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The Teaching of the New Testament Concerning the Church

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TODAY the word "church" has a wide variety of meanings. These include: (1) the totality of Christian believers as the Church universal; (2) a local congregation, whether gathered at one place for worship or not; (3) a building used for public worship; (4) a denomination; and (5) the clerical profession. Of these five common meanings, only the first two appear in the New Testament; the others are of later development. For example, though today we speak of "the church which is located on such-and-such a street," the earliest known reference to a church building dates from the second century. During the first century Christians would gather together for worship in the homes of local members (see Rom. 16:5; I Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philem. 2).

In the Greek New Testament the word commonly used for "church" is *ekklēsia*, which occurs one hundred fourteen times in seventeen of the twenty-seven books. In analyzing the concept of the Church in the New Testament one must not only examine the usage and meaning of the word itself, but also take into account the

many other terms and images employed by the New Testament writers to describe the Church. Furthermore, since one ought not divorce the New Testament from the Old Testament, it is necessary to trace the roots of the idea of *ekklēsia* back to the usage of the Hebrew Old Testament.

I

In the earlier books of the Old Testament an assembly or gathering of Israel is described by the Hebrew words *'ēdhāb* and *qābāl*. At first these two words had little or no religious connotation; in fact, *qābāl* in Num. 22:4 means "this horde [of people]." In later, post-Exilic writings *qābāl*, which came to be used much more frequently than *'ēdhāb*, acquired a distinctly religious connotation. It refers to an assembly of Israelites gathered to hear God's law and to worship him (II Chr. 20:5; Ezra 10:12; Neh. 5:13; 8:2). Furthermore, the expression "the *qābāl* of Jehovah" came to signify, not merely a gathering of Israelites upon some particular occasion, but the people of Israel as God's people distinct from everyone else, whether assembled or unassembled—in short, the chosen of Jehovah for his service.

When the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek (during the third and second centuries B.C.), both *'ēdhāb* and *qābāl* were rendered by the Greek words *synagōgē* (which emphasizes the idea of assembling) and *ekklēsia* (which

emphasizes the idea of being called-out). The latter term was particularly appropriate as a translation of *qāhāl*, for both are derived from the verbs meaning "to call" or "to summon." The phrase, "the *ekklēsia* of the Lord," therefore, became a common expression in the Greek Old Testament with exactly the same allusion to Israel's having been called by God as was conveyed by the Hebrew, "the *qāhāl* of Jehovah."

Since Christians from a very early date regarded themselves as the "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16), a "chosen race" or "holy nation" as opposed to Jews who had rejected the Messiah (I Peter. 2:9), it is easy to understand why they called themselves "the *ekklēsia* of God." When Paul, for example, addresses the Christians at Corinth, he writes: "To the church (*ekklēsia*) of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Cor. 1:2). Here the apostle deliberately emphasizes the idea of calling, for the root of the word *ekklēsia* is the same as that of the Greek words translated in this passage *called* and *call on*. It is as though Paul had written, "the *called-out* of God which is at Corinth . . . *called* to be saints, together with all those who *call* on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." While the New Testament usage of *ekklēsia* has obvious connections with that of the Old Testament idea of the people of God, the Christian thought as reflected in Paul's words enlarges and makes explicit the significance of the genitive "of God." The "*ekklēsia* of God" is composed of those called *by* God to be "saints," that is, persons who have been brought into a special

relation *with* God. This calling is *through* Jesus Christ, *in* whom they have been dedicated (sanctified) to God.

In another respect also the New Testament usage of *ekklēsia* enlarges the Old Testament idea of the *qāhāl* of Jehovah. Many times in Paul's letters and in the book of Revelation the plural form of *ekklēsia* occurs. For example, "All the *ekklēsias* of Christ greet you" (Rom. 16:16); "the *ekklēsias* of Asia¹ send greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the *ekklēsia* in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord" (I Cor. 16:19); and John sends letters "to the seven *ekklēsias* that are in Asia"¹ (Rev. 1:4). Thus the word *ekklēsia*, which originally referred to the whole body of God's people, comes to be applied to all the Christians of a great city (Corinth, Rome, etc.) or even to smaller groups of Christians meeting in a house. In fact, whether the members of the *ekklēsia* are gathered together in the act of the worship of God or are scattered abroad by reason of persecution, they still are described as God's *ekklēsia*. In short, the *ekklēsia* is not a mere fellowship of men, to be understood only in terms of sociology. The one essential feature is that the members of the various local *ekklēsias* belong to God's one *ekklēsia*.

II

Although the Greek word for "church" appears in only two passages in one of the Gospels (Matt. 16:18 and 18:17), the concept of the called of God is reflected in many other passages in all four Gospels. Both by word and by action Jesus led his

¹ This is the Roman Province of Asia within Asia Minor.

disciples to think of themselves as the new Israel. The number "twelve" in his choice of the inner circle of apostles was no doubt deliberate; as there were twelve patriarchs and twelve tribes of Israel, Jesus intended that the twelve apostles should form the nucleus of the true Israel through which God would accomplish his purposes. Hints as to the failure of the Jewish nation to fulfill its calling give point to several of Jesus' parables. Using the Old Testament imagery which likened Israel to a vineyard or a fig tree, Jesus indicates that old Israel is to be given one more opportunity of bringing forth fruit; but if it fails to do so, it is to be destroyed (Luke 13:6-9). In the parable of the vineyard (Mark 12:1-9) it is suggested that, because of the Jewish rejection of Jesus, the owner (God) will give the vineyard (his possession) to others. The strange story of Jesus' cursing the barren though verdant fig tree (Mark 11:13-14, 20-21) is of parabolic significance; old Israel, though outwardly flourishing and pretentious, disappointed him by failing to produce fruit. In such a context it is highly significant that Jesus' followers constitute his "little flock" to whom it is the Father's good pleasure to give the kingdom (Luke 12:32). This imagery, which goes back to the Old Testament prophets who speak of the remnant in Israel as God's flock (Isa. 40:11; Ezek. 34:12-24; Micah 5:4), appears more than once in the Gospels (in addition to Luke 12:32, see Matt. 26:31 and John 10:1-18) and suggests that Jesus regarded his followers as the messianic community through which God's purposes would be carried out. By sending forth the Twelve and the Seventy on missions to extend his influence, Jesus deliberately sought to call out

of old Israel a remnant which would be prepared to enter the kingdom of God.

Seen in this wider perspective of Jesus' ministry, the two occasions when Matthew employs the word *ekklēsia* do not seem to stand isolated. In the less controversial of the two passages (Matt. 18:15-17) Jesus tells his followers how to deal with an erring brother. There are to be several stages of reproof; first with him alone, next with two or three brethren as witnesses; then "if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the *ekklēsia*; and if he refuses to listen even to the *ekklēsia*, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Here we are once again reminded of the whole congregation of Israel from which offenders were cut off as traitors to the chosen people. Jesus obviously regarded his followers as a brotherhood from which to be separated was tantamount to being cut off from the people of God.

The more controversial passage in Matthew which contains the word *ekklēsia* (Matt. 16:18) stands in connection with Jesus' asking his disciples, "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" After several suggestions are offered which prove to be less than adequate, Peter makes his famous declaration, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." In reply Jesus says that the apostle's insight into who he is was not the result of his own cleverness but was a revelation from God ("flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven"). Jesus continues, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the powers of death [the gates of hell] shall not prevail against it." Here there is no question of a partial or narrowly local gathering. He who had just been

confessed as "the Christ, the Son of the living God," promises that those who belong to him will not be defeated by the powers of hell, for he will build them into his Church. In one sense, what he would build was old; it had a continuity with the true *ekklesia* of the old covenant. In this respect his building of it would be a *re*-building.² But in another, and more adequate sense, his *ekklesia*, being founded on a new covenant, would be a new creation and would take its place not merely as another sociological entity, but as the community of the Messiah.

What Jesus speaks of, however, is not merely building his Church, but building it "on this rock." What does it mean when he declares, "You are Peter (Greek *Petros*), and on this rock (Greek *petra*) I will build my Church"? Many volumes have been written dealing with the interpretation of this important passage;³ the space available here allows only a brief discussion of its meaning. The play on words in the Greek text of Matthew's Gospel (between the proper name *Petros* meaning "Rock" and the ordinary word *petra* meaning "a rock, a stone") is even closer in Aramaic, the mother-tongue of Jesus and his disciples. In Aramaic the same word *kēphā'* serves as a proper name ("Cephas") and also means "a rock, a stone." Therefore, Jesus' conversation with Peter would have continued as follows: "And I tell you,

² Compare the quotation of Amos 9:11 f. made by James in Acts 15:16: "I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; I will set it up, that the rest of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles. . . ."

³ One of the most significant of recent scholarly examinations of this passage is in Oscar Cullmann's book, *Peter, Disciple-Apostle-Martyr* (Philadelphia, 1953), pp. 155 ff.

you are *Kēphā'*, and on this *kēphā'* I will build my Church." The obvious meaning of this surely is that Peter is the rock on which Jesus will build his Church.

One must beware of reading more into this passage than is actually there. On the one hand, the Roman Catholic Church reads into the passage a promise regarding a line of successors to Peter as the first pope. Since, however, the foundation for a building is laid *once*, it is totally incongruous to interpret Jesus' words addressed to his apostle as though they applied successively to a line of bishops at Rome. On the other hand, some Protestants, wishing to counteract the misuse which the Roman Church has made of this passage, take Jesus' words as though he had said, "You are Peter, and upon those who have faith like yours I will build my Church." Of course Peter had faith, but Jesus says nothing about that here. What he promises is that he will build his Church on the "rock-man" Cephas—and historically this is exactly what occurred. At Pentecost it was Peter who, by his sermon, used the keys of the kingdom (Matt. 16:19) to open the Church to many Jewish believers (Acts 2:14-41). Later, when Peter preached to the Roman centurion Cornelius, he opened the Church to Gentile believers (Acts 10:24-48). In both cases Jesus built his Church on Peter.⁴

⁴ The fact that elsewhere in the New Testament Jesus Christ is referred to as the foundation or cornerstone (Matt. 21:42; I Cor. 3:11; I Pet. 2:4-6) does not argue against the obvious meaning of Matt. 16:18; it merely shows that the image of a rock can be used of different persons. There are many other cases of the same metaphor variously applied; for example, in Matt. 5:14 Christians are the light of the world, while in John 9:5 Christ is the light of the world. The image of a lion stands for Christ in Rev. 5:5, but refers to the devil in I Pet. 5:8.

III

In the book of the Acts of the Apostles the author summarizes the history of the growth of the early Church from its origin in Jerusalem, the capital of a comparatively unimportant country within the great Roman Empire, to the time of the arrival of the apostle Paul at Rome itself, the hub and capital of the then civilized world. Between these two cities the author traces the gradual expansion of the Church during the third of a century following the death and resurrection of Jesus. By the beginning of the sixth decade every important city in Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, Thrace, Italy, and Egypt had one or more Christian congregations.

It is most illuminating to examine the names which, according to the book of Acts, were given to the early Christians. Those which Christians themselves adopted reveal what they thought of themselves; those which persons outside the Church gave them are no less important in disclosing what others thought of them.

One of the most characteristic names of Christians in Acts is "the disciples" (*mathētai*). The application of this word to the followers of Jesus arose during his public ministry in Galilee when, as a teacher, he gathered about himself a group of "learners," which is the literal meaning of the Greek word.

Another frequent term for Christians in Acts is "the brethren" (*adelphoi*). It involves a metaphorical extension of the term from blood brothers to spiritual kindred. Since Christians regarded themselves as children of one heavenly Father, it was natural that they recognized one another as "brethren," belonging to one family.

The word "saints" (*hagioi*), which is the

usual name for Christians in Paul's letters, occurs several times in Acts. Its root meaning suggests the idea of "separation" — the saints were separated from the world and separated unto God. Their personal "sainthood," therefore, depended upon their dedication to God, whose holiness was the norm to which theirs must correspond.

The early Christians also called themselves "the believers" and "the saved." By the former term they referred to their faith in God and his gracious purpose. By the latter they indicated that they had been rescued from the evil one and were being kept safe by the Lord.

Several names were given by outsiders to members of the early Church. Frequently such names were meant to be derogatory. Thus, when Paul was on trial before Felix, the prosecutor Tertullus referred to the prisoner as "a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes" (Acts 24:5). The word "Nazarene" alludes to the humble origin of Jesus of Nazareth and is clearly intended as a reproach (cf. John 1:46, where Nathanael asks incredulously, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?"). The term was not adopted by the ancient Church.

Another name, however, which also may originally have been meant to be abusive, was eventually taken over by the Church — the word "Christian" itself. It was at Antioch that "the disciples were for the first time called Christians" (Acts 11:26).⁵ In antiquity the Antiochians had an unenviable propensity for coining scurrilous nicknames. The name "Christians" appears to have been a derisive epithet with which the followers of Christ were branded by

⁵ The word "Christian" occurs only three times in the Greek New Testament, Acts 11:26; 26:28; I Pet. 4:16.

the mocking Antiochians. It is probable that the populace of Antioch confused the Greek word *Christos*, whose special Hebrew usage meaning "the anointed one" would not be generally known to them, with the much more common Greek word *chrēstos*, which at that time was pronounced the same as *Christos*. The word *chrēstos* meant "good, mild, kindly," but sometimes it was used with a derogatory connotation, meaning "simple" or "silly," somewhat like the expression, "He is goody-good." The word doubtless carried this sneering, ironical sense to many Antiochians.

Perhaps the most unusual of the names in Acts given to the new religion is "the Way" (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 24:22; cf. 22:4). It is probable that this name was coined by non-Christians of Jewish background. In rabbinical literature the Hebrew word *derek*, meaning "way" or "custom," was sometimes used with a derogatory implication (as one might say, "Oh, he's all right in his way, but he has such strange ways!"). It is possible that non-believing Jews described Christianity by this word, implying that, according to their view, the Christians were peculiar or even heretical. In any case, neither the word "Christian," given first by pagans, nor the word "Way," probably given by Jews, was especially popular with those to whom they were first applied; Paul, for example, adopted neither. In time, however, the word "Christian" came to be a badge of honor, and eventually was used more frequently than any of the other names given in the book of Acts to followers of Jesus Christ.

IV

Like the book of Acts, the Pauline letters use the word "church" for the whole

people of God (*e.g.*, Acts 9:31; I Cor. 12:28), as well as for the concrete manifestation of this people in a particular place. The Christian believers of Corinth are not "the Corinthian church," but "the church of God which is at Corinth" (I Cor. 1:2; II Cor. 1:1). That is, the Church is not a great community made up of an accumulation of small communities (as, the Corinthian Church alongside the Jerusalem Church, and the Roman Church, etc.), but is truly present in its wholeness in every company of believers, however small. When Paul confesses that he had persecuted "the Church of God" (I Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13; Phil. 3:6), he means that he had attacked particular and local embodiments of the universal Church.

Paul's special contribution concerning the nature of the Church is conveyed through his elaboration of several images or word pictures. Noteworthy among many such metaphors or analogies are his references to the Church as the body of Christ, the building or temple of God, the bride of Christ, and the mother of believers.

(a) In Paul's usage the phrase "the body of Christ" is flexible and elastic. In many of the passages where the apostle applies the word "body" to the Church he does not think of a living or organic body, but uses the word in the sense of a collection or a whole (compare this usage with the common expressions "a body of soldiers" or "a body of water"). Thus he declares that "we, though many, are one body in Christ" (Rom. 12:5). When Christians celebrate the Lord's Supper, "we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the same loaf" (I Cor. 10:17).

In other passages, however, Paul compares the relation of Christians to one another as parts of the human body (I Cor. 12:12 to 27). All members of the body—head, eyes, ears, hands, feet—need one another, and together they are the body of Christ. Here the idea is that the life-giving presence of Christ coexists in all members of the Church.

In Ephesians the image of the body is developed along somewhat different lines. Here the writer thinks of Christ as the head of the Church, which is his body (Eph. 1:22,23). The head and body are correlative and organically connected. The inner cohesion of all parts of the body, in subordination to the head which supplies vital energy to the whole, is expressed in the admonition, "Grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together . . . , makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love" (Eph. 4:15,16; compare Col. 2:19).

(b) The image of the Church as a building occurs more than once in Paul's letters. The whole Church is regarded as a great structure which serves as the temple of God (I Cor. 3:10-17). The foundation of the building is either Jesus Christ (3:11) or "the apostles and prophets" (Eph. 2:20; the sequence of the two terms, "apostles and prophets," suggests that here New Testament prophets are meant; see, *e.g.*, Acts 11:28; 13:1; 15:32; 21:10). Individual Christians are the building materials, each in his own place contributing his part to the progress and completeness of the whole (I Cor. 3:12-15; compare Peter's reference to Christians as "living stones," I Pet. 2:5). The structure depends for its coherence and stability upon Jesus

Christ as "the cornerstone" (Eph. 2:20),⁶ a term which Old Testament writers had used in referring to the Messiah (Ps. 118:22; Isa. 28:16). The growth of the "temple-house" is not only quantitative (more stones are added), but qualitative as well (the stones become intimately joined together in a common life). In accord with the figure of constructing a building suitable for God's dwelling, Christians are exhorted to "encourage one another and *build one another up*" (I Thess. 5:11; cf. Acts 20:32).

(c) In the Old Testament the relation between Jehovah and Israel is often depicted as a relation between a husband and his wife (Isa. 54:5 ff.; 62:4 f.; Ezek. 16; Hos. 1—3). In harmony with this imagery Jesus referred to himself as the bridegroom and the circle of his disciples as the Messianic bride (Mark 2:18 ff. and parallels; John 3:29). Paul uses the same metaphor of marriage in referring to a local Church (II Cor. 11:2) and to individual Christians (Rom. 7:1-4). In Eph. 5:23-32 the writer elaborates at length upon the idea of the marriage of the Church universal to Christ as the head of the Church, declaring that Christ's affection for the Church is more tender than that of a husband for his wife. This love is far more than mere feeling, for it has involved a great sacrifice: "Christ . . . gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25). His love for his bride did not cease with the sacrifice of himself in her behalf; it continues to manifest itself in providing for her welfare ("nourishing and cherishing . . . the Church," Eph. 5:29). In return for Christ's caring for

⁶ The translation "chief cornerstone" is an error which came into English versions from the Latin Vulgate.

his Church, her attitude must be one of subordination and loyalty to him (Eph. 5:24).

(d) In addition to the more familiar figures of the Church, some of which have been mentioned above, Paul alludes to still another which Protestants have frequently neglected, namely, the Church as mother. In his impassioned letter to the Galatians the Apostle contrasts the children of Hagar, the bondwoman, with the children of Sarah, the free woman. The former, he says, are under servitude to the law given at Mount Sinai; the latter, as children of the divine promise, receive the inheritance which belongs to the free-born. The pitch of the Apostle's similitude is that the Church is "the Jerusalem above . . . and she is our mother" (Gal. 4:26).

As each person was born of two human parents, so the Scriptures speak of the second birth in terms of God as father and the Church as mother. In accord with this imagery, Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage in the third century, was accustomed to affirm: "Before one can have God as his Father he must first have the Church as his mother" (*Epistle 74:7*; cf. *Unity of Church*, 5). Echoing and elaborating this sentiment, one of the great Reformers wrote concerning the visible Church as mother: "There is no other way of entrance into life, unless we are conceived by her, born of her, nourished at her breast, and continually preserved under her care and government till we are divested of this mortal flesh, and 'become like the angels'" (Calvin, *Institutes*, Bk. IV, ch. 1, sec. 4; compare also sec. 1).

V

Nowhere in the Bible is the nature or essence of the Church defined with cold,

Aristotelian analysis. On the contrary, besides using the Greek word *ekklēsia* in varied contexts the New Testament writers employ a wide variety of images or metaphors of the Church. One must beware lest, by selecting only two or three of these pictorial representations, one gain a partial and even a distorted understanding of the full scope of the New Testament teaching regarding the community of God's people.

Furthermore, it must not be expected that all questions regarding the procedures of Church union in specified cases today (or even the advisability of Church union) will be answered directly by consulting the New Testament. On the contrary, it is by the patient study of all the many images of the Church in the New Testament that one comes to have a sympathetic understanding of the form and nature of the Church which God wills. Then questions pertaining to internal and ecumenical problems can be answered in the spirit of him whose concern for the welfare of his Church far exceeds merely human solicitude or expediency.

The concept of Church belongs primarily to a religious and not to a merely institutional or sociological dimension. As the body of Christ and as the Messianic bride, it is not a mere fellowship of men of good will, a purely voluntary association. For Paul, as for other New Testament theologians, ecclesiology and christology are interrelated. He who gave himself up for his Church (Eph. 5:25) continues to supply her with all needed heavenly graces, and directs her life toward the fulfillment of his purpose, when "we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (I John 3:2).

The Church is represented as a living organism whose unity arises from its rela-

tion to one God and one Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 4:1-6). The Church is not the property of the believers, nor do the expressions "my Church" and "our Church" reflect the New Testament emphasis upon the divine origin of the *ekklēsia*. Its members are knit together by a supernatural kinship, and all their talents and services are a continuation of the life and activity of Christ himself.

In the Church human divisions and distinctions disappear (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11). Although local communities of believers were under the guidance of apostles, elders or bishops, prophets, and other leaders, the Church as a whole is described as a "brotherhood" (I Pet. 2:17; 5:9) in which nothing is known of sacerdotal grace or of an institutional hierarchy that separates laymen from clergy. All who

belong to Christ are equipped for work in his service (Eph. 4:12).

The Church is not identical with the kingdom of God, but is the means through which God's sovereignty will be acknowledged. Her mission is to proclaim to the world the Gospel of salvation which God offers in Jesus Christ. She is God's instrument through which he will accomplish his ultimate purpose, that of achieving unity and harmony in the universe. With exalted boldness the New Testament *co-ordinates* the Church and Jesus Christ in their work of focusing and reflecting the glory of God Almighty: "Now to him who by the power at work in us is able to do far more abundantly than we ask or think, to him be glory *in the Church and in Christ Jesus* to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen" (Eph. 3:20,21).