

# **EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY**

**VOLUME 3**

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**Volume 3 • Number 2 • October 1979**

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**Evangelical  
Review of  
Theology** p. 160

# What is the Church?

by HOWARD A. SNYDER

*Reprinted from Spectrum (Fall 1978) with permission*

*In this article Howard Snyder outlines his understanding of the Church as the community of God's people and the importance of the widening of our understanding and practice of the Christian ministry for the Church's renewal. Snyder's thesis at the Lausanne Congress, "The Church as God's Agent in Evangelism" has been developed in two books, The Problem of Wineskins and The Community of the King.*

*This article is followed by one contemporary experiment model of Christian Community in a poorer and multi-racial section of Germantown, Philadelphia, USA where Arbutus and Ron Sider and the other families of the Jubilee Fellowship seek to live out some of the principles in Ron Sider's book, Rich Christians in a Hungry World.*

*For an appreciative understanding of the Church as a structured institution, especially in times of persecution, see below Michael Bourdeaux's "The USSR—The Church after sixty years of Persecution."*

(Editor)

I CAME to the conclusion, while I was working in Brazil, that I couldn't really give an intelligent answer to the question "what is the church?" I was a missionary, had served a couple of years pastoring in Detroit and had spent a year in language school, but I was still confronted with new questions in Brazil. I came to the conclusion that the church needs to rely more heavily on smaller informal structures. It seemed to me that the book of Ephesians had put a lot of that together; so I spent a year of personal study in that book.

During this time I reaffirmed that the church is the community of God's people. We can take the phrase "the body of Christ" [p. 170](#) or others which are used to describe the church, but the expression that seems to me to put all of that together most completely is to call the church "the community of God's people."

I take the fact that the church is the body of Christ as being much more than a figure of speech. We have many figures in the Scripture, and when we talk about the body of Christ, we are talking about more than a metaphor. We are talking about a reality of what the church is. Jesus Christ was here in His physical body on earth, but He said to His disciples, "It is better for you that I go away, because if I go away, the Holy Spirit will come." And so Christ's physical body was removed from the earth in order that the Holy Spirit would come and indwell His body, the church.

We are confronted with the reality of the church; but as we begin to explore it, we suddenly discover that we keep bumping into structures and understandings and ways of doing things that seem to come into conflict with it. If the church is the community of God's people, this has a lot of things to say about what it means to be the expression of that body in the world.

The issue comes down to the ministry of the Christian community as an expression of the community life of the church. The whole matter of ministry is in crisis today. The person who finds himself out in the pastoral role finds that role challenged from several angles. He finds it challenged by the breakdown of the consensus of society that held the traditional pastoral role in a good deal of esteem. He finds it in crisis because now he expects to function in a role that he has trained for, and yet he finds that much of his training doesn't line up with what he is called upon to do.

Increasingly I'm getting letters and having discussions with younger men and women and working in local pastoral situations where people are saying, "I just feel as if I don't fit here." I received a letter from a young man who is two years out of seminary. He has been through a M.Div. program and supposedly was well-trained, but now he is working in a church in California, and he said, "My wife and I just don't feel at home here. We have lots of questions about the traditional pastoral role that we are called to, and we feel isolated." He is an assistant pastor who is working closely with another pastor and with a group of people who know and love the Lord, and yet he feels that something [p. 171](#) is out of focus and out of gear as far as his own personal ministry.

In the midst of the crisis, not only of community, not only of fellowship, but partly because of ministry, it is interesting to take a look at the history of the church. One of the things that you will note as you trace back through the centuries of history is that the renewal in the church has always been accompanied by a widening of the understanding and practice of Christian ministry. As the church institutionalizes, it seems to take a ministry which has been given to the whole body. It narrows that ministry to the point where only certain people at certain times with certain training can perform it. Then someone understandably says, "Well, he is a minister" or "He is called to the ministry," and we automatically think of the ordained pastoral ministry or something related to that.

With this kind of thinking, the worst thing that could be said of a pastor is that he has left the ministry. That may mean in some cases that he has really entered the ministry! The whole process of what it means to be a minister is involved here. If we look back through the renewal movements in the Catholic church before the Reformation, a number of movements during the Middle ages, movements in the first century, or some of the Protestant renewal movements—all of which have resulted in new denominations—many times we discover that the ministry of the gospel which has been restricted to a certain place, a certain time, a certain people has now broken out of those barriers and ministry has been given and is being experienced and is being carried out by the whole body of Christ.

One example is the Franciscan Revival. St. Francis realized that when he heard the gospel read and it said that he should go and preach it, he should do so. He started doing just that, unordained, and he touched a sensitive point in many of the people of his age. Soon there were thousands of young men and later young women who were actually ministering the gospel of Christ. What they were doing was within the church; yet they were to some degree conscious that it was a judgment upon the church.

Another example would be the Wesleyan Revival in the 18th century in England. John and Charles Wesley and George [p. 172](#) Whitfield were going up and down the British Isles preaching. In addition, John Wesley had an organizational bent, so when people began to come to him saying, "we want more instruction," he organized small classes of about a dozen each and appointed people in charge of them. Through this process leaders began to emerge and Wesley appointed various ones of those as lay preachers. They would go preaching and raising up new Methodist societies, which led to a whole range of other kinds of opportunities for ministry that were involved with the class leaders and various other kinds of leaders.

In both the Wesleyan and the Franciscan revivals, the gospel was extended to the poor. Both were also expressions of ministry where something of community was bound up in them—community as the facilitator of ministry. And in that process we see something that we might call discipleship and the awakening of spiritual gifts.

In [1 Peter 2:4-9](#) we read about a holy priesthood which will offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Basic in the understanding of the church that Peter is talking about here is the community of God's people. Often, if we have a mindset of an

institutional model of the church and we are not aware of the fact that we have that mindset, we try to clamp our mindset onto the Scriptures. If we come across the word “pastor,” we think of our understanding of the pastor rather than the scriptural one. When we read about a holy priesthood, we must first of all say, “what is Peter presupposing here?” He is presupposing the church as a community and as God’s people, and so he calls it God’s people. There is the idea of being a corporate reality which God has placed in the world for some basic purposes, and one purpose is to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. There is the idea of expression of worship and praise to God and then a ministry unto the world. All of this is based on the fact that we are a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, a chosen race, a holy nation, God’s own people. We are aware, of course, that this passage, and particularly verse [9](#), was a key passage for Martin Luther in his development of the doctrine of the priesthood of believers. [p. 173](#)

## **I. PRIESTHOOD OF BELIEVERS**

The priesthood of believers is the key—the fact that if we have come to know Jesus Christ and have been made a part of that body of Christ, we have been made a part of His priesthood. In 1 Peter, the author refers back to [Exodus 19](#) where Moses was about to go up on the mountain and God told Moses that these people would be a kingdom of priests. But there’s another, more foundational truth to the idea of priesthood in the Old Testament, and that is that God’s people were to be God’s priests before the world. In a large measure, of course, that commission wasn’t fulfilled, and yet it was there.

When we think of the priesthood of believers in the Protestant evangelical tradition, probably the main thing we think of is direct access to God. This, of course, was a strong emphasis of the Reformation. But the priesthood of believers means more than the fact that we have direct access to God. It also means that if we are a priesthood, we are priests to each other. We are a fellowship. We are a community of God’s people. I’m thankful that there have been those in the fellowship of the church who have been priests to me. Some have been pastors (ordained people) and others have been brothers and sisters in the body of Christ.

## **II. SENT ONES**

The priesthood of believers also suggests to us that we are sent as missionaries in the world, and this is why Peter says “that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” We are in the world to be the channel of God’s love, God’s ministry, God’s revelation, the incarnation, and the proper sense of love. We are in the world to gather up its concerns and to represent it before God in intercessory prayer.

The fact that I want to emphasize here is that this is not a restricted priesthood. It is interesting to see what happens to the idea of priesthood from the Old Testament to the New Testament. In the Old Testament, we had the restricted priesthood, the priestly tribe. In the New Testament, focus is on Jesus Christ who is [p. 174](#) the one Great High Priest who now takes up all the mediatorial functions. He is the mediator between God and man, and being Himself truly God and truly man, He became the Great High Priest and He became the sacrifice through which we have access to God.

The idea of priesthood does not end there. Not only is it narrowed down and summed up in the very person of Christ; it is, on the other hand, broadened to include all of us. We have a share in the priesthood of Jesus Christ. He is our Great High Priest, but we are all priests, for as believers a priesthood has been given to us. One of the most fascinating

things about the New Testament is the disappearance of the whole mentality that some people are priests and some are not. It is interesting that Acts records that a great number of priests became obedient to the faith; then we do not hear any more about them. They did not suddenly become priests in the church and then receive an invitation to speak at some big convention. Rather, leadership was exercised by those who had been carefully disciplined by Jesus Christ.

When we talk about ministry in the church, we are not talking about a differentiation between some who are priests and some who are not. But we cannot just say, “okay, we are all ministers, so let’s all go out and minister; we will not worry about who is trained and who is not trained or who is ordained and who is not ordained.” We have to realize that there is more to the ministry of the body of Christ. The idea of the priesthood of believers has to be lined up with the teaching on the gifts of the Spirit.

### III. THE SPIRITUAL GIFT

The basic passage that deals with spiritual gifts is [Ephesians 4](#). It talks about the unity of the church—there is one faith, one Lord, one baptism. Then there is a transition in verse [7](#). It says “grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ’s gifts.” When we look at the context, we learn that this is not the grace by which we are saved. That is discussed in chapter two. In chapter four Paul is talking about the grace for ministry. In fact, when Paul talks in the book of Ephesians about the ministry that was [P. 175](#) given to him, he sometimes says “this grace which was given to me.”

The word for grace and the word for spiritual gift (*charisma*) are related, so the unique word for spiritual gifts which Paul and Peter used is related to the idea of grace, and it literally means a gift of God’s grace. Remembering that, we begin to understand what Paul means when he says, “but grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ’s gifts.” We are all one in Christ. We are all one body. We are all part of that community of God’s people. We all share in the priesthood of believers. But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.

There is a sense in which none of us can grow up into the fulness of Christ; it is the whole body which is to grow into this fulness. In [Ephesians 1](#) Paul has said that the Church is Christ’s body, the fulness of Him who fills all in all. So this idea of the fulness of Christ is really an expression of a functioning unity in which various gifts are being exercised. When each person within that body has come to realize what God’s particular manifestation of grace is in his or her life for ministry, then the body grows and builds itself up in love. What Paul is saying here is that the exercise of spiritual gifts is basic to the healthy life of the church and implicit in a ministry in the world.

I think that the matter of spiritual gifts suggests three things for the ministry of God’s people. First of all, all ministry is by God’s grace. That is a very fundamental fact in Scripture and yet one which is only beginning to dawn on us in a new way today. It is not a matter of how much training we have or how intelligent we are or whether we are ordained or not. Maybe those are important in context, but they are secondary to the basic fact that ministry is by God’s grace.

Secondly, God gives a wide variety of ministries. It is clear both in [1 Peter 4:10, 11](#) and in the early part of Hebrews, that when the Scriptures talk about gifts for ministry—the spiritual gifts—they are talking about a variety of ministries. The whole matter of diversity is basic to what is being taught. Of course, this is where we line up the gifts of the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit. [p. 176](#) The fruit of the Spirit is for all Christians. We are all to have love, joy, peace, long-suffering. I have no right to say I have no love but I have a lot of joy; or I do not have any peace but I am good at long-suffering. But when it

comes to the gifts of the Spirit, the very nature of what is being discussed is diversity. The whole idea of the figure of the body is that we are not all hands; we are not all feet; we are all given different gifts according to what God has in mind for us in working out His grace in our personalities.

Thirdly, every believer has some ministry. I think that a biblical understanding of the Church is revolutionary, for then we understand that every person in the Church was created in God's image, and God's grace wants to work through each individual. I like what Gordon Cosby says about the gift of personhood—the fact that just being a person is part of God's gift to us, and this is where the matter of gifts of the Spirit begins.

Unfortunately, the church has too often succumbed to the idea that some people have value because they can do certain things. Others do not have value because they cannot do those things. But the biblical perspective is that every person has value, because every person is created in the image of God. What about the handicapped and the mentally retarded? One interesting point about God's grace is that He knows how to use that which has been warped or tainted by sin—whether it be the sin of the individual or the unfortunate things that happen in people's lives because of sin in society from earlier times. Yet, God knows how, in the body of Christ, to take even those who are worthless to society and make them instruments of His grace. This is a view of personhood which is essential and basic to the scriptural understanding of who God is, who we are, and, therefore, what the church is.

What we know in regard to the priesthood is true also in regard to the gifts of the Spirit: both priesthood and the gifts of the Spirit are given to all the Church. We line these two up, of course, and see that while each of us is a priest, the way we exercise the priesthood is going to vary according to the gifts God has given to us. p. 177

#### **IV. SERVANTS**

Another important fact is that in the ministry of the body of Christ, we are servants. A key passage that helps us get a clearer grasp of the nature and ministry of the church is [John 20](#) where Jesus says, "If you're going to be a disciple of mine, there is something different here than is going on in the world. In the world you know how the Gentile leadership is great to exercise authority over those under them." Then He talks about how it is in the religious establishment with the high priests. "But," He says, "not so with you. Whoever will be the servant of all will be considered great." Ministry is service.

Jesus is the model for ministry, which keeps us from an exaggerated emphasis on the Holy Spirit where it becomes a subjective kind of thing. Success is measured by service; it is measured by Christlikeness. It is interesting to me that in [Philippians 2](#) where Paul talks about Jesus emptying Himself, he is not primarily giving us teaching about who Jesus Christ was, though that is part of it. What he is saying is that we should have the mind of Christ within us. Jesus, though He was in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. He emptied Himself and took on the form of a servant.

As we study the priesthood of believers, the gifts of the Spirit, and the fact that we are called to be servants of Christ, the essential point is that we need to rethink this whole matter of ministry and realize that to be a member of the Body of Christ is to be given a ministry. How we are going to define the various kinds of ministries, the ways we are going to carry on training, the rules of discipleship, etc. then flow out from that. But we are all ministers.

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# Jubilee Fellowship of Germantown

*by* ARBUTUS SIDER

*Reprinted from The Other Side (April 1977) with permission*

WHAT IS Jubilee Fellowship? Most simply, we are a church in the Germantown section of Philadelphia. We have roughly twenty members, plus about fifteen children.

In backgrounds we are an ecumenical group: Brethren in Christ, Mennonite, Presbyterian, Reformed Quaker, United Church of Christ.

A little over three years ago some of us began meeting regularly as a Christian fellowship and support group. At that time we all attended separate churches in the city. A year and a half ago we started meeting in one another's homes for Sunday worship. Over the past two years, one by one, our families have moved into a multiracial area of Germantown. Within a few months, God willing, all but three of us will be living within a six block area.

We have been variously called a church community, a house church, and a fellowship. Recently we adopted the name Jubilee Fellowship of Germantown. We chose the name *Jubilee* as an ideal we would all like to strive after. To us it suggests, on the one hand, joy, jubilation, and praise. On the other hand, it points to a willingness to share with each other and with the poor beyond our fellowship—in the spirit of the Year of Jubilee. This is the spirit that Jesus seems to have referred to in his first sermon, announcing that he had been chosen to “proclaim the year of the Lord's favor” ([Luke 4:14–18](#)).

This is an ironically appropriate name for a Christian fellowship in Philadelphia, since our city's Liberty Bell refers to that same Year of Jubilee. Inscribed on the bell are the words, “Proclaim liberty throughout all the land to all the inhabitants thereof” ([Lev. 25:10](#)). [p. 179](#)

So much for our name. What about our style of life?

We do not live communally, nor do we have a common purse. But we live in the same neighborhood so we can share what we have—and what we are—with each other as any has need. And we do share economically in certain group projects.

We meet regularly on Sunday mornings—three Sundays a month—for teaching and worship, followed by a simple meal. Then we spend as much of the day together as our schedules permit: playing football, hiking, or the like

On Thursday evenings we meet together without our children for worship, sharing, and discipling of each other. These are the times when we share most deeply our cares, frustrations, weaknesses, and spiritual struggles—as well as our hopes and dreams and joys. We give each other both support and counsel.

Some of us also meet four days a week for prayer and singing and reading of the Scriptures before our work day begins.