriptive word than ‘ekklesia’, the assembly of God’s own called out ones. Try following up all the references to ‘church’ which you can find in the New Testament – a concordance would be useful!

What about ‘the churches’? Again, remember that we want to see what God has to say about the matter, not try to fudge the New Testament to fit our present situations. If we talk of ‘the churches’ on a large scale, perhaps nationally, we are probably thinking of all the various denominational groupings represented in the whole country. If we are talking about ‘the churches’ in a smaller area, perhaps mid-Devon, we probably mean all the Christian fellowships in the area, of whatever affiliation or none.

All the separate churches in the New Testament share two key characteristics:–

- 1) There was only one church in each town or city.
- 2) All the believers in that town or city were part of it.

This was not just an accident of the early days. The church in Corinth was riddled with spiritual pride, immorality and divisiveness but it was still one church – just! Paul leaves them in no doubt that their divisions are far from OK and are in fact the cause of their carnality and spiritual poverty, possibly even of sickness and death among them. (See **1 Corinthians chapters 1 & 3 and 11:27-34**)

Jesus had prayed for the Church *“that they may all be one . . . that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21)*. A divided church in Corinth or anywhere else would give the world around a very good excuse not to believe in Jesus.

Paul’s exhortations to the churches to be of one mind and heart together are almost too numerous to list (another concordance-assisted search?) but they make two things clear:–

- 1) The threat of division was there from the start, and
- 2) Division in the local church was totally unacceptable.

1 Timothy 2:8 is clear. No wrath or dissent was to be condoned. When it happened, it was to be dealt with firmly and with the grace of God for proper reconciliation, as in the case of Euodia and Syntyche in Philippi.

We need to ask ourselves some questions:–

- 1) Has our Father changed his plans?
- 2) Are we prepared to fit in with his purposes?
- 3) If so, what must we do in our own situation?
- 4) If not, what reason will we give him?

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