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A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_sbct-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbct-01.php)

# THE CHURCH AND THE URGENT PATIENCE OF CHRIST<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

The nature of the church, not as an institution, nor yet perfected as the body of Christ, is the seat of Christ's operations in his redemptive work. It thus bears the characteristics of the reign of Christ, but alas, also the features of a society still under sin. In this paper, a thesis is presented that suggests the church might be profitably regarded as the *frontier* between the reign of Christ and the old order of sin. The experience of the church is thus the tension on such a frontier, as it advances and suffers reverses. This model is investigated using the Corinthian church as an example, taking the two letters of St Paul in the New Testament and the First Letter of Clement to the Corinthians from the sub-apostolic age as sources. With four variables – faith, godliness, hospitality and knowledge – Clement reflects on the past Christian virtue of the Corinthian church and their present low estate in this regard. Using these qualities, revised under the headings of saintliness (response to the call of God), faith (fidelity to God), and godliness (attentiveness to God), the anatomy of the reverses of the church, represented by spiritual sloth, secularisation, and narcissism, are considered in the light of cultural and philosophical factors. Finally the urgency and patience of Christ's ministry to the church in upholding her in truth and virtue, in retrieving her from loss and degradation and, finally, presenting her to himself in perfection are considered in the long time-scale in which she works out her salvation.

## I. THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

We are familiar with the manifold biblical descriptors used to describe the church of Jesus Christ. It is his body.<sup>2</sup> It is his creation by virtue of his calling. It is the body of humans among whom his Holy Spirit is operative in a distinctive way, causing them to receive the spiritual energies of the age to come and thus to anticipate here and now, that which lies in the

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<sup>1</sup> The Finlayson Lecture, 22 March 2009

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. 12.27 develops this model and identifies the church with the body of Christ explicitly.

future.<sup>3</sup> The church is, to use a reformation definition, the gathering of people to whom and from whom the gospel is preached and obeyed, the community of the baptised, among whom the word of God is rightly heard and comprehended and the sacraments duly administered.<sup>4</sup> It is the community which results from the fact that Jesus Christ manifests himself by the Spirit and is present with them, thus bringing them into being as his church wherever two or three are gathered in his name.<sup>5</sup> St Ignatius of Antioch defines the church on these lines: 'Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude [of the people] also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.'<sup>6</sup>

These are familiar definitions which mean that the church cannot be defined purely in institutional terms. Following Scripture, the church fathers and reformers steadfastly refused to accept that the church is merely a socio-historical construct - a society of humans, by their own determination and choosing. They insisted rather that it is a supernatural community of humans chosen and called by the living Christ and therefore not their own but his, among whom he disposes and reigns as he pleases.<sup>7</sup> In this context, the term 'in Christ', which occurs frequently in the Pauline epistles, describes the essence of the nature of the church, the dative signifying the sphere in which the power of Christ is recognised and operates. Being 'in Christ' thus means 'new creation',<sup>8</sup> as a result of this operative power which prevails over him. At baptism, the new disciple of Christ dies as one whose former life is now over, and is made alive together with Christ, beginning a new existence in the power of Christ's reign.<sup>9</sup>

As true as this is, the church cannot be fully identified with the sphere of the reign of Christ, or, to use gospel terminology, the kingdom of God, because the sphere of Christ's reign is clearly of infinitely greater compass than the extent of the church. Equally and conversely, the church, because it is a body of humans who exist in their former state as sinners alongside their new status as the people of God, cannot fully and unequivocally represent the body of humans in Christ, but can only do so provisionally and in a flawed way. The church cannot therefore be exclusively identified

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Eph. 1.13; and 4.30.

<sup>4</sup> See Article XIX of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England.

<sup>5</sup> Matt. 18.20.

<sup>6</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, 'The Epistle of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans' in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), vol. 1, p. 89.

<sup>7</sup> See K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), pp. 614ff.

<sup>8</sup> 2 Cor. 5.17.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Cor. 12.13; and Eph. 2.5.

with the sphere in which Christ power reigns, or the kingdom of God, but under the providence by which Christ calls the church into being, it will inevitably reveal his reign over and within it, and therefore will not be entirely without the characteristics proper to a body of humans under the reign of God. Even in its worst moments, and these have and continue to be, very bad moments, even if it is almost entirely unlike a church, it will not quite achieve this total differentiation from its true character and calling. It will always present, however, even in its greatest moments, a qualified representation of that which is proper to it, namely the society of men under the reign of God and in the fellowship of his Son.

The best understanding of the church will do justice both to the incipient perfection of the reign of Christ under which it is set and to the church's declension from that standard. We might best formulate the description of the church, therefore, as a *frontier*. This frontier exists at the intersection of the reign of God and of the world to which the saving power of the kingdom is directed. The church is, accordingly, a frontier at which God is active and Christ is saving, at which evil is continually being rebuked and set back while virtue and righteousness are furthered; a frontier at which the love of Christ triumphs over lovelessness, truth over falsehood, life over death; a frontier, finally, at which the death-throes of the evil one are negated by the loving reign of the everliving God. Under that definition, the church will exhibit a welter of characteristics as variable and diverse as might be found on a battlefield. There will be great love and sacrifice, great courage and endurance. There will be great triumphs of grace, and victories wrought in Christ's power and name. But there will also be set backs, there will be cowardice and betrayal, shameful defeats, desertions and reverses.

Any observer will notice the ambiguity in the church's life arising from this understanding of the church as frontier. There will be evident sins and crimes which will not go unrecorded by a scornful world. But there will also be signs of grace which will draw men and women to the Source of that grace, thus recruiting them to the membership of the church. This will happen, even in the darkest hours of the church, even when she bears the least resemblance to her true calling and nature. Furthermore, the gospel has the power to raise up better hearers and doers of Christ's word, and thus the church always exhibits the power of reformation in its midst.

Thus in this frontier, in this powerful encounter of God's reign with the world, there will always be regrouping, reforming, realignment in order that set-backs and reverses can be answered with true and godly advances. Thus the church will never be static even though overall and in the long run it proves to be invincible. Forgetful and faithless here,

it regroups and springs up anew there, disobedient and corrupt there, it is raised up holy and dutiful here. And because it is the creation of the One who is raised from the dead, it can never stand in any serious risk of diminution. Always his power is greater than the decay to which it is subjected. Always it will rise up in more or less better forms, in more or less better powers of witness and obedience.

Thus the church will inevitably become witness to two aspects of divine action in its midst, two aspects which are antagonistic in the sense that muscles are antagonistic to maintain and control limbs. The church will always be impelled forward by the energy of the Holy Spirit, pressed forward to make good its opportunities as they arise. It will prove tirelessly energetic under the prompting of the Holy Spirit, and discover, like St Paul, that it is omniscient through Christ's strength. At the same time it will need and exhibit endurance, patience in the face of its reverses. It will never be allowed to forget that with the Lord one thousand years is as one day, and one day as one thousand years.<sup>10</sup>

There will be times when it is urged forward by the Spirit's gracious insistence, and other times when it will be held back because the Spirit of Jesus does not give it leave to advance.<sup>11</sup> It will inevitably become an advocate of the 'urgent patience' of Christ. No doubt we will hear of young exuberant churches and old, battle-hardened churches: young churches who know about the urgency of Christ's impulse, and old churches who can tell their story of patient endurance. But both urgency and patience are necessary and must be evident in every church.

## 2. AN EXAMPLE IN THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH FROM CLEMENT OF ROME

There can be no doubt that the Corinthian church, as we are introduced to it in the New Testament, exemplifies the church as this kind of frontier. The life of the Corinthians is a turbulent mixture of great enthusiasm and energy, abundant spiritual gifts, outworking of divine grace, as well as destructive party spirit, ignorance and the despising of true apostolic instruction, serious moral failure and misbehaviour even in the context of worship. Some of these errors and sins are so gross that if they happened today, we would wonder whether the body in which they took place could really be considered a church at all. But Paul never suggests that. He calls them to be true to their vocation as a church, their denial of that can never succeed in reversing their call. 2 Corinthians ends with the

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<sup>10</sup> 2 Pet. 3.8

<sup>11</sup> See Acts 16 for the restraining of the apostles by the Spirit.

apostle's injunction to mend their ways, but as far as the New Testament is concerned, it is an open question whether they will do so.

The First Letter of Clement to the Corinthians, which is represented in a single document in the Alexandrian Codex, gives an insight into the progress of the Corinthian church in the sub-apostolic age. The letter was written by one Clement, very possibly the Clement referred to in Philippians 4.3, who succeeded his co-presbyters, Linus and Cletus to the oversight of the Roman church. The letter appears to be written upon the occasion of some internal doctrinal corruption or seditious activity which threatens the integrity and effectiveness of the Corinthian church. Clement seeks to draw them back to moral and spiritual health by reminding them of previous better times in which they had exhibited a great godliness and holiness. While the compliments that Clement expresses may be to some extent an epistolary device to facilitate their acceptance of his criticism, it seems that the sedition is a very recent and acute matter and that the Corinthian church had enjoyed a more godly period of its history in the immediate past.

Putting this side by side with the New Testament evidence, it suggests a none-too-surprising oscillation in the quality of Corinthian Christianity and witness. They evidently exhibited besetting sins, arising, no doubt, from the cut-throat competitive spirit of commercial Corinth, which, from time to time, flared up and got the better of their godly intentions. St Clement's letter breaks no doctrinal ground but sets forward the virtue proper to a Christian church with persuasive encouragements to imitate the apostles and their spiritual fathers. The opening discourse of the letter runs thus:

The Church of God which sojourns at Rome, to the Church of God sojourning at Corinth, to them that are called and sanctified by the will of God, through our Lord Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, from Almighty God through Jesus Christ, be multiplied. Owing, dear brethren, to the sudden and successive calamitous events which have happened to ourselves, we feel that we have been somewhat tardy in turning our attention to the points respecting which you consulted us; and especially to that shameful and detestable sedition, utterly abhorrent to the elect of God, which a few rash and self-confident persons have kindled to such a pitch of frenzy, that your venerable and illustrious name, worthy to be universally loved, has suffered grievous injury. For who ever dwelt even for a short time among you, and did not find your faith to be as fruitful of virtue as it was firmly established? Who did not admire the sobriety and moderation of your godliness in Christ? Who did not proclaim the magnificence of your habitual hospitality? And who did not rejoice over your perfect and well-grounded knowledge? For ye did all things without respect of persons, and walked in the commandments of God, being

obedient to those who had the rule over you, and giving all fitting honour to the presbyters among you. Ye enjoined young men to be of a sober and serious mind; ye instructed your wives to do all things with a blameless, becoming, and pure conscience, loving their husbands as in duty bound; and ye taught them that, living in the rule of obedience, they should manage their household affairs becomingly, and be in every respect marked by discretion.<sup>12</sup>

Clement explains that 'sudden and successive calamitous events' have overtaken the Roman church and there has been some debate as to whether he refers to the Neronian persecution, which seems too early, or perhaps a localised persecution during the reign of Domitian.<sup>13</sup> Either way this persecution prevented Clement making the urgent and prompt response to the plight of the Corinthian church as he would have liked. Nevertheless, he now makes that response, and his urgent plea is for a return to standards previously exhibited by the church. His plea is for an enduring quality to those previous virtues.

Clement is concerned not just for the reputation of the church in a general way, but in the specific name of the Corinthian church which was previously 'venerable and illustrious and worthy to be universally loved'. Clement is too straightforward to be dismissed here as merely polite: rather he is referring to a reputation enjoyed by the Corinthian church prompted by Spirit-inspired virtues exercised at an earlier time. Four virtues are mentioned as being praised by visitors to Corinth: *faith*, fruitful of virtue and well established, *godliness* in Christ, yielding sobriety and moderation, *hospitality*, both habitual and magnificent, and *knowledge*, perfect and well-grounded. One cannot read this list without recognising how blessed it must have been to make a visit to the Corinthian church at this time.

In terms of the church as we have understood it as Christ's ministry at the frontier with the world he came to save, it clearly represents an advance, a taking of a bridgehead in the hearts and minds of the Corinthian Christians. And the virtue within the church generated much collateral goodness as the fame of the church spread from visitors' testimony. This is not unlike the growth of the reputation of the Thessalonian Christians as Paul records in his first letter to that church.<sup>14</sup> Such was their reputation that the apostles reports that 'we had no need to say anything', establish-

<sup>12</sup> Clement of Rome, 'The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians' in Roberts and Donaldson eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> R. Grant and H. Graham, *The Apostolic Fathers: A New Translation and Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1965), Vol. 2, p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> 1 Thess. 1.6ff.

ing a vital link between the quality of the Christian life in an ethical sense and the power of the church to exercise the missionary task.

It is worth noting that the virtues, or their root forms, all recur in Clement's section on the divine origin of church order (chapters 40-44).<sup>15</sup> Thus Clement regards them as issuing from the ordering of the Christian community by God's Spirit, an order which is impiously contradicted when godly bishops are deposed from office. And the virtues themselves are very practical in nature: 'faith' means 'fidelity to God'; 'godliness' refers to the Christian way of life characterised by humility of mind, mastery over appetites and impulses, respectful speech and kindly disposition; and 'knowledge' is something practical – knowledge of God's will and obedience to it.<sup>16</sup> In speaking of 'hospitality', Clement is drawing on Hebrews with which he was familiar. Here and elsewhere in his letter, Clement speaks of *hospitality* as a benchmark virtue, combining it with *faith* in 12.1 and *piety* in 11.1. The real virtue of hospitality is that by it all are welcomed, not only the needy but Christ for whom the poor are deputies. For Clement, hospitality is a way of admitting Christ into the life of the Christian and into the life of the church.

It is not surprising that St Peter urges the church to 'make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love'.<sup>17</sup> 'Making every effort' corresponds to a resolve to cooperate with the divine work of the Spirit in the church. This accumulated virtue, this edifice of righteous living is the powerful expositor of the gospel to those who witness it. If it collapses, the witness is destroyed. And that collapse had evidently occurred in the Corinthian church at the time of Clement's letter. The besetting sin of Corinth, of partisanship, faction and competition had effectively reduced their edifice of piety to rubble. Chapter 3 of Clement's letter describes this disaster:

Every kind of honour and happiness was bestowed upon you, and then was fulfilled that which is written, 'My beloved did eat and drink, and was enlarged and became fat, and kicked.' Hence flowed emulation and envy, strife and sedition, persecution and disorder, war and captivity. So the worthless rose up against the honoured, those of no reputation against such as were renowned, the foolish against the wise, the young against those advanced in years. For this reason righteousness and peace are now far departed from

<sup>15</sup> See chapter 44 of 'The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians' (p. 17).

<sup>16</sup> In contrast to the esoteric, speculative knowledge of a Gnostic type to which the Corinthians were wrongly attracted.

<sup>17</sup> 2 Pet. 1.6.



you, inasmuch as every one abandons the fear of God, and is become blind in His faith, neither walks in the ordinances of His appointment, nor acts a part becoming a Christian, but walks after his own wicked lusts, resuming the practice of an unrighteous and ungodly envy, by which death itself entered into the world.<sup>18</sup>

Clement here gives us a description of the anatomy of the downfall centring on their abandonment of God manifested as the disordering of all their relationships: the ignoble against the honourable, the disreputable against the reputable, the foolish against the wise, and the young against their seniors. Evidently Clement is echoing the terms of Isaiah 3.5 and 1 Corinthians 4.10. In Clement's chapter 4, he enlarges this moral catastrophe which has overtaken the Corinthians. It comes down, he says, to jealousy, a competitive party spirit which Paul had to reprove a generation or two earlier.

It is useful to trace what Clement says are the things which issue from this moral declension. Not only is there a loss of godly reputation, a rendering ineffectual of the church's witness, but also there arises persecution: either by external agencies alone or by such agencies assisted and encouraged by parts of the church. Their internal strife and sin gives an opportunity to their external enemies. Clement sees that there has been a comprehensive collapse of the church in Corinth by this progression from the initial jealousy.

To a great extent, in the rest of his substantial letter, Clement urges the necessary repentance. But here there are some interesting features. He invokes 'humility of mind' which is to be the hall-mark of the Christian attitude. But as a primary virtue in the ancient world, this was unknown, and the word used in the New Testament and by Clement, *tapeinophronoun*, was used in a bad sense among the Greeks to signify 'weak-mindedness'. Following Christ's example of obedience to God and humility of disposition, in Christian usage the same word now signifies a great virtue. Clement regards it as primary in initiating the path of repentance he advocates for the Corinthian church. So we find in Chapter 13 of his epistle,

Let us therefore, brethren, be of humble mind, laying aside all haughtiness, and pride, and foolishness, and angry feelings; and let us act according to that which is written (for the Holy Spirit saith, 'Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, neither let the rich man glory in his riches; but let him that glorieth glory in the Lord, in diligently seeking Him, and doing judgment and righteousness'), being especially mindful of the words of the Lord Jesus which He spake, teaching us

<sup>18</sup> 'The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians', p. 5

## THE URGENT PATIENCE OF CHRIST

meekness and long-suffering. For thus He spoke: 'Be ye merciful, that ye may obtain mercy; forgive, that it may be forgiven to you; as ye do, so shall it be done unto you; as ye judge, so shall ye be judged; as ye are kind, so shall kindness be shown to you; with what measure ye mete, with the same it shall be measured to you.' By this precept and by these rules let us establish ourselves, that we walk with all humility in obedience to His holy words. For the holy word saith, 'On whom shall I look, but on him that is meek and peaceable, and that trembleth at My words?'<sup>19</sup>

It may have been very difficult for the Corinthian church to take hold of the necessary 'humility of mind', because Corinth thought itself only for the strong-minded. The Corinthian church was called, therefore, to be very strongly counter-cultural, and no more strongly than in the reverse of their mental attitude from pride of power to the humility of obedience. This must go far to explain why, tending to lapse from the apostolic standard, they sought out, even in the New Testament period, 'strong', impressive teachers rather than the diminutive and battered figure of St Paul. Evidently the instinct to do so again in the sub-apostolic age, was just as powerful. But the same sin calls out from St Clement, as from St Paul, the same remedy.

Clement repeats to the Corinthian church the exhortation found in Acts 20.35, that they should remember the words of the Lord Jesus. And he repeats words which have parallels in the Sermon on the Mount, though Clement seems not to have drawn them directly from the gospels. It is possible that they were in oral circulation or used in liturgy, judging from their catechetical style. Clement finishes with a quotation from Isaiah 66.2.

Overall, Clement understands the Corinthians to have followed the wrong examples, to have at least partially repudiated their counter-cultural status by adopting worldly standards of behaviour and moral evaluation. In doing so, outwardly, they stand at risk of losing their godly reputation, and, inwardly they suffer schism, party-spirit and a destructive worldly competition between themselves. The Corinthian church is an exponent of many of the dangers with which the church in general, and every individual church in particular, is surrounded. The story of the Corinthians, illustrates the fact that the state of health of a church is some measure of the degree to which God-given advance triumphs over human-made reverse. The church is always faced with the call of Christ, on one side, and the inclination to do otherwise, on the other. Of course, the issues may be more subtle: the putative disobediences may be clothed with an apparent piety or faithfulness, which may more or less convince their proponents.

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<sup>19</sup> Clement of Rome, 'The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians', p. 8

In time, the true status of such things, however, are usually elucidated. The church does always stand on a knife's edge between its faithfulness and its tendency to lapse, and God, willing always the church's faithfulness, does endure the reality that the church can, and frequently does, backslide. It gives pause for thought why this should be so.

The abundance of the grace and power of the Spirit, the readiness with which God stands to give this gift, the divine determination of Christ to be with and bless his church, might surely place the church in a better position than on a knife's edge from moral and spiritual disaster? And yet, no. The church is placed in a position where it will always have to make war, not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities and powers. It will have to prove itself a co-victor with Christ. That is the far-ambition of God, and he wills the uncomfortable and demanding interim before it is realised. P. T. Forsyth says,

Our suffering can only be finally dealt with by him who is more concerned about our sin; who is strong enough to resist pity till grief has done its gracious work even in his Son; and who can endure not only to see the [church's] suffering go on for its moral ends, but to take its agony upon his own heart and feel it even as the victims do not, for the holy purpose, final blessing and the far victory of his love.<sup>20</sup>

The church's life ought then to consist of thousands of co-victories with Christ. It does so consist but only admixed with reverses to which it succumbs through its weakness. Even these reverses can be and are turned into co-victories through the Spirit's power and through the gift of repentance. Clement's aim in writing to the Corinthian church was to turn its reverses into co-victories in this way.

We turn now to consider various kinds of reverses and co-victories which the church may encounter on its way to the divine fulfilling of God's 'holy purpose, final blessing and far victory.'

### 3. THE REVERSE OF SAINTLINESS: THE SLOTH OF THE CHURCH IN ITS TWO FORMS

Everywhere in the New Testament, the church is described as 'holy', and Christian as the *hagioi*, the holy ones, the saints. The definition of a saint is very simple. *A saint is someone who comes when he is called by God.* Sanctification is divine causation which results in the addressee coming to God when he or she is called. The disciples of Christ in the New Testa-

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<sup>20</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross* (London: Independent Press, 1957), pp. 81-2.

ment demonstrated their sainthood by immediately rising up and following Christ at his bidding. But Christ did not make rising up and following at his bidding an easy matter. Indeed, as far as the capacity of humanity in the flesh is concerned, he made it impossible. To all would-be disciples he says, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save it' (Mk. 8.34-35, NRSV). For any one of Jesus' contemporaries, who knew what it was to take up their cross and struggle with it outside the city to a shameful and agonising death, it would preclude following Jesus at all. Similarly to enthusiastic individuals he was scarcely encouraging, telling one that 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head' (Mt. 8.20, NRSV), and to another, 'go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me' (Mt. 19.21, NRSV). Taken together, it is not too much to say that there was a deliberate policy to restrain people from following Jesus, even though he himself called them to do so.

Yet, there was a powerful impulse at work all through the earthly ministry of Jesus and beyond by which men and women became followers of Jesus, and therefore, saints. They did rise up and follow him even in the face of certain death. The creation of the church by the call of Christ is thus a radical and fearful thing to behold. And the closer they follow, the more nearly their life reflects Christ's way of suffering as the more nearly they share in his victory. Such is the danger and the pain of sainthood. It is thus not surprising that, in their fleshly weakness, the saints are always tempted to find ways of not being saints, being called in name only and not in deed. These are the reverses to their saintliness, and those things from which they are summoned back continually by the witness of the Spirit.

The opposite of saintliness, the refusal to come when we are called is a very old instinct, first encountered when Adam hid from God in the Garden of Eden, when the Lord sought him in the evening.<sup>21</sup> Then it was hiding in the bushes. Now it has developed into more subtle manifestations, although when evasion of God is felt to be urgently necessary, even the primitive form is pressed into service. This vice is sloth. Sloth is the abject refusal of humans to come when they are called by God, and it appears in many forms but generally in two types.<sup>22</sup> The first of these is

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<sup>21</sup> Gen. 3.8.

<sup>22</sup> The author is indebted to Karl Barth for this analysis. See *idem.*, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, pp. 403ff.

the type generally associated with the term: a *passive* sloth in which we give ground to an inertia, a physical, mental or spiritual laziness. Usually, the Christian call involves going from a place of relative comfort to a place, ordained by God, which is relatively uncomfortable. In its better moments, the church has always stood in difficult and draughty places for the sake Christ, but these places *are* difficult and draughty, and the nature of the flesh is to avoid them by staying in a relatively comfortable place, perhaps telling ourselves that, comfortable as it is, it is nevertheless where the Lord bids us stand.

Part of the Corinthian church's reverse, at least in the New Testament, was of this kind of sloth. This was not manifested merely as a laziness, but as the avoidance of standing in a position wherein the world is faced and challenged. The Corinthian Christians wanted a reasonably smooth and level interface between the world and its perspectives, priorities and desires, and those of the Christian church. It wished to cultivate the respect of the world for its wisdom, its rhetoric and above all, its message. This is a natural and understandable weakness. It is much more comfortable to agree with the world and please it by giving Christian authority to its practices and preferences. There is something awkward, angular and ill-fitting about the gospel set against the world. In more modern days, P. T. Forsyth has made a similar point:

The process should be arrested by which the frontiers of belief are being erased, and the church is opened to every aesthetic adventurer of the soul, or to free-trade in every opinion. . . . A Gospel which is not exclusive will never include the world for it will never master it No religion will include devotees which does not exclude rivals. Half gospels have no dignity and no future. Like the famous mule they have neither pride of ancestry nor hope of posterity. We must make it clear that Christianity faces the world, and does not merely consecrate it, that it recreates and does not just soothe or cheer it; that it is life from the dead, and not simply bracing for the weak or comfort for the sad. The church must be more occupied with conversion and less occupied with diversion.<sup>23</sup>

However it is concealed, this desperate accommodation of the world is a form of passive spiritual sloth in which the church seeks to avoid its sanctification. It stays in a comfortable place.

But this can easily be transformed to another kind of sloth altogether: and active sloth, in which many things are done with great diligence, to avoid doing the one necessary thing. In this active form of sloth almost

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<sup>23</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *The Church and the Sacraments* (London: Longmans, 1917), p. 15.

## THE URGENT PATIENCE OF CHRIST

any agenda will do, and can often be followed up with great and vigorous effort, just so long as it covers up the fact that the church is not resorting to Jesus Christ, is not coming to his feet at his bidding. Of course, the church may, and probably will, claim that its activities are quintessential examples of obedience of Christ, that the church is fully committed to his commandments and to the service of his kingdom. In its more successful forms, this active sloth can put up a very convincing case for its own holiness. The Spirit of Christ and the Word of God will, however, finally unmask it.

It is not easy to say how the Corinthian church exhibited this form of un-holiness in its reverses. This active sloth is, to a great extent, a more modern, western manifestation of the reversal of the church's sanctification. Activism is a more prevalent phenomenon in the West and it is the general mode of spiritual evasion employed by individuals who are 'far too busy to attend worship'. In the form that the church appropriates it, this active sloth usually issues in a full church agenda which has the appearance of being very worthy. There is little sign that this was a feature of the Corinthian church unless it took the form of lecture series from the impressive orators of which they were apparently fond. More likely it took the form of a competitive infighting (or sedition) as Clement reveals.

The reverse of sanctification makes a church ineffective in the service of Jesus Christ. In a telling passage, Karl Barth underscores the ineptitude of sloth, especially in its mental dimension:

The stupidity of man consists and expresses itself in the fact that when he is of the opinion that he achieves his true nature and essence apart from the knowledge of God, without hearing and obeying His Word, in this independence and autonomy, he always misses his true nature and essence. He is always either too soon or too late. He is asleep when he should be awake, and awake when he should be asleep. He is silent when he should speak and speaks when it is better to be silent. He laughs when he should weep, and weeps when he should be comforted and laugh. He always makes an exception when the rule should be kept and subjects himself to a law when he should choose in freedom. He always toils when he should pray, and prays when only work is of any avail. He always devotes himself to historical and psychological investigation when decisions are demanded, and rushes into decision when historical and psychological investigation is really required. He is always contentious when it is unnecessary and harmful, and speaks of love and peace when he may confidently attack. He is always speaking of faith and the Gospel where what is needed is a little sound commonsense, and he reasons where he can and should commit himself and others quietly into the hands of God. In Eccles 3 we are given a list of different things for which there is a proper time - in accordance with the fact that God Himself does everything in its own time.

The genius of stupidity is to think everything at the wrong time, to say everything to the wrong people, to do everything in the wrong direction, to lose no opportunity of misunderstanding and being misunderstood, always to omit the one simple and necessary thing which is demanded, and to have a sure instinct for choosing and willing and doing the complicated and superfluous thing which can only disrupt and obstruct.<sup>24</sup>

Is there a church on earth that does not have to confess to being somewhat, if not substantially and wholly, on the wrong side of this analysis?

#### 4. THE REVERSE OF FAITH: THE SECULARISATION OF THE CHURCH

Secularisation of the church is usually regarded as resulting from an infusion of worldly mindset, outlook and morals into the life of the church. It is this. But there is wider picture to consider, which embraces not only the secularisation of the church, the secularisation of the world as well, which, in the case of Western Europe in the last five hundred years, preceded the secularisation of the church. The church, as we will see, was a key player in both these secularisation processes.

In medieval Europe, God was central. He was invoked constantly. His church was ubiquitous and entirely integrated into the functions of civilisation. The farm employee, working in the fields, would hear the church bell toll three times at the elevation of the host in the village church, and would fall to his knees and cross himself, for he knew that in that church, God was doing his miraculous deed in self revelation. In a thousand other ways, medieval life was criss-crossed with the activity and life of God. Of course, some of this was theologically and biblically insecure, some of it was superstitious, perhaps even exploitative. But these reserves aside, medieval Christianity was true to the incarnation that God certainly was with us. The reformation, especially in England, did address the superstition, the lack of biblical foundation and even the exploitative elements of the medieval system. But in doing so, it told the man in the field, not to kneel, not to cross himself, but just get back to work. It silenced the bell, and it publicly declared that God wasn't doing anything in the world after all, or at least, not too much. In reformation Britain, it was not quite true that God was nowhere, but he certainly had very much less to do. The subtext was that, under Enlightenment principles, the world could manage pretty well without God. So quite dutifully, the world started managing pretty well without God. The world wasn't atheist; it still believed in God. But it was deprived of the reason and encouragement to do so given by the medieval faith. It is not surprising that, without that reason and

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<sup>24</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, p. 413.

encouragement, the world believed less and less in a God who now did rather little.

The secularism thus sown by the church is now being reaped. The church told the world to do without God, now the world is telling the church the same. And the church does tend to listen to the world. Perhaps she feels that she will get a better hearing if she seeks to make her message more or less continuous with the plausibility structure prevailing in her particular space and time. This may have been the temptation facing the Corinthian church to which Paul writes. He tells them that he 'did not come... proclaiming...the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom' (1 Cor. 2.1, NRSV). Rather he proclaimed the cross of Christ. Perhaps he was tempted to orient his message according to the plausibilities of his age, but instead he chose to proclaim only the singularity of the cross. Paul's decision runs counter to almost all the counsel offered on Church mission and growth. Nowadays, churches seek to be 'culturally relevant', as they are so often advised. As dutiful children of the Enlightenment, Christians now tend to argue for their faith, if they do so at all, along the lines of plausibility with the smooth predictability of the Greek world-view which they have inherited. Paul, in his visit to Corinth throws off this temptation and resorts to proclaiming not the plausibility of the gospel, but rather its *singularity*.

And this contrast between the plausibilities of the world and the singularity of the gospel lies at the heart of the problem of secularisation of the church. To the worldly man, the philosophical landscape is a very smooth, gently undulating outlook. Any point on it can be reached by reasonable extrapolation from any other. It is all intrinsically predictable, so much so that Aristotle believed the whole of it could be understood by careful thought from an armchair. The church has tried to fit itself and its theology into this smooth landscape, seeking a smooth weld, if not a seamless union between its message and this smooth philosophical environment.

But, of course, it fails. It either cannot gain the smooth weld, or it abandons the central elements of its message to do so. This latter temptation was evidently making ground in Corinth as it has done since in many times and places, not least our own. Both Wrede<sup>25</sup> and Schweitzer,<sup>26</sup> along with their theological descendants, in their respective approaches, have

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<sup>25</sup> W. Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien: Zugleich ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Markusevangeliums*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901); English translation: W. Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, trans. J. C. G. Grieg (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1971).

<sup>26</sup> A. Schweitzer, *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1913).



made the modifications necessary for this smooth weld.<sup>27</sup> But Paul will not give up the singularity of the cross, nor, as we find later in 1 Corinthians, the singularity of the resurrection.

## 5. THE REVERSE OF GODLINESS: THE NARCISSISM OF THE CHURCH

Ezekiel describes a terrifying moment in Israel's history when God in defence of his own holiness forsakes the temple of Jerusalem, leaving it for his heavenly residence.<sup>28</sup> He is shaking the Israelites off his back. They evidently have got into the habit of a utilitarian attitude towards their relationship with the living God. Instead of their serving of God in the temple, they began to regard God as a service to them. Walter Brueggemann in his discussion of this phenomenon, relates it to the narcissism of the modern church thus:

For most of us utilitarianism (i.e. God's usefulness) is in fact ideological. God is drawn into and identified with a variety of social commitments which we advocate. It is so easy for conservatives to identify with God, because they know so fully the mind of God, to present God as a partisan in the struggle against homosexuality, or in the crusade against communism, even in justification of the arms race. Liberals also know the mind of God and know God is pro-busing and pro-choice and all of the other themes of justice to which one is committed. Drawing too close to God's will can, of course, be much more benign. It can be simply that prayer is good because it keeps families together, and tithing is good because one feels better, and worship is good because one gets refuelled, and singing in the choir is good because one meets nice people ... All such subjective, narcissistic, utilitarian, ideological postures finally become burdensome because they require us to know too much, and claim too much, and do too much. On most days it will work, but not for Ezekiel. And, I think, not for us just now.<sup>29</sup>

He continues,

The pathology of narcissism is enormously supported by consumer advertising, for that enterprise rests on a value system of satiation and self-indulgence ... Everyone of us knows how easily the life of the church is caught in this narcissism in which appeal to the Gospel is grounded in what it will do for us in terms of intimacy, problem solving, marriage saving, and so forth. None of

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<sup>27</sup> See N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996) for a thorough response to these historical critical approaches.

<sup>28</sup> Ezek. 10.

<sup>29</sup> W. Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1986), p. 85.

## THE URGENT PATIENCE OF CHRIST

these are in themselves wrong, but when they become the end, goal, ground of appeal, it becomes pathological because it is not 'for the sake of my holy name'.<sup>30</sup>

The proponents of this utilitarian Christianity are often not very aware of its narcissistic character or the incipient godlessness which lies at its heart. We advertise Christianity to our non-Christian friends on the basis of its utility. We think this is helpful because it shows how practical Christianity is. But it is, at the last analysis, merely another way to gain that plausibility we think we need to convince others of the value of Christianity and hence, in our narcissistic culture, its truth. There are even signs that the disciples were tempted to follow this line early in Mark's gospel. Jesus spent the day preaching and healing many people. The following day, very early in the morning, he goes out to a lonely place to pray.<sup>31</sup> The disciples realise that there is a busy day ahead of them, many new candidates for healing have presented themselves and clearly the day's clinic will be even busier than that of the previous day. But they cannot find Jesus. They search for him, and eventually come across him in the lonely place. They tell him that everyone is looking for him, expecting no doubt, that he would accompany them back to the obvious task which awaits him. But he shakes them off his back; 'we will go on to the next villages to preach, for that is why I came out,' he says. The disciples are, in part, evaluating Jesus as a healer and therefore useful. These were early days and it would be a harsh judgement of them to condemn them for it. But it does show how quickly we try to seize God make him serve our agenda.

Worship might be seen as a remedy for this utilitarian tendency, and indeed, it can be. The allocation of space and time and resources for honouring the invisible God might be seen as an antidote for the tendency to manage God for our benefit. But there is no guarantee that this will be so. The worship offered by God's holy church can never be, and inevitably will never be, free from a narcissistic element. This element takes the form of a *sacralisation* in which a church may vaunt itself in the name of Jesus Christ, but in reality is enamoured only with itself, with its music, with its preaching, with its antiquity, its traditions, its modernity, its spirituality, its asceticism. For all the intensity of religious observance, it may be true that it can function very well indeed whether God was present with it or not. The answer to this latter question is a measure of the degree to which the church has become sacralised.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Mk. 1.35ff.

## 6. THE ADVANCE OF THE GOSPEL: THE SANCTIFICATION OF THE CHURCH

Reviewing the manifold hazards the church faces, the numerous temptations by which she is tried, the subtlety and depth of penetration that these errors can exhibit, it is a wonder that there is still a church, still able to name the name of Christ, and justly be called a church. It is a solemn tribute to the invincible reign and limitless grace of Jesus Christ that churches recognisable as such, exist and, in places exist in such strength and abundance. Equally, it is a tribute to the same reign and grace that deficient and corrupt churches live on to see the day of their reform. They form a visible witness to the implacable resolve of Jesus Christ to be the bridegroom of his bride and to present her to himself without any blemish.

The answer, therefore, to the plight of the church is not a programme of reform, no revision of its government, no re-writing of its liturgy, or a tightened disciplinary procedure. All these from time to time may be necessary. But they will not lift the church out of its sloth, or its worldliness or its narcissism. Only Jesus Christ can do that. And he will do so. And here we come to that subtle combination of the urgency and patience of his reign in the church.

Jesus Christ is patient with the church in that he will not collapse the problem to himself. He is prepared to wait for the church he redeemed and this so that the members of his body might prove to be infinitely more than spectators in the battle, but rather, as we have said, co-victors with Christ. The patience of Christ, moreover, is very great, so the time-scale for the co-victors is correspondingly long and the battle, very extended. The church finds it a quick and easy matter to fall to a low state, and a long and troubling journey to repentance.

A favourite theme of Clement and one to which we have not given any space so far, is the gift of insight. Clement speaks of the 'eye of faith' and the 'eyes of the heart'. This gift allows the Christian to see the purposes of God beyond his personal horizon. Following this spiritual line of sight, the Christian can follow a purpose which leads to a goal which will be reached perhaps long after the span of his natural life is complete. This means that every Christian can serve the purposes of the church's repentance even if that repentance may take hundreds of years to effect.

Jesus Christ is urgent in his ministry to the church in that he will not abandon the church to its own problem of repentance. In Chapter 36 of his letter to the Corinthians, Clement affirms this and refers to the spiritual vision of the church:

This is the way, beloved, in which we find our Saviour, even Jesus Christ, the High Priest of all our offerings, the defender and helper of our infirmity. By

## THE URGENT PATIENCE OF CHRIST

Him we look up to the heights of heaven. By Him we behold, as in a glass, His immaculate and most excellent visage. By Him are the eyes of our hearts opened. By Him our foolish and darkened understanding blossoms up anew towards His marvellous light.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Clement of Rome, 'The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians', p. 14.