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Editorial

The Church—Is It Relevant?

Time passes. As it does, in current secular history the time-bound ecological global crisis and consequent global depletion of resources have dwarfed all other world problems. To those who take the Christian faith seriously, a comparable crisis would be concerning the church. Never before in either sacred or secular history has the Christian Church been assessed to be so sick, so irrelevant universally, particularly in those regions and histories where christendom is a dead corpse (though every now and then heart-pacers have been vigorously attempted!). The world is perennially searching for a paradigm of human society, but for one reason or the other the Church has *not* been a candidate. Now the theological air is filled with dust: Should not the Church always remain militant or a 'little flock'? Is it not antiquated? How best and radically should the Church be restructured in order to be salvaged? After all, Jesus gave himself to us as the way of life, not the Church; and so the arguments go on. The causes for both are said to be the inevitable spread of secularization (a world-view necessarily without God) and the unparalleled abundance of material wealth. In any case, for Bible-believing Christians the nature and relevance of the Church in the contemporary world is the key issue, as myriads of publications and discussions on the subject in the last decade reveal. And one suspects that these inquiries will become more intensified, more numerous and more urgent everywhere in the coming decade.

All the articles and book reviews in this issue of *ERT*, published in original, speak to this problem of the relevance of the Church. Most of these are papers presented at the last meeting of the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians (FEET), which took place in Woelmersen, West Germany in August, 1988. Evangelical ecclesiology was the theme of the conference. The understanding of the Church and her problems from other regions also are included to show the universal urgency of a relevant ecclesiology beyond the regions of Europe. It is hoped that these papers will evoke similar studies among evangelical [p. 4](#) thinkers in other parts of the world too. We earnestly hope that the readers of *ERT* will also be moved to respond. Any responses will be published for the benefit of our international readership.

The editor is grateful to all the paper writers and book reviewers for their contribution and permission to publish.

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Essential Aspects of the Church in the Bible

R. A. Campbell

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It would be generally agreed that the NT writer who has most to say about the Church is Paul, and that his most developed thinking on the subject is to be found in Ephesians. Ephesians has been described by J. A. Robinson as ‘the crown of Paul’s writings’¹ and by John Stott as ‘the Gospel of the Church. It sets forth God’s eternal purpose to create through Jesus Christ a new society which stands out in bright relief against the sombre background of the old world’.² Many of today’s NT scholars, of course, would not start here. For them Ephesians is doubtfully Paul’s own handiwork, and even evangelical scholars seem to be in danger, if not of recognizing a ‘canon within a canon’, then of working with a hierarchy within the canon according to which the earlier letters of Paul carry more authority than the later and those they suppose may rather be products of a Pauline school. This is to treat the NT not as Scripture but as evidence in a detective inquiry. Our task is not to reconstruct something called ‘the historical Paul’ or ‘the primitive church’ but to come to Scripture as a whole and ask what it has to tell us through its different writers about the essential nature of the Church. For this purpose, to say that Ephesians is a later letter is to show its particular value to us. It is the maturest product of apostolic thought, written not in the heat of controversy or in response to a church crisis, but perhaps more than any of Paul’s letters except Romans, as a definitive statement of his faith and teaching concerning the Church of Jesus Christ.

In Ephesians the word ‘church’, *ekklesia*, occurs first in 1.2: ‘and he has put all things under his feet and made him head over all things for the church which is his body.’ Paul is praying that the readers will know the greatness of God’s power and love toward them, and he has been saying that the resurrection shows that Christ has all authority in heaven and on earth and has it *for the Church*. Christ is Lord and we who are so bound up with him are the beneficiaries of his Lordship. In [Eph. 3:10](#) the Church is central to God’s eternal plan, since it is through the Church that his wisdom is to be made known to the principalities and powers. In [Eph. 5:21–33](#) the relationship of husband [p. 6](#) and wife is briefly illuminated by reference to the love of Christ for his Church and the Church’s glad surrender to him. Although these are the principal occurrences of the word *ekklesia* in the letter, they do not go to the heart of the matter, for in them the Church is *assumed* rather than defined. In none of these passages is the Church as such the main topic of discussion. If we want to see what in essence the Church is, we need to turn instead to chapter [2 vv. 19–22](#):

So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles, and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

A few verses earlier Paul has been addressing his Gentile readers and reminding them that before their conversion they were ‘separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise’. Now he says they have been brought near, they have access in one Spirit to the Father; in a word they have become part of the people of God. Another way of expressing this is that they have joined the household, the family of God, and this leads Paul to think of a building with foundations and cornerstone and finally of a temple where God dwells by his Spirit. As G. B. Caird says, ‘The change of metaphor from commonwealth and family to building and

¹ J. A. Robinson, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians*, 1903, p. vii.

² J. R. W. Stott, *God’s New Society*, 1979, p. 9.

temple is facilitated by the triple meaning of the word *oikos* (household, house, temple).³ Not all parts of the passage are equally metaphorical, however. To describe the Church as a temple is obviously a metaphor, and like all metaphors it has its limits—the Church is a temple in so far as God dwells in us by his Spirit; it is not the case that we are made of blocks of stones—but to describe the Church as fellow citizens and members of the household of God is much less metaphorical, for this is the language used in the OT to describe Israel. Paul is not saying that the Church is *like* a people of God or *like* Israel; he is saying that the Church is the people, it is Israel. All the privileges and responsibilities of the people of God belong to the Church. Jesus Christ has made Jew and Gentile one so that in and through this one reconciled people God's eternal purpose for the whole world can be fulfilled.

It is because the Church is thought of as the people of God that it can [p. 7](#) be referred to as the *oikos theou* ([1 Tim. 3:15](#)), with Christians as the *oikeioi theou* ([Gal. 6:10](#), [Eph. 2:19](#)). *Oikos* is secular Greek and meant not merely the building but the family/household who lived in it and formed a basic unit of society. It was regularly used metaphorically of a city, a state or the empire itself. The Roman emperors were accustomed to projecting themselves as 'fathers' of the nation, *patres patriae*. In the LXX *oikos* is similarly both a family, a clan, the royal family and Israel as a whole, 'the house of Israel'. So it was natural for Paul to use *oikos* language both of the local church which met in houses and functioned as a family/household, and of the universal Church of which God was the father and head ([Eph. 3:15](#)).⁴

The church as the people of God is not an isolated idea in Paul's letters. It lies behind the argument in [Romans 9–11](#), where Paul asks whether the rejection of the gospel by the Jews means that God's word has failed, whether God chose a people for his own and then was forced to reject them. As the people of God the Church must learn the lessons learnt by Israel in the wilderness ([1 Cor. 10:1–13](#)). Paul actually calls the church 'the Israel of God' ([Gal. 6:16](#)) and in [Titus 2:14](#) he says that Jesus Christ 'gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds'. 'A people of his own' is a clear echo of what was said to Israel at Sinai ([Ex. 19:5–6](#)).

OTHER NEW TESTAMENT WRITERS

Paul is not the only NT writer to think in this way. Next to Ephesians the letter in the NT that says most about the church is 1 Peter. Here new believers are addressed as those who have become heirs to all God's promises. Language appropriated from the OT's description of the people of God runs through the letter. They have been born again to an 'inheritance' ([1:3](#)); they are to be 'holy, for I am holy' ([1:16](#)); they are to be built into a 'spiritual house to be a holy priesthood' ([2:5](#)); they are 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood' ([2:5](#)); 'a household' ([4:17](#)). The whole letter is an extended call to the newly baptised to know who they are and be what they are, the people of God. We notice again how the idea of the church as the people of God readily expresses itself in terms of *oikos*. The thought is primarily of belonging, not of building (although in that direction, see [1 Peter 2:5](#), [Eph. 2:20](#)). In the world believers are strangers and exiles, *parokoi*, but members of God's [p. 8](#) *oikos*, with security, dignity and obligations to live by the code of the family and to be good stewards (*oikonomoi*) of God's grace ([1 Peter 4:10](#)). Another NT writer to work this idea

³ G. B. Caird, *Paul's Letters from Prison*, 1976, pp. 60–1.

⁴ See further J. H. Elliott, *Home for the Homeless*, 1981, pp. 170–200.

is the writer to the Hebrews. Christians are God's house ([3:6](#)), his people are moving through the desert towards the promised land in heaven. They are to be beware of missing God's rest by reason of unbelief, and to be encouraged by the vision of heaven that is deliberately contrasted with the assembly of Israel before Sinai: 'you have come to Mount Zion, and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven ...' ([Heb. 12:22-23](#)). Finally the book of Revelation plunders the OT for images to describe the Church, culminating in the vision of the city coming down out of heaven from God dressed as a bride adorned for her husband.

The fact that the Church is seen as the people of God throughout the NT and that this is the fundamental truth about the Church can be seen also from the way in which so many of the ways of describing the Church are dependent on it. Paul Minear, who has counted over eighty ways of describing the Church in the NT, says that these titles form 'not so much a technical doctrine as a gallery of pictures'.⁵ But they are not created out of nothing. When the Church is called the temple of God, or the flock of God, or the bride of Christ, this is possible because she is already known to the people of God and the OT images apply to her. The idea of the Church as the Bride, which Paul uses first in [1 Cor. 11:2](#) and in [Eph. 5:22-33](#), and which we have just been reminded appears at the end of Revelation also, has its roots in the OT prophets, especially Hosea and Jeremiah, who spoke of Israel's relation to Yahweh in terms of broken marriage promises. The image of the flock of God, which was used by Jesus ([Luke 12:32](#)) and appears also in Paul's address to the Ephesian elders ([Acts 20:28](#)), as well as [1 Peter 5:1ff](#) is found in both the Psalms ([95:6](#)) and the prophets ([Ezek. 34](#)). When the Church is compared to a temple it is the temple in Jerusalem that is in mind, and when the Church is compared to a city, it is not *any* city (the picture says nothing to our present concern with urban ministry) but to the city of God, Jerusalem. No one doubts that these are metaphorical descriptions of the Church; but the point is that they are OT metaphors arising from and pointing to the fact that the Church is the people of God. p. 9

THE MEANING OF *EKKLESIA*

In the light of this, much of the discussion about the word *ekklesia* seems to me to be beside the point. It has been disputed whether Paul's use of the phrase *ekklesia theou* derives from the OT description of Israel at Sinai as *gahal YHWH*.⁶ It is pointed out that the word 'ekklesia' in Greek had no religious significance as such and referred simply to a meeting or assembly, as it does for example in [Acts 19](#) to the silversmiths' meeting in the theatre at Ephesus. Paul, it is suggested, simply used the regular word for meeting to describe what was happening, with no special thought of the assembly of God's people in the OT. However, it is generally thought that Paul was not the first to use the term *ekklesia* of the Church. The earliest Christians had probably used the Aramaic word *knishta*, which was used to translate the Hebrew *gahal* or *edah* equally. The first Greek speaking Christians would have used the LXX where *gahal* is translated by *ekklesia* but also by *sunagoge*. But *sunagoge* was closed to them as a term for their own meetings because of its use for the weekly Jewish meeting. So even before Paul the term *ekklesia* entered the Church's vocabulary by way of the LXX. Now it is quite true that the link between *gahal YHWH* and *ekklesia theou* is never explicitly made by Paul or anyone else, but in view of the fact that

⁵ P. Minear, *IDB*, pp. 607-17.

⁶ For a summary of the debate see I. H. Marshall, *ExT.* 84, 1972/3, pp. 359-64.

the Church was understood as the people of God, this hardly seems to matter. All it shows is that Christian theology was not created by reflecting on the derivations and association of words alone, and that, as so often, linguistic studies alone will not settle for us what a word must have meant.

The same applies, I suggest, to the attempt by some scholars⁷ to show that Paul never used *ekklesia* to apply to the universal Church on earth, but only to local assemblies of Christians on the one hand and the Church, thought of as gathered in heaven, on the other. Their argument is that the word *ekklesia* always retains its sense of an actual meeting and is not used of the organization that holds the meetings or the people when they are not meeting. The Church Universal on earth never actually assembles, and so what looks like references to this are in fact descriptions of the heavenly reality of the Church gathered about Christ. Paul of course does use *ekklesia* in two ways. It does often indeed refer to a local church or meeting: we read of the ‘church [p. 10](#) in Corinth’, or ‘the church in your house’, or to the ‘churches in Judea’ or ‘the churches of Christ’. However, especially in the later letters to the Colossians and Ephesians, *ekklesia* is used in a more general sense: ‘he is the head of the body of the church’ ([Col. 1:18](#)), ‘Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her’ ([Eph. 5:25](#)). This later usage, it is suggested, refers to the Church in heaven, because the Church on earth is never in session, and because it is said that the believers are seated with Christ in the heavenly places. The first thing to say in reply is that the two usages overlap, in that the local sense is also found in [Col. 4:15](#) and the general sense is found in earlier letters in connection with Paul’s having persecuted the church of God (not one congregation surely! [Gal. 1:13](#)). Second, the Church Paul suffers for ([Col. 1:24](#)) is the Church of which he became a servant ([Col. 1:25](#)), and this is surely on earth where the sufferings and the service are. But third, if we are right that Paul saw the Church as the people of God, as the remnant accomplishing God’s mission in the world on behalf of all Israel, surely it is inconceivable that he thought of this as going on anywhere but on earth. To argue for this on the sole ground that *ekklesia* always means an actual gathering seems far-fetched. It is surely more likely that *ekklesia* experienced a natural development similar to that of *oikos*. J. H. Elliott writes: ‘Both terms, *oikos* and *ekklesia*, originally were employed by Christian missionaries to depict local individual households or public assemblies of believers respectively. In the eventual expansion and consolidation of the Christian movement both terms were also subsequently used in a comprehensive manner to designate the sum total of Christian *oikoi* and *ekklesiai* as constituting the one universal household or assembly of God.’⁸ We should particularly note in this connection [Eph. 3:15](#) where God is spoken of as one from whom ‘*pasa patria*’ in heaven and on earth is named. ‘*Pasa patria*’ should be translated, as in NIV, ‘the whole earth family’, not ‘every family’, and it shows that Paul could indeed think of the universal Church on earth as well as in heaven.

So far we have confined ourselves to the Church in the thought of the apostles; but we must ask where Christians came by this conviction that they were the people of God. Surely the most likely answer is that it came from the teaching of Jesus. If we were to limit ourselves to the word *ekklesia* we would conclude that the church was peripheral to the teaching of Jesus, but that would be a mistake. It is true that the word only occurs in two places in the Gospels, both in the Gospel of [p. 11](#) Matthew: once where Jesus says, ‘You are Peter and on this rock will I build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it’ ([16:18](#)), and once when Jesus is teaching about dealing with sin within the fellowship of believers ([18:17](#)). The authenticity of these sayings has often been doubted both

⁷ R. J. Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community*, 1980, pp. 43–52; P. T. O’Brien, ‘The Church as a Heavenly and Eschatological Reality’ in D. A. Carson (ed.), *The Church in the Bible and the World*, 1987.

⁸ J. H. Elliott, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

because the language has seemed to reflect a later time and because the belief lingers on that Jesus expected the end of the world so soon that there was no room in his thinking for a continuing church. However there is a growing body of opinion willing to defend the sayings as genuine sayings of Jesus,⁹ and while here we cannot go into the whole question of Jesus' expectation, it will be sufficient to refer to Newton Flew's arguments showing that the Church is indisputably central in Jesus' thinking.¹⁰ Jesus after all called twelve disciples, and the number is more significant than the men. The Twelve as individuals were apparently quickly forgotten, but not the fact that there were twelve, or that Jesus had called them a 'little flock' ([Luke 12:32](#)). Jesus began his ministry by identifying with John the Baptist whose baptism called Israelites to begin all over again, and he concluded it by speaking a new covenant and giving his disciples a new passover rite. Moreover he spoke of himself as the Son of Man, a title best explained by reference to the figure who in Daniel represents the saints of the Most High, Israel in fact, vindicated by God after suffering. If Jesus saw his disciples as a new Israel, or as the faithful remnant who would live in the world, love their enemies and proclaim the kingdom in the interval before his return/vindication, then the question of the precise length of the interval is irrelevant. The evidence is that Jesus calls a community into being, and that we have here the source of the apostles' doctrine that the Church is the people of God and a vital part of the gospel message.

So far we have said nothing of Paul's description of the Church as the body of Christ, and yet for many people it has been this, rather than 'the people of God', that has been the essential definition of the Church. Against this I shall argue that it is only a metaphor, or rather two metaphors, that it is never used by Paul to *define* the Church, and that if we treat it as more than a metaphor, cutting it loose from the purposes for which Paul employed it and drawing conclusions he did not draw, then we get into trouble. But first we must see how Paul actually uses the phrase 'the body of Christ'. It occurs first in [Rom. 12:4-5](#): [p. 12](#)

As in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually members one of another.

The idea occurs again in [1 Cor. 10:17](#) and receives extended treatment in [1 Cor. 12:12-27](#). In all three places the purpose of the comparison is to stress the interdependence of members and to promote the unity of the Church. Christians are one body, and a comparison with the human body is that each member has a service to perform that only he can do and all the others need. It is because we are in Christ and his Spirit is in us ([1 Cor. 12:13](#)) that we are so related to each other. Christ has created this situation and maintained it by his grace, but he is so to speak outside the metaphor at this stage. We are one body, his body, because we are in him, but it is not literally or ontologically his body, as if different members claim to be the eyes or ears of Christ. It is about what we are to each other, not what we are to Christ.

In Colossians the metaphor is developed and used differently. Christ is the head of the Church, his body ([Col. 1:18, 24](#)), and Christian growth depends on holding fast to him as head ([Col. 2:19](#)). The thought here is that Christ is supreme over all and is the source of all life. The metaphor is developed in the service of showing that Christians do not need

⁹ By G. Maier, 'The Church in the Gospel of Matthew' in D. A. Carson (ed.), *Biblical Interpretation and the Church*, 1984.

¹⁰ R. Newton Flew, *Jesus and His Church*, 1938.

any other mediator, any other wisdom, in order to experience fullness of life. They have Christ in them, and that is enough. In Ephesians both the earlier and later use of the metaphor come together. The supremacy of Christ and the Church's security in him are the climax of the opening chapter ([Eph. 1:22-3](#)), and it is further said in the marriage passage that Christ nourishes and cherishes the church as a man his own body ([Eph. 5:29-30](#)). In both passages Paul appears to be referring in familiar terms to the church, not stating a new doctrine, and in both places the main point is how the Church benefits from Christ. Then in [Eph. 4:1-16](#) the idea of unity in diversity appears; since Christ is now the head, believers are no longer said to be parts of the body but only to be gifts whereby the whole Church can grow up to maturity in Christ.

TWO METAPHORS

From this brief survey we can see that in fact we have two distinct metaphors: the body and its members (Romans and Corinthians), and the head and its body (Colossians and Ephesians). The first teaches the unity of believers, and the second the sufficiency and love of Christ. **p. 13** This cannot easily be combined into one picture or doctrine of the Church. In particular we should notice what Paul does not say. He does not say that we are Christ's body in the sense that it is through us he does his work in the world,¹¹ although it seems to us a natural extension of the metaphor: he dwells in us by his Spirit, we do his work in the world. But Paul never uses 'body language' to relate Christ to the world, only to relate believers to one another or believers to Christ.

To take this further step is to open the door to all sorts of false ideas, such as that Christ is limited by his Church (whereas Paul is actually teaching the unlimited power of Christ in [Eph. 1](#)). To say, for example, that the Church is the 'extension of the incarnation' is to dissolve the essential difference between Christ and the Church by virtue of which he can be our Saviour ([Eph. 5:23](#)). If we say that 'his body' is more than a metaphor, that the Church really is the Body of Christ, then since the man's body is himself, and where it goes he goes, we end up with the absurdity that Christ saved himself. Paul can avoid this only because he never thinks of it as anything but a metaphor of strictly limited application. Similarly he can raise the appalling thought that a Christian can take the members of Christ and join them to a prostitute ([1 Cor. 6:15](#)), but as a *reductio ad absurdum*, not as a literal possibility. The problem, by contrast, with the 'extension of incarnation' approach is that it becomes impossible for us to take seriously the possibility that the Church should ever sin, for example by unbelief. The church loses the precious ability to be self-critical. An example where this kind of thinking can take us occurred only recently. The Archbishop of Canterbury was attending the national assembly of evangelicals in the Church of England. He congratulated them on their growth and the contribution they had made to the life of the church over the last generation, but appealed to them to give more explicit attention to ecclesiology. 'The church', he said, 'is not just a useful shorthand term for the community of the faithful. If it truly is the Body of Christ, the Church too demands our belief, trust and faith.'¹² We are left wondering in what sense are we to trust the Church too. If all he meant was that we should show more regard for one another, not only in the local congregation but in the wider councils of the Church, not only to those of our own tradition but to those of other traditions, there are surely less dangerous ways of saying it. **p. 14**

¹¹ P. T. O'Brien, *op. cit.*, p. 111-113.

¹² *Church Times*, London, May 6th, 1988.

There are good grounds, then, to see ‘the people of God’ rather than ‘the body of Christ’ as the basic definition of the Church in Scripture, while rejoicing in all that the body idea so finely expresses. ‘The people of God’ is far more widespread in the NT. Unlike other ways of speaking of the Church, which each make their point and no more, this is the truth on which the various metaphors build. It is fully personal and readily comprehensible. It defines us in terms of our salvation, since we are those who have entered into a covenant with God through Christ, and in terms of our purpose, since God chooses to use his people to bring the whole world back to himself. It makes plain that to be a Christian is not to be saved in isolation. It is a term that can express both the Church in its local manifestation, the worldwide Church and the whole sweep of God’s purpose from its beginnings with Abraham to the consummation of it all in heaven.

The Church then is the people of God and as such is central to the purpose of God in both OT and NT. The importance of the church in Jesus’ ministry can be seen not by counting the number of times he used particular words, but by the place given to the disciples. Their call is not an afterthought. In Mark it is the first event after the programmatic announcement of the kingdom in Jesus’ preaching. Before a single healing takes place, or any teaching, some disciples are called. They continue to figure prominently in the gospel record. In the same way the result of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost is the emergence of a community. The final vision of the Bible is not (as we might have expected) the coming of Christ, but by the coming of the city, his Bride. But what can we say of the form the Church takes while on earth—what are sometimes called the structures of the Church? Structures there must be, since the Church lives in the world, but here we encounter a paradox. If the Church in the NT everywhere occupies a central place, her structures are only casually referred to. Towards the end of the 1st century Clement of Rome wrote:

Our apostles knew through our Lord Jesus Christ that there would be strife over the same name of the bishop’s office. For this cause therefore, having received complete foreknowledge, they appointed the aforesaid persons, and afterwards they provided a continuance, that if these should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed to their ministration. (1 Clement 44:1–2), Lightfoot’s translation).

Despite this it is plain that Clement is indulging in a good deal of wishful thinking, and that in fact he has to write as he does precisely because the apostles provided no such thing! When we examine the NT we find very little in the way of clear directions about the organization or order of the Church. Jesus himself established no hierarchy [p. 15](#) and permitted no titles ([Matt. 23:8–11](#)). His disciplinary teaching ([Matt. 18:15–20](#)) envisages no officers. During his ministry he practiced no ceremonial initiation, apparently discontinuing the practice of baptism taken over from John ([John 4:2](#)) and only restoring it to the church before his ascension ([Matt. 28:19](#)). He established no liturgy beyond the prayer with which all might draw near to God as children and brothers, and the meal that (in continuity with his own practice of eating with sinners) declared a new covenant. He gave his community no rule but the rule of love, and no task but the task of proclaiming the forgiveness of God. The ambivalence concerning the church which we find in the rest of the NT, both the importance of the community and its unimportance can be traced back point for point to the teaching of Jesus himself; and this ambiguity is carried forward from Jesus into the Acts and letters of the apostles.

ACTS AND LEADERSHIP

To take the witness of Acts first, and accepting that Acts was written by Luke the companion of Paul at a date nearer to 60 AD than to 90 AD, and that Luke knew what he was talking about (all of which I gladly affirm), what does Luke want to tell us about the Church? About the kind of life it should aspire to, he is clear ([Acts 2:42-7](#), [4:32-4](#), [9:31](#), etc.): unity, prayerfulness, generosity, joy are clearly set before us as a model. That the church lives by the power and initiative of the Spirit is clear. That the preaching of the gospel leads to the establishment of Churches, and that these churches are precious and important ([Acts 20:28](#)); that is explicit. Nor is Luke silent about the leaders the church has, any more than he is unaware of the magistrates different Greek cities had, but while we have to respect his accuracy in the latter case we do not read Acts as a text-book on secular government, and it will serve us no better on ecclesiastical government! In Jerusalem we learn of apostles, then of the Seven, and later of the elders and of James apparently in overall leadership; but what the relationship of these different offices is—whether, for example, as has been argued,¹³ the appointment of the Seven is really the origin of the eldership rather than, as has traditionally been maintained, of the diaconate—no one can say for certain. Moving on we learn that in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers, and of the call and commission of **P. 16** some of their number to be missionaries, who themselves appointed elders in every church ([Acts 13:1-2](#), [14:23](#)). Elders then appear again at Ephesus, and they are said to have been made ‘overseers’ by the Holy Spirit ([Acts 20:28](#)). Now accepting the truth of all that Luke says, and believing that there is no fundamental disagreement with what Paul says in his letters (especially if we take seriously the witness of the Pastoral Epistles), and remembering that we are concerned with ‘essential aspects of the Church in *Scripture*’ with some reconstruction derived from setting one biblical writer against another—having said all that I think we will have to admit that Luke gives us no water-tight prescription for the Church’s order and that this must be because he did not think it necessary to do so. If he tells us anything it is that God can be trusted to give the Church the leaders that it needs. If we were going to find an ecology anywhere it would be the speech of Paul to the Ephesian elders, but to quote C. K. Barrett: ‘It was the Holy Spirit who appointed (*etheto*) them; not the churches, not Paul. It is a consequence of this that the speech makes no provision for the appointment of new ministers; the presbyters are not told that they must ordain successors, for the good reason that the Holy Spirit that appointed them can be trusted to produce more when more are needed.’¹⁴

In this speech, as in the Pastoral Epistles, the only ‘apostolic succession’ Paul knows is the passing on of the apostolic message. Before we leave Luke it will be good to notice what else he doesn’t tell us: he doesn’t tell us that the elders are paid or full-time; he doesn’t tell us what they do; and he says nothing whatever about sacrament with regard to them.

We have seen that Paul is the great theologian of the Church, but when it comes to the structures of organization of the Church, he has less to tell us than we might think. There is, of course, always the unmistakable leadership and authority of the apostle himself, but his authority did not lie in an office so much as in his historic relationship with the churches he had founded. He speaks of colleagues variously as ‘brothers’, ‘servants’ and ‘fellow-workers’, associating himself with them in a way that claims no special rank for himself. There is a marked reluctance to accord titles to those who lead in the churches. In Thessalonica they are called ‘those who labour among you and are over you in the Lord’,

¹³ A. Farrer, ‘The New Ministry in the NT’ in K. Kirk, *The Apostolic Ministry*, 1946, p. 133ff.

¹⁴ C. K. Barrett, *Church, Ministry and the Sacraments in the NT*, 1985, p. 52-3.

at Corinth the equivalent people are described as ‘those who have devoted themselves to the service of the saints’, and their relationship to the ‘first apostles, second prophets, third [p. 17](#) teachers’ in [1 Cor. 12:28](#) is nowhere made plain. In Galatians there is a reference to ‘him who teaches’, in Rome to *ho prohistamenos* (probably meaning one whose gift is leading); in Philippi there is a greeting for ‘the overseers and servants’; Ephesians knows that Christ has given ‘some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers’, but how they are supposed to relate to one another in a local church, or in the wider Church, no one can be sure.

Nor is there any greater advance if we turn to the Pastoral Epistles. The leaders are variously called ‘overseers’ and ‘servants’ as in Philippi, and ‘elders’ as in Acts. These leaders have more prominence, because the letters are about their appointment and discipline, and are written to ‘fellow-workers’ of Paul to that purpose, but nothing is said to suggest that they have become priests or clergy. Reference to laying on of hands, whether *on* Timothy or *by* him, by no means proves that later ideas of ordination are present; and once again nothing is said about sacraments. The only clear task of leaders is teaching and preaching.

Whether we turn to the (probably) earlier or (probably) later letters of Paul two things are clear. First, there were always leaders. It was never the case that leadership was simply left to the impulse of the Spirit. There is accordingly no need to see the presence of elders as incompatible with the recognition of *charismata*; or to doubt that on the one hand leadership naturally lay with older people, or those converted first, or those in whose houses the church met; nor on the other hand that not all such people proved to have useful gifts, nor were the gifts found among such people alone. Secondly, while recognizing those who led, Paul did nothing to magnify their position or reserve any cultic or sacramental function to them. Finally, even in the Pastorals their presence and role is assumed; it is never argued for, and in no letter of Paul is space devoted to drawing up anything like a constitution of the Church or defining the ministry of the leader in terms of anything more specific or exalted than ‘labour’.

If this is all we learn from Paul and the Acts about the ministry of the Church, the remaining letters of the NT do not add greatly to the picture. Peter knows of elders who shepherd the flock and to whom younger members (or are they younger *leaders*, deacons in fact?) should be subject. James knows of elders who anoint with oil in the name of the Lord, but confession of sins is significantly ‘to one another’ and not to an elder. John introduces himself as ‘the Elder’ in his second and third letter, and speculation has raged around the pre-eminence beloved of Diotrefes, but otherwise neither the epistles nor the Fourth Gospel show any interest in church organization or leadership [p. 18](#) at all. Finally Hebrews enjoins obedience to leaders who ‘keep watch over your souls’, but is otherwise notable for its exposition of the high priesthood of Jesus which explains why the Church has no other priests and offers no sacrifices for sins.

DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

What is the proper conclusion to draw from facts such as these? One possibility is that the different NT writers merely reflect the diversity of patterns of leadership in the NT church, that they cannot and should not be harmonized and that there is no more to be said. Another is that they are evidence of a historical development within the Church during the 1st. century, and that with care we can reconstruct the stages of its evolution. A third possibility is that all the details can be fitted together to form a pattern which can be called ‘the order of the church according to the NT’. I would not dismiss this out of hand. Differences between what can be learnt from Paul and Acts, between ‘acknowledged

Paulines' and the Pastorals, have been greatly exaggerated. I am willing to believe that the details preserved for us are historically correct and mutually consistent, but I would ask, *even if they are, what does that mean?*

For surely the clearest thing to emerge from our brief survey is that none of the NT writers thought it important to tell us more than they have, and that what they have told us falls a long way short of providing the sort of information that we would need to speak with confidence of a NT church order. All of them assume rather than prescribe patterns of government and organization. All of them leave large gaps in our knowledge which we can attempt to fill in with some detective work; but even if we succeed to everyone's satisfaction, would we then have the mind of the Spirit for his Church in every age? Would the result of our ingenuity in fact be *theology* as opposed to ancient history? If we could the silences of Scripture to be as inspired as its pronouncements, we have reason to doubt it.

God has chosen to reveal himself to the world through a people. He might conceivably have chosen to do so through a Book (as Islam for example holds that he did), or through an elite corps of angels, or priests, or prophets; but God actually chose to work through a nation. In the same way Jesus left behind no body of writings, no system of doctrine, no blueprint for an organization: instead he called a community into being and entrusted his mission to a group of ordinary people. The significance of this should not be missed when we ask what is the essential purpose of the Church. The first purpose of the [p. 19](#) Church is to be together, to meet, to belong, to love one another. John Taylor wrote:

Like a peal of bells the word *allelon*—'one another'—rings through the pages of the New Testament. 'Accept one another'—*allelon*, 'serve one another'—*allelon*, 'wash one another's feet', 'confess your sins to one another and pray for one another', 'forbearing one another and forgiving each other', 'teaching and admonishing one another', 'comfort one another and build each other up', 'bear one another's burdens', 'love one another as I have loved you'.¹⁵

So the Spirit falls on the disciples when they are all together in one place, and the result of his coming is new community. However the church does not exist for itself, to promote a sense of community for its own sake. The second and no less important purpose of the Church is to be God's witnesses. The two main contentions of this paper so far come together here. If the Church is the people of God in continuity with Israel, then it follows that its purpose is to witness; and if the purpose of the Church is to witness, then we see why so little is said of structures. A concern with structures and offices belongs to an organization that is more concerned with preservation than with proclamation, more concerned with itself than with the world. A concern with offering worship as an activity in itself leads to that worship being seen as the essential activity of such a Church, and those appointed to offer the worship come to be seen as the essential core of the Church. It is quite otherwise in the NT. In the first place, the essential task of the Church in the NT is witness; in the second, cultic language is used not of any liturgical activity of the church but of its preaching in the world; for, third, this witness is the work of the whole Church of the people of God as a people together.

That the essential activity of the Church is witness and proclamation can be seen in every part of the NT. This was Jesus' stated purpose in calling the disciples ([Mark 1:17](#)). The theme is continued in the mission discourse of Jesus ([Mark 6:7ff.](#) and parallels). The gospel is to be preached to the whole world ([Mark 13:10](#), [14:9](#)). This is the heart of the Great Commission with which the Gospels end ([Matt. 28:18–20](#), [Luke 24:21](#)). The Father

¹⁵ J. V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God*, 1972, p. 126.

sent the Son into the world to bear witness to the truth ([18:37](#)), and Jesus has earlier said that the disciples are to bear witness along with the Holy Spirit ([15:27](#)). Witness is a key word in Acts also. The apostles are constituted witnesses by the coming of the Holy Spirit ([1:8](#)), and that is how they speak of their ministry ([2:32](#), p. 20 [3:15](#), [5:32](#)). Witness is likewise the purpose for which Paul is called ([20:24](#), [2:15](#), [23:11](#), [26:22](#)). Paul himself does not use the word 'witness' so much as 'apostle', one who is sent to preach. This is his *ergon* and that of his team, his *sunergoi*. This is his obligation to all men ([Rom. 1:14](#)), beside which administering baptism is a very small matter ([1 Cor. 1:17](#)) but it is not a task reserved for him. The aim of his ministry is to generate other witnesses who will 'shine as lights in the world, holding forth the word of Life' ([Phil. 2:15-16](#)). As we saw in Ephesians, the Church is founded on the apostles and the prophets, which means that it must always be an apostolic and prophetic Church, conscious of being sent to proclaim. Its task is to declare the wisdom of God to the principalities and powers ([3:10](#)) and this is its spiritual warfare ([6:12](#)) for which its only armour is the gospel and its only weapon is the word of God. The gifts of Christ to his Church are the characteristics of his own ministry: he is our Apostle, Prophet, Evangelist, Pastor and Teacher, these ministries are his before they are ours, and the Church continues them through his Spirit. They are all significantly ministries of the word. Even in the Pastoral Epistles, which are so often said to reflect a Church that is settling down and becoming concerned with preaching the gospel as preservation, there is a steady concern with preaching the gospel as the purpose of Christ's coming and of the Church's existence ([1 Tim 1:15](#), [2:5-6](#), [4:10](#)). And the underlying concern of its various practical admonitions is that nothing should hinder the gospel's progress in that world ([1 Tim 3:7](#), [5:8](#), [6:1](#)). As the household of God the Church is 'the pillar and bulwark of the truth'. Leaving Paul, we have seen that Peter has the same vision: the Church is 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, *that you may declare the praise of him who called you out of darkness into his glorious light*' ([2:9-10](#)). This last passage is apparently a reference to [Isaiah 43:21](#) (LXX) and reminds us that the theme of witness provides the link between the people of God in the OT and in the NT. Isaiah sees Israel, or the righteous remnant, the true Israel, as called to be a light to the nations ([49:6](#)). 'You are my witnesses,' says the Lord, 'and my servant whom I have chosen' ([43:10](#)). At his baptism and in the synagogue at Nazareth we see Jesus stepping into this role, and so through Jesus the task of witness passes to his Church.

THE ONLY AGENDA

That proclamation is the essential task of the Church can be seen not only from its prominence throughout the NT, but negatively by the [P. 21](#) absence of any other agenda. I do not mean that the Church's task is limited to speaking words, for Jesus declared the Kingdom of God in word and deed and so should we. The gospel is proclaimed by the life of the Church and by its works of kindness, as well as by the explicit preaching of the message, but what is missing from all the NT documents is any interest in the correct performance of worship, or the proper qualifications of those who are to make it happen. This is very striking against the background of 1st. century religion, at the heart of which was the offering of sacrifice, by the right people, in the right place, at the right time. None of this finds a place in the NT, where the only priest for Christians is Jesus, where sacrificial language is not of cultic activity but of the work of preaching the gospel ([2 Cor. 2:14-6](#)),

[Phil. 2:17](#)). To put it another way, what is missing in the NT is any idea of the 'religious specialist'. John Howard Yoder has written:¹⁶

There are few more reliable constants running through all human society than the special place every human community makes for the professional religionist. We may consult comparative religion, anthropology, sociology, or psychology.... The report is always the same. Every society, every religion, even the pluralistic and 'secular' civilization makes a place for the religionist.

He goes on to show that while there may be differences about how this person qualifies and what exactly he does, everywhere he does have to become qualified and there is something he alone does. It is his presence that is the presence of the Church, and society no less than the Church accords him an honoured place. Yoder continues:

If we come to the NT with this 'professional religionist' view of ministry, asking, 'What is said on this subject?' then we can add together something which Paul said about himself as apostle, some thing he wrote to Timothy and Titus about themselves, some other things he wrote to them about bishops and deacons, some things Acts reports about the leaders in Jerusalem and Antioch, salt the mixture with some reminiscences from the OT and come up with a quite impressive package as the 'Biblical View of Ministry'. But if we ask whether any of the NT literature makes the assumptions listed above:

Is there one particular office
in which there should be only one or few individuals
for whom it provides a livelihood
unique in character due to ordination [p. 22](#)
central to the definition of the church
and the key to her functioning?

then the answer from the biblical material is a resounding negation.¹⁷

It is not surprising that the early Christians appeared to some of their contemporaries to be atheists; they simply didn't do the things that religious people do! J. B. Lightfoot was not far off the mark when he wrote, 'The Christian Ideal is a holy season extending the whole year round, a temple confined only by the limits of the habitable world, a priesthood co-extensive with the human race'.¹⁸ Such an ideal means that the church, like John the Baptist, preaches her Lord's priesthood and not her own, content like him to be 'the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord"' ([John 1:23](#)). It means that the church in every age must ask itself whether it has really faced the challenge of Stephen to its tendency to settle down and even trust in what God has not commanded: 'Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands; as the prophet says, 'Heaven is my throne, and earth my footstool. What house will you build for me, says the Lord?' ([Acts 7:48-49](#)). [p. 23](#)

¹⁶ J. H. Yoder, *The Fullness of Christ*, Concern No. 17, 1969, p. 33.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-8.

¹⁸ J. B. Lightfoot, *Epistles of Paul: Philippians*, 1878, pp. 183-4.