

The Meaning of the Church

by Raymond Golsworthy

The church is a people called out from the world, a heavenly organization, and the body of Christ, and its love for Christ is the essence of the real Christian life.

Scripture: Daniel 2:28

Topics: "Ecclesiology", "Body Of Christ"

Description

Raymond Golsworthy delves into the mystery and importance of the church, emphasizing that it is not a physical building but rather 'people' saved by the Lord, added to daily by God. The church is described as a heavenly organism ruled by God, with chosen men subject to His authority. The term 'ek-klesia' highlights that the church is 'called out of' the world, with a heavenly calling. The church is revealed as the body of Christ, a living reality where believers are consciously united with Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Transcript

A brief survey of the salient points

There are many who sing very feelingly about the church's one foundation, but, through no fault of their own, know very little about the real character of the church. Nor is there much understanding of its important place in the plan and economy of God. It is with the hope of improving this situation that the following paragraphs are written.

The Bible itself refers to the church as a mystery, or secret (Ephesians 3:4-6), but, as Daniel said, "there is a God in heaven who reveals secrets" (Daniel 2:28) and He finds pleasure in so doing (Galatians 1:15, 16). We believe that even the verses as we shall here quote, if they were read carefully and prayerfully would provide a basis for some further light to dawn.

There are many misconceptions regarding the meaning of the word church. Some still think of it as a building used, perhaps, for religious purposes, but that idea, certainly, finds no support in our Bibles! We read for instance, that the church has ears (Acts 11:22) and that it can sometimes be found inside a house (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Philemon:2). No, the church clearly is, 'people', and we read that God "adds to the church daily those who are being saved" (Acts 2:47). So the church is the people saved by the Lord.

We also must not think of the church as some human and earthly organisation administered by men. Rather, it is something essentially heavenly (e.g. Philippians 3:20; Colossians 3:3). It is God's dearly loved possession (Acts 20:28; 1 Thessalonians 2:14) and He, therefore, has the right and responsibility of ruling it. Whilst He may deign to use chosen men to implement or mediate that rule, those men themselves must obviously be subject to the rule they mediate. They must be in close touch with God, and ever-sensitive to His mind and purpose. In a word, then, we may say that the church is an organism rather than an organisation. This, we are sure, will become very apparent as we continue with our study, and look into the relevant scriptures on the subject.

It will be well, at this point, to consider the original word used for church in the New Testament. The word is 'ek-klesia', meaning, literally, something 'called out of'. This reminds us immediately of the words in Acts 15:14, "God did visit the gentiles (nations) to take out from them a people for His Name." This verse emphasises the fact that the church is something extracted from the world, or we could say from the world-system. (We could have used the word extricated, for the world-system is very possessive, and it will cling to us as long as it possibly can.) All this is very helpful when it comes to understanding the nature and calling of God's church.

The word ek-klesia also reminds us that God's people are, indeed, a people with a calling. This is abundantly and beautifully unfolded throughout the New Testament and it is a wonderful calling indeed. It is not our purpose right now, however, to discuss the details of that calling, but just to emphasise that the church is a people called out from this world, and a people with a heavenly calling (Hebrew 3:1).

Before we leave the matter of that word ek-klesia we would like to mention an interesting point. While that word is used for church, it is also once used to denote a town council, or group of responsible citizens, called out to administrate municipal affairs. (See e.g. 'lawful assembly', Acts 19:29.) This, we suggest, throws further light on the purpose of God for His church. It is called out for administration and to exercise a delegated authority in God's affairs. This is a glorious fact, much emphasised in the Old Testament (see Daniel 7:18, 27; Isaiah 60:14, and the closing verses of Psalm 149) and then finally developed in the New Testament. Paul tells us that the saints shall judge the world and shall even judge angels (1 Corinthians 6:2, 3), whilst Peter designates the church as a chosen generation, a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9). And, lest we should think this only applies in the future, we have the word of Christ Himself, "whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." This word, we notice, is expressly directed to His church (see Matt. 16:18,19; Matt. 18:17-19) and needs to be taken to heart now. How precious, too, that the Lord Himself said, "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32).

We carefully add, just here, that all these verses need to be read in the light of Matthew 20:25-28. Men invariably associate rulership with some kind of forcefulness, or despotism, or self-importance, the very opposite of the divine concept. God links rulership with servanthood and trains heaven's rulers by teaching them meekness and humility. Those are the royal robes that will be worn by Heaven's kings (see Ephesians 4:1, 2). They will have learned the lesson of the towel (John 13:3-15).

The church, the body of Christ

We now move on to consider what is undoubtedly the main feature of God's church, its real essence and character. Our Bible again and again refers to the church as the body of Christ (see e.g. Ephesians 1 :22, 23; Colossians 1:24; 1 Corinthians 12:27) and it could be said that that is its true Bible name. What a

glorious truth it signifies, a body for God's Christ. Before we go into details we feel it necessary to stress that we are here talking about an actual reality and not just a metaphor or figure of speech. We read that, "By one spirit we are all baptised (plunged) into one body" (1 Corinthians 12:13) and as the new birth is an actual conscious experience (when the Holy Spirit enters into an individual person), so it is when that Holy Spirit progressively enters into many persons. These persons, together, are constituted members of the body of Christ and they are conscious of it (see 1 John 3:14). A collective organism is being formed and we know it!

Much of this, of course, is beyond present human explanation and we certainly do not claim to have all the answers. But we do know that the body of Christ is an existing reality. There is a oneness that we are blessedly conscious of right now and it will become our real experience and joy to the degree that we allow the Holy Spirit to control us.

We would like to draw your attention to that beautiful and indeed majestic passage at the end of Ephesians one, where Paul was outlining the process by which God glorified His Son. He tells us about the resurrection (verse 20a), the ascension (verses 20b and 21) and then what we might call the great subjugation, when God "put all things under Christ's feet" (verse 22a). We might think that this completes the majestic process, but not so. There is yet another act of God, essential for the completing of that glorification. We refer to verses 22 and 23, where we read that after all things were put beneath Christ's feet, God proceeded to give Him, the risen, ascended and reigning One, to the church which is His body. The original words read. "God gave Him (to be) the head over all (things) to the church which is His body." It is all a glorious picture of that great exalted Lord being extended into His people, thereby constituting them His body, a people in life union with Himself. It is a marvellous reality indeed!

The astonishing fact is that God's great Christ is in that sense not fully complete until He has us (you and me) in this life-union with Himself. What a wonderful God we have, and what inscrutable purposes are in His heart!

We must also note that, in concluding that same chapter, Paul states that the church is the fullness of Him that filleth all in all. The actual Greek word translated here as fullness is 'pleroma', always used to designate an item which completes something else. It could be used, for instance, for a roof which completes a house, or for wings which complete a bird. Christ Himself used the word in connection with a patch which completes a worn garment. In Matthew 9:16 we have the phrase: "That which is put in to fill it up," meaning the patch in the garment. The original text in Matthew 9 uses the one word pleroma, exactly the same as in Ephesians 1:23; the church, the pleroma of Him that filleth all in all. How wonderful, that we have been made part of that which completes God's glorified Son!

Paul tells us that this is a mystery which has at last been opened up to men by God (Ephesian 3:5, 6). He rejoices that he himself has seen the mystery and that grace has been given to him to share it with others (verses 3, 4). The special wonder to Paul was that regenerated gentiles, as well as regenerated Jews, were being included in the one body (see Zechariah 2; Colossians 3:27-28; Revelation 5:9; 7:9). And what a wonder and what a joy that should be to us; we too are in the body.

The term body immediately brings in the beautiful thought of unity with diversity. While a body is totally one as to its life, it is wonderfully diverse as to its functions. Paul develops this idea very helpfully when discussing this mystery. He mentions the various senses and the various limbs that comprise a normal human body, which have their parallel in the manifestation of God's church (see 1 Corinthians 12). All this

should be very helpful to us and we would say that one of the great joys of living as a body is to discover this operating diversity and to learn the blessedness of our Christian interdependence. "I need thee, O I need thee" is a song we can sing in relation to our brothers and sisters, as well as to the one great Lord over us all. What a help this can be in our learning of humility.

The inferences and challenges of this mystery are innumerable, but we shall simply state one basic fact right here, namely that we cannot now separate the church of Christ from the life of Christ. If the church is the body of Christ, then obviously it lives with His life. Where there is not that life there is no church. It is wrong, therefore, to lead people to think that they are in the church if they have not been born again and thus made recipients of the Saviour's risen life.

The inferences, we said, are numberless, but God will show them to us as we walk on with Him. They will surely challenge us.

The church, its local expression

We now move on to a brief consideration of what we call the local church. The New Testament speaks of churches, by which we are to understand separate groups of Christians established and operating in various places where the gospel had been preached and has done its saving work. The believers living in those places and receiving the gift of eternal life, would first have been incorporated into the one great organism, added, as the record puts it, to their living Lord (Acts 5:14; 11:24). They would then gather together in their various areas or localities for purposes of worship, edification and service. We do not read of memberships, or of any such official requirements or conditions; only of simple spontaneous gatherings of God's people. Such gatherings, however, are also called churches, in so far as they were part of the one great universal church and local representations of it. They were microcosms of the far greater reality.

Perhaps we should pause just here to say that in these early days there would probably have been only one such gathering in a given city, for the cities were comparatively small and the gospel was only beginning to make its inroads amongst the people. In our day, however, with our much larger cities, there could in one city easily be a number of churches of the kind we have described, each of them being cared for by its own group of elders or shepherds. In a land like India on the other hand, with its numerous villages in one small area, quite a few such villages could conceivably be represented in the one gathering. The simple point for us to watch is that we do not gather under the names of founders, favourite apostles, or most-prized doctrines, etcetera, for such distinctions would contradict the testimony of the one body. Paul faithfully warned the early Christians about that danger, for he was jealous for the truth entrusted to him. The only truly scriptural way of distinguishing one Christian gathering from another is the simple geographical one; we meet in different places as may be convenient to us. That will be our sufficient safeguard. Our Lord said, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst" (Matthew 18:20). That is sufficient, and what a presence!

The church, the Lamb's wife

We now wish to say something about the church being the bride of Christ and this will surely be the deepest and dearest of our considerations. We read, in Ephesians 5 (a passage concerning husbands and wives) that "Christ loved the church, and gave Himself for it ... that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing, holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:25-27). This can only be described as a breath-taking thought. You and I, born of the Spirit and then, together, put alongside Christ to be His bride, His supremely beloved partner, and the privileged recipients

of favours and graces beyond all description.

A number of verses in the Old Testament mercifully prepare us for this amazing revelation, not least Isaiah 54:5: "Thy maker is thine husband". (We would also mention Isaiah 62:5, Jeremiah 3:14, Ezekiel 16:8 and Hosea 2:19, all of which touch upon the same great marvel.) Likewise, we know that the New Testament reaches its climax with the same glorious picture, the marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:7-9), whilst in Revelation 21:9, the church is actually referred to as the Lamb's wife. Here of course, we are treading on very sacred ground, and fewness of words will doubtless be our wisest course. We would only say that this high mystery is what the whole Bible has been leading up to. It is the eternally appointed object of all God's creative and redemptive work, a beautiful and worthy partner for His beloved Son.

The depth and mystery of this is surely beyond our present understanding, but the time is coming when we shall know as we are known (1 Corinthians 13:12). We tremble to say it, but the Bible teaches us that right now, not only after we have been finally dealt with and prepared, God's people are intended to live as the very bride of Christ. Paul tells us that we are now married to Another, even to Him that is raised from the dead (Roman 7:4). He told the Corinthians that he "had espoused them to one Husband that he might present them as a chaste virgin to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:2). We feel we want to echo the beautiful doxology in Roman 11:33-36: "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? Or who hath been His counsellor? Or who hath first given to Him, and it shall be recompensed unto Him again? For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever."

Before concluding this part of our study, we would like to make brief mention of Psalm 45. The psalmist tells us he has an overflowing heart and he wants to share his exciting thoughts about God's King (verse 1). This he proceeds to do and what a wonderful picture he paints! We would like to ponder the whole picture, right now, but the simple point we must make here is that the song gradually merges into a song about the queen. This he had not mentioned at first, for he simply wanted to sing about the king. But how can we even think of God's King without His queen? They are inseparable! Hence those lovely verses 9-14 where the psalmist depicts the queen "standing at the King's right hand in gold of Ophir" (verse 9), and "brought to Him in raiment of needlework" (verse 14). This latter surely refers to the church being made beautiful through "the fellowship of His sufferings" (Philippians 3:10). She has been pierced with His piercings and made lovely with His loveliness. What deep mysteries, indeed, are here!

Even back in the psalms, then, we have this picture of Christ and His bride. May the Holy Spirit Himself interpret this whole picture to us as we wait on Him.

We have been speaking much about the church being the bride of Christ, emphasising mainly His great love for us. But it goes without saying that that love is to be reciprocated; we are to love Him because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). Of course, it all begins from His side and that has no doubt been our experience. Before we were saved we heard of His great love for us (Roman 5:6-8) and something began to stir in our hearts. When we actually received Him, those stirrings were changed into a living reality. A true love-bond was formed and a new relationship began. Hence, we cannot even think of the church being the bride of Christ without thinking of the matter of our love for Him.

We feel sure that this is the whole source and secret of true Christian living; all must spring from a love relationship with our blessed Lord. It is all a simple matter of our heart's love going out to Him, continually and completely. This love grows and deepens as we get to know Him.

It is significant that the very climax of Christ's prayer for His church, in John 17, was that our love for Him might somehow be comparable with the Father's love for Him, not to mention its being identical with that love and a new expression of it (see John 17:24). This, surely, challenges us! We notice too that the final emphasis in John's gospel is on this very matter. Three times Christ asked Peter: "Lovest thou me?" This evidently was what the Lord had in view throughout the gospel, a people that loved Him! It was for this that He had revealed Himself! (See also John 14:21.) We repeat that this love for Christ is the very essence of the real Christian life. Our relationship is a love relationship and our love for Christ should be open for all to see. We are lovers of our Lord and every time we come to the Lord's table, for instance, it should be to reaffirm that relationship and to strengthen it.

We know only too well that our love for Christ will always be under challenge, it being Satan's supreme audacity we would say. He hates real lovers of God's Christ. He is positively furious about that bridal bond which exists between Christ and His church. The enemy succeeded for a while with Christ's disciples (John 6:66) and even with Peter, their over-confident leader (Matthew 26:45-69). Later, the Ephesian church failed on this point and became a warning to us for ever (see Revelation 2:4).

Thank God our heavenly bridegroom will not give us up (Hosea 11:8). His love is an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:8) and, in the end, it will win (see 1 Corinthians 13:8). And what a message all this has for our own marriage relationships, intended to be a true reflection of what we have been talking about (Ephesians 5:25-27).

The church, object of satanic hatred

In drawing this whole survey to its conclusion we must say something about the inevitable battle bound up with the church. Christ Himself made reference to this at His first usage of the word church. He said He would build His church and then added that, "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). This presupposes a battle, a great battle! By gates the Lord would have meant powers or authorities. We know how, in the Old Testament, the judges and rulers of a city executed their business at the city gates (e.g. Ruth 4:1, 11) and for that reason the rulers themselves were later referred to as the gates. Christ is therefore saying, "The rulers of hell shall not prevail". They will oppose the church, but they will not win. The Bible speaks of the rulers of the darkness of this world (Ephesians 6:12), of principalities and powers, wicked spirits in high places. These are the enemies of the church, but Christ assures us that, however great these diabolical forces may be, they will never prevail against His church. God help us to claim that promise and to prove it.

We certainly know how hell rose up at the very entrance of Christ into this world and operating through king Herod, sought to have Him murdered in His infancy (Matthew 2:16). Also these same powers dogged His footsteps all the way to Calvary, stirring the religious leaders in Jerusalem and their councils to destroy Him. The great psalm of the cross (Psalm 22) speaks of Christ being compassed about by strong bulls of Bashan (verse 12), but, praise God, none of them prevailed. It is little wonder then that the same battle continues to rage against Christ's church. But the church, too, in the strength and victory of her Lord, will surely prevail. (See Psalm 2:1-6.)

We conclude our study with the prayer that the Lord may reveal to us all we need to see about His church. And may the Lord bring us into the joy of its full expression and its assured victory.

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