

Eye-Opener Studies

Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. (Ps. 119:18)

19: The Church



A: Aylesbury (after worship) 1994



B: North Marston (Buckinghamshire)

Which photo is of a church: A or B? Answer: A. (B is simply a church building)

There is a good deal of misunderstanding about the church, from the simple mistake, highlighted above, to whether all groups who claim to be Christian really are. The church is the people not a building, and if the apostle Paul were to come today into the village where I live looking for the church, he would not think to find it in that edifice up on the hill but probably in a house somewhere more obviously accessible. He wouldn't have a clue what the building called St Mary's was used for - and sometimes we're not so sure either!

We have to accept that there is confusion in people's minds because so many, if not most, have left the original New Testament pattern of faith and worship far behind over the mists of 2,000 years for a sort of hybrid mishmash which satisfies an unthinking claim of authenticity. Additions and subtractions have been made over these years, usually with the very best of sincere intentions, until the

church Paul knew, and thought he had helped to found, has been buried and long forgotten, or its stances now dismissed as irrelevant. And if this notion leaves you puzzling perhaps as to what is meant, North Marston now has a female priest as one of its team of vicars. Paul explicitly forbade such a thing, and the word 'priest' being masculine should really be rendered as 'priestess' in her case. That, however, smacks of paganism, so confusion is heaped on confusion and its absurdities go almost unnoticed amidst a haze of political correctness and its overarching desire for inclusiveness. Modern society trumps ancient teaching every time!

We could argue long and loud about the changes which have been made over the years, and many do, but one thing is absolutely certain in this debate; if God accepted a practice and belief in the New Testament church He will also accept it now. We can be one-hundred percent sure of this. We cannot,

however, be even one fraction of one percent sure that God will accept a man-inspired alteration to His revelation, no matter how well intentioned it was or is.

Denominations

Every denomination exists because of some difference in interpretation or religious emphasis, and each denomination believes that it, and it alone, holds to the full expression of the truth. Others may be close but not quite there yet. If they did not think like that, why exist as a separate entity? They may say that they accept the fellowship of a different group but, when the chips are really down, they acknowledge that these others may be nearly right but only they are wholly right. This attitude is not just found across denominational divides, it also permeates the thinking within our broader single communion, where shades of opinion, usually about practices rather than theology, can divide blood-bought brothers and sisters. I was once told by a brother in a 'church of Christ', slightly different in ethos from mine, that I would be viewed by them as a brother, but a brother in error. "Welcome to the club," was obviously the only fitting rejoinder!

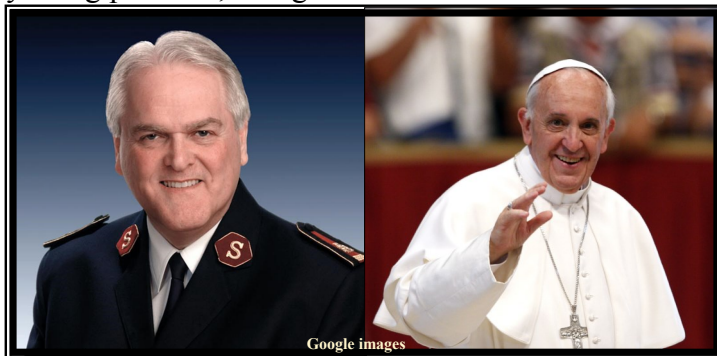
This is not necessarily being perverse, though it can be. This is being totally consistent and only a hypocrite would believe otherwise. The General of the Salvation Army and the Pope (pictured right) cannot both be wholly right but they can both be completely sincere, completely convinced of their own positions on a subject, and both can also be completely wrong at times, and often are in our opinion. How then can we decide? Is it possible to decide? Naturally we believe it is.

What is the church?

In its broadest sense the church is the whole body of Christ, namely every Christian put together. 'The church' is the corporate name for all Christians. We do not and cannot join it. When we are baptized we are automatically *added* to it by the Lord (Acts 2:47). Consequently, as we pointed out at the beginning, it is not a building since the physical sur-

roundings where Christians meet to worship are irrelevant to God. Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well: "*Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father... the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.*" (Jn 4:21-24). Stephen pointed out this fact to the Jews, who had very strict ideas about where to worship, and they stoned him for doing so (Acts 7:1-52). Christians have met in houses, by riversides, in catacombs and caves, on mountainsides and street corners, in tents and temples. There is no holy place, shrine or consecrated building where God can be found to the exclusion of anywhere else, and now no town or country which is especially holy to the Lord. He can be worshipped equally in Iceland or Indonesia, and from Rio to Rome; there is a complete universality about the God of the New Testament - which was not evident too much in the Old - and which is not found in any other world religion.

The church is a living organism with Christ at its head. Each Christian becomes a part of the body



and brings his or her various talents to it for mutual upbuilding. *'For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ... 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 sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.' (1 Co 12:12-20). If one part suffers, we all suffer; if one part is exalted all are exalted.

There is an amazing equality for each Christian in the body. *'In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise,'* (Gal 3:26-29). This realisation must be accompanied by a profound humility: *'Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.'* (Php 2:3-4).

Equality in Christ does not mean that all can function equally, or ever were intended to function equally. *'His gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.'* (Eph 4:11-12, RSV). The equality being referred to is an equality of standing before God. The Bible nowhere indicates that all are equi-talented or equi-gifted. The parable of the talents (Mt 25:14-30), where some have five, some two and some one, demon-

strates this point. Then the miraculous gifts of the Spirit, given in the early days of the church for edification and teaching, were not evenly distributed to all either. 'Now there are varieties of gifts... and there are varieties of service... and there are varieties of activities. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given... the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge... to another faith... to another

gifts of healing... to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.' (1 Cor 12:4-11).

The point being made is quite clear. Equality before God is definitely not the same as equality of function in the church. All cannot preach, or teach, or lead in worship. In fact James warns against this attitude because with certain functions comes greater responsibilities and expectations, and thereby more severe condemnation for failure. *'Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.'* (Jas 3:1). Taking a lead in the life of the church is not an office, calling or duty to be performed flippantly, carelessly, or without prayerful thought. It should also not be undertaken against the direct commands of the Scriptures, as is currently becoming the case in the social climate of our times. Yes, this again is a reference to the redefinition of the rôle of women in worship in many communions, and even in our own in some cases. We will think further on this as we proceed with this study. We have to face it and not duck out from under, hoping nobody will notice!



Parable of the talents

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What the church is not

We know that the church is a living, worshipping and evangelistic unit through which Christ gains earthly representation today. It is not, therefore, a social club where nice people meet like-minded fellow beings for pleasant social intercourse. It may well, and really should, have this characteristic but it reaches out well beyond such a social level. Sadly there are many who view it just as they do a club. Consequently, as with all worldly clubs, there are the keen ones who do all the work and organize everything, whilst the 'ordinary members' attend if it suits them, and then sometimes criticize the efforts of those who sustain it. This should not happen in the church. There are no 'ordinary' members. Every member is precious, from the pulsating heart, eagle eye or loquacious mouth down to the little toe! Every member should be striving to further the cause. It is not a 'take-it-or-leave-it' club which will function *despite* the membership, as much as *because* of the membership. It is always only one gen-

eration away from extinction.

The church is not a political unit. Jesus never got tangled up in local politics. Christians are given guidance on good citizenship: *'Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God... For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad... do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good... Therefore one must be in subjection... You also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honour to whom honour is owed.'* (Ro 13:1-7). It is not the function of the church to be an arm of the political scene. It keeps its nose out of politics.

This does not mean that Christians, as individuals, should divorce themselves from the issues of the day and not engage with them, bringing a Christian perspective to them as and when appropriate. Nor does it mean that they should quietly tolerate injustice and oppression. Peter said that where there is a conflict of loyalties, *"We must obey God rather than men,"* (Acts 5:29), but it does mean that Christians should be exemplary citizens. Any political pressure we wish to exert, however, must be on a personal level and not in the name of the church. Over the years many denominational churches have become embroiled in politics and this has led to their losing sight of their functions as worshipping, witnessing bodies. It also has seriously divided some of our own congregations since, on many political matters, members frequently sincerely adopt opposing stances for different reasons so there is no common 'church' consensus.

Finally the church is not primarily a benevolent society. Once again, benevolence is an important part of a Christian's duty. If it can be conducted as part of its witnessing campaign, to bring glory to

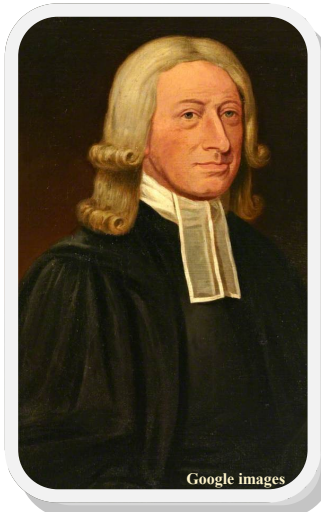


Christian benevolence. Food aid to Pakistan after floods

the church of its benevolent functions that should be cause for rejoicing in that it leaves the church more resources available for other evangelistic work.

Government, organization and worship

Paul wrote to the Ephesians that the church is *'built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.'* (Eph 2:20). There is therefore no room for any foundation being laid by anybody, in any way, whose origins post-date the Scriptures. The relevant teachings of the Saviour and His apostles and prophets is contained solely in the New Testament, and Paul would have none of the nonsense at Corinth where factions were forming behind the names of men, including his own. *'I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarrelling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow*



John Wesley

God and to Christ, then fine. It is not there to minister solely to the physical needs of others in a religious vacuum. It has very clear duties to its members (Acts 6:1-4, Acts 4:32-35, 1Tim 5:3-16) and to help the needy (especially where the state does not do so), but its primary function is for worship and witness, and where the state relieves

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Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?' (1 Cor 1:10-13). None of the great reformers such as Luther, Wesley, or Calvin, ever wanted denominations, let alone denominations named in their honour and not for Christ. They

wanted to reform existing bodies to bring them back to the biblical pattern as they saw it. What they should have aimed for was not reformation but restoration. They say that ‘you cannot teach an old dog new tricks’, and the dogged old religions they tried to teach were simply not willing to learn. You have to begin afresh, but such new beginnings usually succeed in further fragmentation, which seems to defeat the original object of Christian unity.

Thus with the bond of the unity of the apostles’ teaching at their base, each congregation in the New Testament was internally autonomous. The pattern was that **elders** were appointed **from within** each congregation. These were men who met high criteria for conducting the spiritual life of the congregation: *‘an overseer [elder or bishop] must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.’* (1 Tim 3:2-7, cf. Titus 1:5-9). The terms ‘elder’, ‘bishop’, or ‘overseer’ are interchangeable. We see this in the criteria list sent to Titus in Crete, as opposed to Timothy in Ephesus. *‘This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint **elders** in every town as I directed you—if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For an **overseer**, as God’s steward, must be above reproach...’* (Tit 1:5-7, emphasis ours). There is no office called ‘Bishop’ above and beyond the individual congregation, and definitely no hierarchy at all apart from ‘elders’ (spiritual leaders) and deacons (congregational servants) (1 Tim 3:8-13).

Furthermore, no priestly class or division into priests and laity, as shown in the four pictures below and marked out by fancy dress and robes, existed in the First Century church. Old Covenant priestly vestments were not needed under the new Christian dispensation, but some groups apparently can-



Bishop

Archbishop

Cardinal

Pope

None of these offices are found in the New Testament.

(NB: The term ‘bishop’ is found but not a hierarchical appointee as is the current Bishop of Leicester, here.))

not cope without them! Each person has access directly to the Father through Christ and Him alone. There is no other designated mediator at all from amongst either the living or the dead. As Paul told Timothy: *‘There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,’* (1 Tim 2:5). and Peter told his readers: *‘**You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.**’* (1 Pe 2:9, emphasis ours).

Who leads and why

There are specific instructions governing how to conduct some aspects of worship in the church. Consequently we are not in the realm of opinion, social custom or historical practice but of direct command. Let’s look at it as Paul instructed Timothy. There are several side issues here too but the main shaft of the teaching is abundantly clear.

‘I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarrelling; likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness—with good works. Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.’ (1 Tim 2:8-15).

We are labouring the point because so many seem to miss it today; equality before God and ‘the priesthood of all believers’ does not mean that any Christian, male or female, can function in any office as they choose. It is **spiritual men** who are to be

elders (bishops, overseers) and thus guide in spiritual matters. It is God who makes His own rules, and He has not given us authority to modify them for Him. There are significant reasons for this which apparently are being consistently missed in Christendom at large today.

God made the world, so it is His, not ours. He made it to be a place of spiritual relationships working in harmony for the good of all. So mankind exclusively was made in His image and was made to reflect His nature in a loving harmonious relationship which would be like His own perfect, loving harmony, and bring Him love, glory and blessing too. That man ruined the effect is well-known but there still remains the Divine blueprint for successful living on both the physical and spiritual levels, and which can still beautifully witness to Him, bringing love and honour to His Name.

There are therefore three levels of relationships involved in all of this: i) God's own triune relationships as 'Three-in-One' and 'One-in-three', as we have already studied; ii) The marriage relationship; iii) In the church. In marriage and in the church God wants us to demonstrate Him and witness to the world concerning Him. All three relationships are about headship, loving submission and equally standing together to produce perfect harmony and love. A loving marriage, where both husband and wife are in a perfect, godly relationship, brings honour to His Name, and peace, love and inexpressible joy to the couple. The church where the relationships

are as God wants them to be shows forth the very essence of the God we love and serve and thus witnesses to His might, majesty and power. Great comedy is made about marriages where the relationships are out of harmony and the hen-pecked husband squirms beneath a torrent of psychological abuse from his domineering wife. Churches where the same reversed relationships prevail, and headship is in the wrong hands, do

not honour the Lord nor impress the populace, but ultimately reduce these churches to irrelevancies best quietly ignored, and ready to fade away.

We have already studied the Nature of God (Study 4) and the 'work of the Word' (Study 5), where we see that Father, Son and Holy Spirit, though equally God, do not function exactly the same. Headship resides with the Father. The Son therefore willingly submits to the will of the Father. Godly submission has nothing to do with subservience, inferiority and inequality, and everything to do with perfect love. The Holy Spirit sustains what Father and Son initiate.

Paul spells out beautifully in Ephesians how the perfect marriage relationship not only benefits the couple but demonstrates the relationships between Christ and the church. *'Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church; however, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.'* (Eph 5:21-33, RSV). Headship is not lording it over the other, it means honour and love. 'Submit to one another' is the opening thought, not 'Fight the good fight with all thy might!'. We don't really have any choice; God is in charge. We do it His way and so honour Christ, and that's what we should all be about anyway as Christians.

This relationship within the working of the



Nora Batty
Archetypal harridan in 'The Last of the Summer Wine'.

church is not a social or cultural construct but an eternal truth. Men and women are not the same and their relationship in the church is not one of equal function but of equal worth. They function differently biologically, emotionally, and spiritually since they complement, not duplicate, each other. This relationship is eternal, and if couples would only live in this sort of marriage relationship there simply could never be any divorce! God's way works best, and God's way works best in the running of the church and its worship as well. It always has and it always will.

Characteristics of the New Testament Church

To summarize the sorts of things we have been looking at:

- a) Congregational autonomy.
- b) Governed internally by spiritual men (not one spiritual man), ideally called 'elders', if there are men qualified to fill the office.
- c) No separate priesthood. (This does not mean that the paid, full-time worker is out of order. It is quite legitimate to pay religious functionaries, e.g. 1 Tim 5:17-18: 1 Cor 9:1-14.)
- d) No special religious clothing or names. (The title 'Reverend' is only used once, in the Authorized Version (KJV), Ps 111:4, and is applied to Almighty God!)
- e) Worship which includes: i) praying, ii) Scripture reading, iii) singing, iv) the Lord's Supper every week, v) contributing financially, as we have

been prospered (not a tithe) to meet perceived needs (members' obligation only), vi) preaching and teaching. There will be no offering of unauthorized activities such as musical items (other than singing, of course), dance, or anything which smacks of a concert. Worship is not for entertainment purposes, though it is good if it is pleasurable and enjoyable. There's no merit in it being deliberately boring!

- f) No altars, idols, or incense present. Christ did away with altars and incense at Calvary (Col 2:14).

We would also expect to find a welcoming warmth, friendship and love, centred around a dedication to Christ and the truth contained in His Word.

The church in God's plan

Ephesians 1 shows that the plan of salvation in Christ and the church were worked out by God before Creation. Acts 2:47 shows the Lord adding to His church and Colossians reminds us that '*He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*' (Col 1:13-14).

The church is the final element in God's wonderful plan to redeem the world and, as such, is so precious to Him. It was bought with the blood of His Son. Our prayer is that every Christian will love and value it in some small measure as He does.

Task

How important is it to you to worship and witness in a group of Christians who do things according to the New Testament. Give reasons for your point of view.