

The Church

Scripture teaches that:

"Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" - Eph.5:25-27

Not a building: The first thing that might be said about church is that Christ did not die for a building. We have so often heard it said that the church is the people and not the building and we believe that. Yet we still refer to "the church on the corner" and speak of "going to church". These conventions, not to mention buildings, are useful as long as we don't allow them to mislead us.

Not an institution: The second thing to be said is that Christ did not die for an institution. Christians, of necessity, need to organise themselves and so we have church organisations. We need to have some form of government and order so we choose leaders, hopefully by inspiration of the Spirit, who will teach and counsel. Inevitably out of this organising activity institutions grow, which is good and helpful so long as the institution serves the church and not the church the institution.

We can think of the Church in two ways:

1. Matt 16:18 - the universal church for whom Christ died
2. Matt 18:17 - a congregation who gather together, whether it's a city church (1 Cor. 1:2), or a church in a house (Rom. 16:5) Jesus promised that when the church met together He would be with them (Matt 18:20)

A body of people: Bible baptism is in the name of the Father, the Son and the Spirit, or in the name of Christ, and this tells us an important principle with regards to the Christian life - it begins with a change in our relationship with the triune God, for we are baptised into God and not into an organisation.

At Pentecost, when the conscience-struck people cried, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter's reply was, *"Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."* (Acts 2:38) Repentance is a turning to God in genuine sorrow for sin, baptism is into, or "in the name of" Christ, who is God.

The apostle Paul wrote, *"And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit..."* (v.13). All who believe and are 'sealed', we are told, are added to the number of believers, those who are being saved (Acts 2:47). This 'number of believers' is the church which is made up of 'living stones' for, *"As you come to him, the living Stone - rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him - you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house..."* (1 Peter 2:4-5). Paul also reminds us that we are "God's building"; that we are "God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in [us]" (1 Cor. 3:9 & 16).

This it is that identifies the church:

1. Not an organisation but an organism.
2. Not a structure but a body.
3. Not marked by offices and hierarchies but by the life of the Spirit in true believers.

The church has the Spirit to lead us into all truth. In his book *I Believe in the Church* David Watson wrote:

"Those who have recently declared that...the church is redundant...must know little of the God of history, the God who raised Jesus back to life, and the God who is able to work through human suffering and sin to reveal his reality to the world".

In Ephesians we read:

"And He gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers to prepare God's people to works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" - Eph.4:11-14

Now what will the church look like "*until* we reach a unity of the faith"? Unity is not something that falls out of heaven into our laps. It is something that develops as we give ourselves to "works of service" and apply ourselves to the apostle's teaching (Acts 2:42) "*so that the body of Christ (the church) may be built up until we all reach a unity of the faith*".

Of course there is no room for complacency and every right thinking Christian seeks that maturity in the church. But since the church is living stones and not Portland stone, and since we are "*being built* into a spiritual house" there is need for grace as we *become* what we are destined to be.

There is a biblical precedent for such a view of the church - Israel, God's chosen people. When you read the account of God's dealings with them they often looked like anything but the elect of God.

Consider the account at the time of the judges when "everyone did as he saw fit". Or the time when Eli's sons showed contempt for the Lord's offering. Or the times when Israel had to be punished for following other gods and worshipping in the high places. Think of Samson who went straight from a brothel to do the work of a judge amongst God's people. Or Saul who, with bitterness in his heart and evil intent, nevertheless could not help but prophecy along with the prophets of Israel. Consider further the dividing of the kingdom and the warring factions within Israel. Good times, bad times, Israel never stopped being Israel - and the church never stops being the church.

Archbishop William Temple observed:

"What we must completely get away from is the notion that the world as it now exists is a rational whole; we must think of its unity not by the analogy of a picture, of which all parts exist at once, but by the analogy of a drama, where,

if it is good enough, the full meaning of the first scene only becomes apparent with the final curtain; and we are in the middle of this. Consequently the world as we see it is strictly unintelligible. We can only have faith that it will become intelligible when the divine purpose, which is the explanation of it, is accomplished." (*F. A. Iremonger*, William Temple [London, 1948], p.22)

What Archbishop Temple said of the world might be said of the church in the world. It is a drama, in process, and the full meaning will indeed become apparent with the final curtain. Meanwhile we must recognise what we are in the middle of, and to what end it is taking us. For this we have scripture, and it is important to recognise that *"all scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work"* (2 Tim.3:16), and we have the indwelling Spirit who gives life (2 Cor.3:6); helps us in our weakness (Rom.8:26); helps us bear fruit (Gal.5:22); and will guide us into all truth (John 16:13).

But we trust that the building work continues and that God's plan for His church, despite the dire pronouncements of those who would write us off and start afresh, continues apace. For it is His church and His work and *"He who began a good work in [us] will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus"* (Philip.1:6).