

# FINDING AND BUILDING CHRIST'S CHURCH

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The Greek word *ecclesia*, often translated "church" in English versions of the Bible, has a number of meanings. In its most basic sense it indicates any body of persons "called out" or brought together. It can therefore mean a political assembly, a religious meeting or even a mob.<sup>1</sup> Basically, it is any gathering of people, but never does it denote a building as does the English word "church."<sup>2</sup> As Robert Banks shows in his excellent study, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting*,<sup>3</sup> the great apostle to the Gentiles first used *ecclesia* to mean an individual, local Christian congregation. In his four letters to the Thessalonian and Corinthian Christians, he addresses the *ecclesia* of God in Thessalonica and in Corinth respectively; and in his letter to the Galatians, he salutes the congregations of the province of Galatia (*tais ecclesiis tes Galatias*) in the plural. In writing to the Philippians, he states: "When I left Macedonia, no church (*ecclesia*) entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving except you only ...." (Phil. 4:15) Thus Paul, in his early letters at least, does not seem to develop any concept of a church beyond that of the local congregation.<sup>4</sup>

Later Paul does present a different or at least an extended concept of *ecclesia*. This is what Banks calls the "church as heavenly reality." What he means by this is that in his later letters Paul uses a number of very rich metaphors to describe the church, the *ecclesia*, as an extension of the Christ himself.<sup>5</sup> The church is thus pictured as

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<sup>1</sup> For a full discussion of the historical meanings of *ecclesia*, see Gerhard Kittel, ed., *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), vol. III, pp. 501-36.

<sup>2</sup> The word "church" comes to modern English through Anglo-Saxon and early West German tongues in general, but its origin is ultimately found in the Greek *kyriakon* - house of the Lord.

<sup>3</sup> Published by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, 1980

<sup>4</sup> See Banks, pp. 33-42 where he discusses the church as a household gathering.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 43-51

the Christ *per se* (1 Cor. 6:15), as the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 5:29-30), as the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:21-27), as the temple of God in which Christ is the high priest (2 Cor. 6:15; Eph. 2:19-22) and in other ways as well. But a note of caution needs to be entered here. According to Banks, the church as a heavenly reality does not mean a "church universal" or international religious organization here on earth under the direction of any human administration. It is truly heavenly, with no more than local earthly congregational manifestations.<sup>6</sup>

At Galatians 4:25-27, Paul writes that Christians are children of the heavenly Jerusalem. He develops a similar idea at Philippians 3:20-21 where he says: "But our commonwealth (*politeuma*) is in heaven, and from it we await our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself." Thus the apostle seems to suggest that Christians living on earth have citizenship in heaven in much the same way that the citizens of Philippi, a largely Latin-speaking, Roman colony, held Roman citizenship. Yet it is in Colossians and Ephesians<sup>7</sup> rather than in Galatians or Philippians that the Pauline concept of the heavenly *ecclesia* is most clearly developed.

At Colossians 1:18 Paul states: "He [Christ] is the head of the body, the church." What is particularly important about this passage is that it and verse 24, which says much the same thing, are set in a context which shows that Christians are already part of Christ's heavenly kingdom. Colossians 1:13,14 tells us that "He [God] has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of our sins." Verses 21 through 23 of the same chapter state: "And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, provided that you continue in the faith ...." Equally significantly, Paul remarks at Colossians 3:1-4: "If then you have

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46

been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things that are on the earth. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”

What this means is that the *ecclesia* or church described by these verses in Colossians is no temporal, human institution; it is a divine or heavenly one. And there is more evidence to support this idea. Robert Banks says: “If any hesitation remains about understanding *ekklesia* this way in Colossians, it is dispelled by the language in Ephesians. There it is explicitly said that God has ‘made us alive together with Christ and raised us up with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.’ (Eph. 2:5-7)”<sup>8</sup> Then, in a careful analysis of passages such as Ephesians 1:3 - “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” - and Ephesians 1:22-23 - “and he [Christ] has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all” - Banks demonstrates clearly the thought that he has been developing: whenever the Apostle Paul thinks of the *ecclesia* or church in any sense beyond that of a local body, he regards it as a heavenly institution.

After establishing his thesis on the two meanings of the word *ecclesia* in Paul's writings, Banks goes on to deal with the relationship between the heavenly church and the local Christian congregation. He says:

What is the relationship between the two churches - the permanent heavenly church and the local intermittent one? Paul does not spell this out in detail, but there are sufficient clues for us to move towards an answer. The language he uses indicates that the local gatherings are not regarded as *part* of the heavenly one any more than they are part of any alleged universal church. Paul uniformly speaks of them as *the* church which assembles in a particular place. Even when we have a number of gatherings in a single city, the individual assemblies are not regarded as *part* of the church in that place, but as *one* of 'the churches' that meet there. This suggests that each of the local churches are tangible expressions

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

of the heavenly church, manifestations in time and space of that which is essentially eternal and infinite in character.

We find no suggestion here of a visible, universal church to which local gatherings are related as the part to the whole. Nor does Paul speak of any organizational framework by which the local communities are bound together. He nowhere prescribes an ecclesiastical polity of this kind and nowhere suggests that the common life which communities share should be made visible in this way. As we have seen, he does occasionally group churches together in his letters by reference to the province in which they exist, e.g. 'the churches in Galatia'. But, as his consistent reference to such in the plural suggests, there is not even a hint of any idea of provincial government. As a background to such usage, we should probably see the language employed to describe the informal alliances of adjacent territories in parts of the ancient world around this time. These were matters of convenience only, had only a temporary existence and lacked any unified organizational framework.<sup>9</sup>

Some may object to Bank's thesis with at least partial justification. After all, the Septuagint Version of the Old Testament refers to the whole nation of Israel as Yahweh's *ecclesia*,<sup>10</sup> and Paul certainly takes up the idea that the church is (New) Israel, a natural extension of God's holy, pre-Christian people. That, after all, seems to be the clear message of Romans chapters 9 through 11 despite attempts of those who believe in a restoration of natural Israel to claim otherwise.<sup>11</sup> But perhaps more important is the fact that other New Testament writers take up that theme. Matthew records Jesus as speaking of a church which seems to be both human and more than local. (Matt. 16:18) At Acts 9:31 Luke describes the church as the whole body of believers throughout Palestine. James begins his epistle to "the twelve tribes that are in the dispersion," thus obviously equating the broader Christian

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 47, 48

<sup>10</sup> *Ecclesia* is used about 100 times in the Septuagint where it generally means the community of God or his people collected together.

<sup>11</sup> W.H.C. Frend makes the following point: "The question indeed whether Jesus sought to found an *ecclesia* is not properly stated. Israel was already an *ecclesia*, 'a congregation of the faithful' and a 'people of God,' among whom, however, were individuals set apart to carry out particular functions, such as Levites and rabbis. The decisive step taken by Jesus was to identify his own followers as the Israel, perhaps in this case taking into account the long tradition of the holy remnant and the vine of symbolism of Maccabean nationalism (John 15: 1)." W.H. C. Frend, *The Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p. 38

community with Israel. Yet after having said this, Banks is still largely right in suggesting what he does: there is no evidence among the first Christians that there was any system of earthly church governance above that of the congregation. So, although we may speak of a Christian community during the first century, and in that sense a universal *ecclesia*, we cannot accurately regard the early church as an *organization* under the leadership of a pope, a governing body of apostles or even an episcopacy.

### CHURCH GOVERNANCE IN THE FIRST CENTURY

Christian religions of the modern era have tended to see early Christianity in terms of their own contemporary organizational structures, thus reading the present into the past. Yet modern scholarship has shown rather clearly that no present-day church, sect or cult really reproduces the structure of the early church, and many attempts by various movements to restore such a supposed structure have been the result either of sincere but misguided piety or outright religious fraud. For the fact is that while there is much that we do not know about the early church, we can be certain that it varied from place to place and did not follow a single structural pattern. For example, it is quite obvious that the mother church at Jerusalem was very Jewish in nature. Members of the Jewish-Christian community continued to think of themselves primarily as Jewish. They were zealous for the Law of Moses, continued to take Nazirite vows and frequented the Temple as worshippers. In addition, they seemed to be under the superintendence of James the Just, the brother of Jesus.<sup>12</sup> But some congregations, such as that at Antioch in Syria, were evidently established as were Jewish synagogues of the diaspora, while still others developed peculiar characteristics of their own.<sup>13</sup> What seems evident from both the book of Acts and Paul's epistles is that each of these churches or *ecclesiae* was a unit unto itself, not under the authority of Jerusalem or any other central ecclesiastical body.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

The case of Antioch is particularly significant. Acts 11:19, 20 tells us how a number of Christian refugees from Jerusalem founded a church at Antioch and began preaching and converting Gentiles without any direction or oversight from Jesus' original twelve disciples. Then verse 21 relates: "And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number that believed turned to the Lord." Only later did the Jerusalem church become aware of them and dispatch Barnabas to assist them, *not to oversee them*. What is also important to note is that it was in Antioch that "the disciples were for the first time called Christians," and it was the prophets and teachers at Antioch, not Jerusalem, who were directed by the holy spirit to appoint Barnabas and Saul (Paul) for their missionary work to the Gentiles. Acts 13:1-3 says: "Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Symeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off."

Over the centuries, some have used the account at Acts 15 to claim that despite the relative independence of the church at Antioch, it and all Christians were ultimately under the central authority of the apostles and elders at Jerusalem. However, an examination of that chapter and corresponding information from Paul's letter to the Galatians does not indicate that at all. Acts 15 deals with the circumcision controversy which erupted at Antioch. Accordingly, what happened is that the Christians there were baptizing and having full table fellowship with uncircumcised Gentile believers. "But," relates Acts 15:1,2, "some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' And when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question." As a result there occurred what some have called "the Apostolic Council of Jerusalem" which has been regarded as having issued an "Apostolic Decree" which established binding regulations on the

church universal.<sup>14</sup> Yet the fact is that it was Paul and Barnabas who came to Jerusalem voluntarily, not to seek a ruling from the Jerusalem apostles and elders, but, rather, to reach an accord with them in Christian love. For Paul himself already had a ruling on this matter, not from men, *but from the holy spirit*. This he makes clear in outspoken terms at Galatians 2:1-10:

Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up by revelation; and I laid before them (but privately before those who were of repute) the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, lest somehow I should be running or had run in vain. But even Titus, who was with me, was not compelled to be circumcised, though he was Greek. But because of false brethren secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy out our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage - to them we did not yield submission even for a moment, that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. And from those who were reputed to be something (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality) - those, I say, who were of repute added nothing to me; but on the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for the mission to the circumcised worked through me also for the Gentiles), and when they perceived the grace that was given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised; only they would have us remember the poor, which very thing I was eager to do.

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<sup>14</sup> Acts 15:20, 27-29 seems to indicate that the "Jerusalem Council" was laying four specific commands on Christians outside Jerusalem. These were to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols, unchastity, blood and meat from birds and animals that had been strangled. But one must remember the nature of fellowship in the early Christian community. At the time, full fellowship always implied sharing a common meal at an agape or love feast. In addition, it would mean sharing in communion or the Lord's Supper. That is why the Apostle Paul is specific in enjoining Christians not to eat with anyone guilty of unchastity, greed, idolatry, reviling, drunkenness or robbery. (1 Cor. 5:11) So what James the Just, the apostles and elders at Jerusalem were telling Gentile Christians was, in effect, that if they did not keep themselves pure in the four areas mentioned above, Jewish Christians would not be able to eat with them and, therefore, have full fellowship with them. Finally, those at Jerusalem - which included Paul and Barnabas - claimed to act at the behest of the holy spirit and not simply on the basis of their own authority.

Stated succinctly, what this indicates is that Paul felt no need to accept a doctrinal decision from the twelve original disciples or apostles of Jesus, nor did he look upon the mother church at Jerusalem as having any authority over either him and his fellow Christians in Antioch or those in any other place. Although all Christians were part of the same true Israel of God and children of the heavenly New Jerusalem, they were not dependent on any earthly high priest, universal vicegerent of Christ on earth, council of apostles, governing body or any other human agency. There was therefore no hierarchy in the early Christian community, for all Christians were under the resurrected Christ and the direction of the holy spirit. And it is quite obvious from the New Testament witness that the spirit did not operate through some specific individual or group alone. Hence there was no human *channel* through which the great mass of Christians had to go to have communion with Christ and no group of teachers to which they had to turn continually for spiritual truths or edification. Rather, they recognized that there was "one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus," and that they had no need that anyone should teach them in a dogmatic or prescriptive fashion. (1 Tim. 2:5; 1 John 2:27) Thus different individuals were chosen by the spirit to reveal new spiritual truths, to utter prophecies, and to proclaim the gospel without being under the superintendence of the apostles. Peter, Paul, Agabus, the daughters of Philip the Evangelist and many others were therefore free to deliver messages to their brethren, and it was the Christian community as a whole - not some select group - which had to accept or reject such messages.

What this means, of course, is that the church was guided and directed primarily by what is often referred to as a "charismatic ministry" rather than an "office" or "administrative ministry," and even at Jerusalem where the twelve were present in person was this so. Yet it would be wrong to assume that the use of the gifts of the spirit could be allowed to degenerate into a form of extreme individualism or into spiritual elitism. Those manifesting miraculous gifts such as prophecy or talking in tongues could not be permitted to act independently of their brethren or seek to dominate them.



## PROBLEMS OF GOVERNANCE

Too great a reliance on certain miraculous gifts has always led to serious problems within the Christian community. In our day, when Pentecostal and charismatic religious leaders exercise such gifts, this can and often does lead to religious elitism and much personal self-aggrandizement. Many of those who prophesy, carry on healing ministries or talk in tongues become spiritual athletes who tend to look on their non-charismatic brethren as second-class Christians. Such uses of the gifts also often lead to a proliferation of unhealthy ministries, self-glorification and the hawking of religion in the name of Christ. Yet such behavior only reflects what happened in the first century. An examination of 1 Corinthians, chapters 12 through 14, shows quite clearly that the church at Corinth was what we would describe today as a charismatic fellowship and that there were problems in that church with respect to the use and misuse of the gifts. Hence the Apostle Paul felt it necessary to counsel his Corinthian brethren, in particular with regard to talking in tongues. While not trying to suppress that gift completely, none the less he was quite blunt about the fact that it could be misused. At 1 Corinthians 14:1-4, he remarks: "Make love your aim, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts. For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the spirit. On the other hand, he who prophesies speaks to men for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. He who speaks in tongues edifies himself, but he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so the church may be edified." Paul then goes on to show how talking in tongues at a Christian service could lead to "speaking into the air" or, much worse, might cause visitors to say that all members of the congregation were mad. (1 Cor. 14:9, 20-23)

Even more serious problems could arise in connection with spiritual gifts. The case of Simon Magus recorded at Acts 8:14-24 is an instance of how someone wanted to purchase the power to perform a spiritual gift for his own selfish purposes rather than for the upbuilding of others. While Simon is described as having repented his sin, at least in this instance, the word *simony*, as taken

from his name, was to come to mean the purchase of ecclesiastical office and the spiritual authority that went with it. Still, Simon was far from the only one who wanted to use spiritual gifts for wrong reasons. The *Didache* or the *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (a late first or early second-century document) shows just how the early Christians were troubled by false prophets and other pseudo-charismatics. It gives certain ways of differentiating between true and false prophets. *Didache* 11:9 says specifically: "And no prophet who orders a meal in a spirit shall eat it: otherwise he is a false prophet." *Didache* 13:12 also says: "But whosoever shall say in a spirit 'Give me money or something else,' you shall not listen to him." Unbridled charismatic leadership could therefore not be tolerated; it had to be curbed. Thus it was that local church administrators began to replace the prophets and teachers as the primary spokesmen within each and every congregation and, after some time, beyond the bounds thereof.

We know that even in the days of the apostles, *presbyteroi* (elders) or *episcopoi* (overseers) and *diakonoi* (deacons) were coming to play an important part in the governance of both the Jewish-Christian churches and in Greek-speaking churches which developed out of Paul's missionary efforts.<sup>15</sup> However, it is not always clear as to how these offices came into being, nor do we know what the responsibilities of those who held them really were. What we do know, though, is that by the end of the first century or the beginning of the second so-called monarchical bishops were coming to the fore in much of Roman Asia. It may very well be that

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<sup>15</sup> There is no indication of how elders came into being at Jerusalem. They just appear *ex nihilo* at Acts 15. The office is never mentioned in connection with Antioch. In the Pauline congregations, they were evidently appointed *de novo* as a matter of necessity by the apostle and his companions. (Acts 14: 23; Titus 1:5) Hence various situations seem to have brought elders, as officers, into being in different ways. In the first century, the terms *Presbyteros* and *episcopos* were interchangeable. We know less about deacons.

Of course after elders were appointed, they were "committed to the Lord in whom they believed" as Acts 14: 23 says. It was impossible for the apostle or anyone else to oversee them in the way patriarchs were to do after Constantine's day. There simply was no great ecclesiastical bureaucracy based on the Roman imperial system in the first century. Nor did Paul or anyone else regard such a system as necessary: the church was under the direction of Christ in the holy spirit.

the seven angels of the seven churches to whom John writes in the Revelation were, in fact, the bishops or overseers of those congregations. (Rev. 1:20; 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14) It is certain from the letters of Ignatius of Antioch that by the second decade of the second century bishops were already prominent in many areas, although it is probable that until the latter half of that same century they were still "chairmen" rather than independent administrators in their own right. But whatever the case, an office or purely administrative ministry was coming to take over from the earlier charismatics who had been so important in the first decades after the death of Christ. W. H. C. Frend states:

Down to 150 it seems that though episcopacy was the normal form of organization there was still a certain flexibility in the status of the leadership, not least in major sees such as Rome. Both Justin Martyr and Dionysius of Corinth refer to the respective leaders of their communities as "chairmen" (*proestos*) this can hardly be mere carelessness. The term *episcopos* (bishop) had been in current use for a century, and Dionysius certainly knew of "bishops" elsewhere because he mentions those of Gortyna and Knossos in Crete and Palmas as bishop of Amastris in Pontus. It looks as though in Rome and Corinth there was, as Robert Grant suggests, a "presiding presbyter" in charge, with other presbyters, deacons, and lectors (readers) to assist. The first bishop of Rome who emerges clearly on the stage of history is Anicetus (c. 154-66) with whom Polycarp had questions on the date of Easter.

Twenty years later, there can be no doubt. Monarchical episcopacy had become almost self-consciously the sole form of orthodox government in the churches.<sup>16</sup>

This did ultimately bring about a reaction. Second century Montanism, a movement which combined within itself many of the diverse characteristics of modern groups such as the Pentecostals and the Jehovah's Witnesses, emphasized the older charismatic tradition - particularly with respect to apocalyptic prophesy. Yet Montanism quickly came to be regarded as a heresy, and the church as a whole stressed the authority of the bishops who were soon seen as the successors of the apostles.

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<sup>16</sup> W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 243

As history demonstrates clearly, the triumph of an office ministry under bishops and a routinized form of church government was no unmixed blessing. Lord Acton's well-known dictum that "power tends to corrupt" proved altogether too true, and ultimately the church of Christ became a number of great ecclesiastical hierarchies, with extensive bureaucracies, systems of canon or church law and means of enforcing "orthodoxy" by way of crusades and inquisitions. Hence a number of modern scholars have argued that the church should never have abandoned its charismatic tradition.<sup>17</sup> So the question may be asked, does the New Testament give us any solution to the problem of the proper relationship of the charismatic ministry to the administrative ministry and vice versa?

This question is of great importance, not only historically, but for Christians today. It is biblically evident that Christianity is, by its very nature, a religion of community, not an individualistic faith. Thus the matter of proper church governance is central to each and every Christian *ecclesia* and to each and every individual Christian as well.

## THE CHURCH AS THE BODY OF CHRIST

Although questions regarding the proper and improper use of authority arose frequently in the early Christian churches, it does not seem that anyone saw the primary problem of church governance as simply that of an official administrative ministry acting to curb either the excesses or freedoms of those endowed with the gifts of the spirit. Such a view of what occurred as described above is based, primarily, on historical hindsight and modern sociological concepts. The Apostle Paul, the one New Testament writer who discusses the gifts extensively, obviously lumped what were miraculous gifts

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<sup>17</sup> Rudolf Sohm has made the comment that "every form of ecclesiastical polity is in flagrant conflict with the essence of the church." Quoted in Hermann Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), p. 438. More recently, Ernst Käsemann and Jacques Ellul have taken much the same position.

such as prophecy, healing and talking in tongues in with what was a commonplace action, the manifestation of faith, and ordinary human talents such as the ability to teach, to help and to *administer*. This is made clear at 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, 27-31. Furthermore, at Ephesians 4:11 the apostle specifically describes several offices or at least official roles as “gifts.” He says: “And his [Christ’s] gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers.” So in effect, Paul saw natural talents and the ability to perform useful services equally as much *charismata* or gifts as he did the various *miraculous gifts*. He states at 1 Corinthians 12:4-8: “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

What this indicates, of course, is that Paul was no spiritual anarchist, and he fully recognized the need for both moral and liturgical order in the congregation. Those practicing such things as blatant immorality of various kinds and those overtly teaching false doctrines were to be avoided. (1 Cor. 5:9-13; 2 Thess. 3:14) As far as the church assembly was concerned, it was to follow orderly practice in the celebration of communion and in other services as well. It was to see that “all things should be done decently and in order.” (1 Cor. 11:27-34; 14:40) This did not mean, though, that Paul wanted to create any kind of a clergy class or body of elders and deacons who would make *all* the major decisions for the church. He knew well the basic principle of Jesus which is recorded at Matthew 20:25-27: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you would be your slave.” Thus while certain ones with the gifts of teaching and presiding over the church might shepherd the flock, give sermons, lead meetings and establish the format for church services, they had no right to sit as a *gerousia* or tribunal of elders which would act as a sort of local, Christian Sanhedrin. The ultimate authority for church discipline lay with the congregation as a

whole,<sup>18</sup> and each person - male or female, bond or free - was to exercise his or her gifts in an orderly way for the benefit of the entire community.

How did Paul envision the local church as functioning? The answer was not on the basis of a particular hierarchical model. As Christians, *in Christ*, all of the believers in the church, the local *ecclesia*, were to seek the mind of Christ and to work together for the upbuilding of the entire congregation. To demonstrate how this could happen in a practical sense, Paul used the various metaphors mentioned at the beginning of this article. That is, among other things, he described the church as "the Christ," "the bride of Christ," "the temple of God," and most frequently as the "body of Christ." So in every instance he saw the church as necessarily rooted in the resurrected Jesus and obedient to his spirit. As he, Paul, stated at 2 Corinthians 3:17, 18: "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." Hence, he was saying that unless a church or *ecclesia* was acting in a Christlike manner, it was not really Christian at all - a point he made very clear to the churches of Galatia. (Gal. 1:6-9) But in order to understand his thinking more clearly, let us examine his body metaphor for the church as he uses it in a number of his letters.

The idea of comparing society at large to the human body was a common one by the first century. It had been developed originally by the Stoics who not only saw human society but the entire cosmos as interrelated. So it was one which was an ordinary, almost everyday concept that was current throughout the Roman world and

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<sup>18</sup> Some have held that Paul was exercising "apostolic authority" in a disciplinary matter discussed at 1 Corinthians 5: 1-13. However, three points need to be made here. First, as the founder of the Corinthian church, Paul was its first pastor and counsellor. Thus he was giving admonition to it as a father might to his children. Second, he was dealing with a situation so blatant that under Roman law it could be called a case of *res ipse loquitur* or "the thing speaks for itself." Then third, Paul did work through the entire assembly of the church, not independently. This is made clear at 1 Corinthians 5: 4,5 and 2 Corinthians 2: 5-11. Hence it is evident that Paul was in full harmony with the position taken by Jesus at Matthew 18:15-17.

was one borrowed by the Jews as well. However, when Paul appropriated this metaphor, he gave it a particular Christian twist. When he compared the church to the body, it was always to a specific body - that of Christ; by doing so, he could argue that the church was a new kind of society based on the man from heaven and that its members were a new creation. (1 Cor. 15:45-50; 2 Cor. 5:17)

Paul uses the body metaphor in Romans, Ephesians and Colossians, but he develops it most fully at 1 Corinthians 12; and it is there, specifically, that he tells how the church should function. After describing the various gifts in detail and their inspiration by the one spirit, he says: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all of the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptised into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and all were made to drink of one Spirit." (1 Cor. 12:12, 13) Paul does not leave the matter there, for in the next eleven verses of the chapter he shows how each member of Christ's church is like a member of the human body which contributes to the wellbeing and proper function of the body. His language is so clear that it bears repeating in full here. He says:

For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single organ, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those parts of the body which we think less honourable we invest with the greater honour, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior part, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together.

We see in this language no organizational blueprint for church government in itself but, rather, a description of how the church as a whole - including every member - should function for the mutual edification of all. In other words, we have what is commonly called a corporatist, and hence a *collectivist*, view of the church in which each and every Christian is equal in worth but may differ in function or office from his brothers and sisters. To be a member of that body in a healthy sense one must work with the deepest respect for the needs and rights of all others without either attempting to impose his will on them or, conversely, becoming a rugged individualist, a "Lone Ranger Christian," always acting on his own. That is no doubt why, after discussing the various gifts and elaborating on the body metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12, in chapter 13 Paul describes the more excellent way of inter-ecclesial personal relationships - the way of love.

### THE CHURCH IN OUR DAY

Paul's concept of the nature of the church is a good and proper one, but from the very beginning sinful human tendencies worked to undermine it. Yet it was no doubt more functional from a societal standpoint in his day than it is today in modern western lands. The earliest churches seem to have met as house churches, and the household, which usually contained an extended family, slaves and other dependents, could serve as a cohesive factor in uniting the congregation.<sup>19</sup> There is also a great deal of evidence to show that the churches used as models the voluntary associations or partnerships recognized under Roman law. Since the members of such associations - each known as a *societas* in Latin and a *koinonia* in Greek - were to be of "the same mind" in promoting the partnership as a whole, they served as excellent examples for the

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<sup>19</sup> It is also possible that rivalries, such as those discussed at 1 Corinthians 1, may have resulted when separate households became centers of differing partisan views. See Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 75-7.



type of relationships that Paul wanted the churches to develop.<sup>20</sup> So first-century society in general was more in harmony with the creation of corporatist churches or *ecclesiae* than is ours, although certainly only Christians wanted to build them on God, on Christ and the spirit of love.

Many things in the modern world make it difficult for Christians to find a church which attempts to follow Paul's concept of what a church should be like - one which is truly Christian. Those who try to found their own fellowships often repeat the mistakes of the past and create clones of the communities from which they have come. Yet that is not the only problem that faces many Christians today. Our world is one of extreme individualism and egotism - so much so that many professed Christians confuse greedy, commercialistic capitalism with Christian virtues. Also, many place such an emphasis on narrow doctrinal uniformity that it is hard to relate to others on a basis of mutual respect. Still others become so "heavenly minded" that they are "no earthly good." None the less, it is a mistake for Christians not to fellowship. No one can do without the regular association of brothers and sisters in Christ any more than he or she can do without Christ himself. Christ builds us up unto himself in the church *and only there*. As the writer of Hebrews says: "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as have some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." (Heb. 10:23-25)

Are there any guidelines, then, that can be followed in finding a church or in helping to develop one? Yes, there are, but these are not mechanistic rules. They are principles that Christians must recognize for themselves; they cannot be imposed by anyone. So what, then, are they?

First and foremost, Christians should seek in some way to be associated with a church which is founded on the living Christ. It

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<sup>20</sup> For an excellent study of the matter, see J. Paul Sampley, *Pauline Partnership in Christ: Christian Community and Commitment in Light of Roman Law* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980).

must be *his church*, no one else's. Members of the church must therefore have a personal relationship with him. Only Christ himself can be "the way, the truth and the life." (John 14:6) His role cannot be assumed by any hierarchy, ministry, theology or even the Scriptures. While the Bible serves as an authoritative guide to bring us to him, it is he, not it, on whom the church must be built.

Of course this means that members of the church must be in full covenant relationship with him and fully committed to him and his purposes. "When Christ calls a man," says Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "he bids him come and die."<sup>21</sup> And Bonhoeffer is right. For the Apostle Paul tells us that he, personally, was crucified with Christ through faith (Gal. 2:20), and we will be glorified with him provided that we suffer with him. (Rom. 8:17) In fellowshiping with any church, then, or in attempting to organize one, it is important to make certain that our brothers and sisters regard the church as more than a place in which to socialize - somewhere in which they can be baptized, married and buried. It is also important to ascertain that they recognize that it is more than a just a spiritual palliative where they can find and obtain what Bonhoeffer calls "cheap grace." These brothers and sisters make up the *ecclesia*, the church; if they are lukewarm, it will falter and die spiritually. As the book of Revelation says, Christ will "spew them out of his mouth." (Rev. 3:16)

Very important, too, is the nature of governance in any church. If we are to take seriously the Apostle Paul's concept that each local *ecclesia* is a manifestation of heavenly reality, the church should be independent of outside human control. It should be devoted to what historically has been called the "congregational principle." However, having an independent congregation with no more than fraternal ties to other churches is not enough. An independent congregation can be dominated by an individual or a clique as easily as can a great institutional church. Thus fundamental decisions should always be left to the entire body of consecrated brothers and sisters as a whole. Some may think that they have greater administrative ability than

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<sup>21</sup> Bishop G.K.A. Bell's Foreword to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1963), p. 7

others, more experience, more education or more spiritual gifts. So they come to feel that they should make all the important decisions for the church. But that is bad for both the church and for them. Although the apostles were men of great spirituality, our Lord had to correct them continually. Peter, Barnabas and others had to be reproved at Antioch (Gal. 2:11-14), and Paul had to apologize for a too hasty tongue. (Acts 23:1-5) Hence none of us should feel above being thwarted or reproved occasionally. We all need to be chastened sometimes. On the other hand, if someone has a gift, a service or a responsible position in the church and is trying to do his or her best, others should respect that fact and not try to interfere improperly or continually criticize. Such would not be acting with love.

This means that any truly Christian church should be charismatic in the broadest Pauline sense. That it should recognize the gifts present in *all members* of the congregation and should use them for the edification of the entire body. The Apostle Paul proclaims: "For freedom Christ set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (Gal. 5:1) So if we are to maintain that freedom, we will seek to participate in the church, use our gifts *in harmony with others* and refuse to surrender control over our spiritual welfare to anyone except the Lord Jesus.

Finally, another important factor to develop and nurture in any church is the quality of being separate from the world. No truly Christian church will simply adopt the values and mores of the larger society in which it is located. It will be "a choice, not an echo." Whether it finds itself in a western, capitalistic land or in a socialist state or whatever, it will not be co-opted to become a form of Christian shintoism in the way that far too many churches, denominations and movements have done. At the same time, it will not become narrowly sectarian and self-righteous. Rather, it must have a mission in love to the world. It is important to remember "God so loved the world [this world!] that he gave his only [begotten] Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16) While we should not love the world with its spirit of selfishness, like God and Christ we should have a

love affair with the world of mankind. We are to “do good to all men.” (Gal. 6:10) That must be part of our Christian quest.