

Food For Thought Article: “What is the Church and Does it Have a Future?”

In some parts of the world today, especially in Western nations including Europe and North America, the Church appears to be undergoing something of an identity crisis. Here in Britain, for example, Church membership and attendance is declining overall, especially among the traditional denominations which may become extinct if present trends continue.

In the last 10 years, more than 3,500 Church buildings in Britain have been closed as places of Christian worship. Some have been converted into restaurants, nightclubs, swimming pools, bingo halls, art galleries, private dwellings, carpet warehouses and some have even reopened as mosques.

On the other hand, globally, the Church is growing, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. The top 10 countries where this is happening are Nigeria, China, Philippines, India, Brazil, Indonesia, Kenya, South Africa, Ethiopia, and Tanzania.

Worldwide, the Christian faith is growing faster than any other, and Christians make up around 32% of the global population. This growth is a function of high birthrate, evangelism/conversion, and immigration. Even in Britain, the Church is now made up of mainly black and Asian immigrants, both recent immigrants and second and third generation immigrants. There are relatively few white British members.

However, I believe that our confidence in the Church should lay primarily in what the Bible says the Church is, and in a Biblical understanding of what its members are. This is especially needed where there is a crisis of identity, both in the Church as a whole and in its individual members.

A scientist once described the Church as: “A gritty and granular collection of pious particles.” Thankfully, the Bible uses much less abrasive and much more encouraging pictures and metaphors to show us what the Church is!

What is the Church?

1. It is the **family of God** with God as Father. Speaking to the Christians at Ephesus, Paul writes: “I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name” and, there is “one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all (Eph. 3:14 & 4:6).
2. It is the **flock of Christ** with Jesus, God’s Son, being the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. Jesus said: “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.” (Jn. 10:27)

I would recommend that anyone who is entering pastoral ministry studies sheep! They are a rich source of information and inspiration!

3. It is the **fellowship of the Holy Spirit**. Without the Holy Spirit there is no Church. Paul concludes his second letter to the Church in Corinth with these words: “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” (2 Cor. 13:14)
4. It is the **building of God**. As God’s people, Paul says we are, “built on the foundations of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” (Eph. 2:20-22)

Peter adds: “you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 2:5)

In Old Testament times, God seems to have met with his people in specific places e.g. Mt. Sinai. He then gave instructions for the construction of the Tabernacle which was mobile ~ they carried it around with them ~ and he met with them wherever it was located. Later, he gave instructions for the Temple to be built in a particular place, Jerusalem.

The reason for this ‘centralisation of Worship’ was to counter the ‘distributed idol Worship’ of the inhabitants of the land. The nations the people of God were dispossessing pursued their idol worship everywhere e.g. ‘under every spreading tree,’ whereas God said his people were to worship and bring their sacrifices and offerings ‘to the place the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name.’ (See Deut. 12:1-14)

So, in Old Testament times, God met with his people in a special way in specific places. It was about location, location, location!

But in New Testament times, Stephen made a startling assertion which didn’t go down well with his hearers! He said: “the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says: ‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me?’ says the Lord.” (Acts 7:48-49). These were among the final words Stephen spoke before he was stoned to death.

In other words, it's no longer about location, location, location. Because God can be found and experienced everywhere, He can be worshipped everywhere.

So today, we are being built into a **spiritual** house, not a physical, literal one. The building is simply a practical space where God's people meet. Recently I visited one of the largest Churches in North London who meet in a Cinema complex!

Yes, there is no doubt that some buildings can aid worship and inspire a sense of God's presence, greatness, glory, and majesty. Lots of the Cathedrals in Britain were built to the glory of God. Now we tend to build shopping centres and sports stadia to the glory of human beings! Manchester United Football Club are currently considering building a new stadium to accommodate 100,000 people and it is expected to cost £2 billion.

However, the danger remains for Christians that we can focus too much on the upkeep of our physical buildings whilst forgetting that it is the spiritual house that God wants to build and is building throughout the world.

Jesus said, "I will build my church and the gates of hades will not overcome it." (Mt. 16:18)

5. It is the **bride of Christ**. Paul says, "Husbands, love your wives, just as 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)

John, in the book of Revelation writes: "For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready." (Rev. 19:7b)

So, the church is illustrative of marriage. Jesus is the bridegroom and the church is his bride. Jesus will be faithful to his bride, and his bride is to be faithful to him. Marriage is seen as a covenant; a sacred and binding commitment that mirrors God's covenantal relationship with his people, the Church.

6. It is the **body of Christ**. Writing to the church in Corinth Paul says, “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” (1 Cor. 12:27)

I would like to look at this metaphor a bit more closely. It seems to me that Paul wants us to focus on three things about the church as the body of Christ: Diversity ~ Necessity ~ Unity.

- a. **Diversity** (every Christian is different; every congregation is different)

Within the church, the body of Christ, don't expect everyone to be like you! It isn't going to happen! For each one of us is unique. The variety of people in our congregations is amazing. Different ages, different backgrounds, from different nations, different temperaments, some new Christians, some who have walked with the Lord for a long time. This is diversity in action! God isn't looking for Christian clones!

And each one of us have different gifts to bring: some bring wisdom, knowledge, discernment, healing or teaching gifts. Some can work miracles, some have practical gifts, financial gifts, gifts of serving tea and coffee, administration gifts, musical gifts, gifts of flower arranging, gifts of baking cakes, gifts of understanding and using modern technology, reading gifts, language gifts... the list goes on and on! Sadly, we often tend to limit the **extent** of the diverse gifts God distributes among his people.

We also tend to limit just **where** all these gifts are used. If they are only used when the church, the body of Christ, is **gathered** on a Sunday, this is a travesty. They are to be used throughout the week when we are **scattered** as the body of Christ.

Maybe you have bricklaying skills, medical skills, train driving skills, sports skills, culinary skills, caring skills, decorating skills, homemaking skills etc. The body of Christ means diversity, so having dedicated ourselves and our gifts to the Lord, there is no distinction between the sacred and the secular; all of these are gifts that God distributes among his people, by his Spirit. Paul had tentmaking skills!

In Exodus 31:1-5 we read, “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘See I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and **with all kinds of skills** – to make artistic designs for work

in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage **in all kinds of crafts’.**”

But this isn’t D.I.Y. (Do it yourself), this is D.I.W.T.S.O.G. (Do it with the Spirit of God). And these gifts are given not only to build up the body of Christ, but also to build up our families, our workplaces, and our communities.

Peter Greig, a Tearfund Ambassador, says this: “The greatest Non-Government Organisation (NGO) on earth today is undoubtedly the church of Jesus Christ. By working through partnerships, Tearfund harnesses the power of up to 2 billion Christians to change the world in quiet, rooted, measurable ways.”

Of course, Christians don’t have a monopoly of the sorts of gifts I have mentioned. We all know people who have got skills but who aren’t Christians. My dentist has dentistry skills but she is not a Christian. My heating engineer and plumber is skilled in these areas but he is not a Christian either.

But the difference between us, as Christians, and them, is that we recognise that it is God who has given us these gifts and abilities, but they don’t acknowledge and recognise that the gifts they have are given by the Holy Spirit. They attribute all they have and all they do, to themselves.

Jesus confirmed this when he said that the non-Christians in the world cannot accept the reality of the Holy Spirit; they neither see him nor know him. But we Christians know him, for he lives with us and is in us (See John 14:17).

There is even a danger that those of us who are Christians, if we become rich and prosperous, forget who it is who has enabled us to become rich and prosperous! I may say to myself, “ ‘**My** power and the strength of **my** hands have produced this wealth for **me**.’ But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth...” (Deut. 8:17-18).

b. Necessity (everyone is needed).

In 1 Cor. chapter 12 Paul mentions two attitudes which will spoil our understanding of the necessity of each part of the body and mitigate against every member ministry in the Church. The first is the attitude of inferiority and the second is the attitude of superiority.

Inferiority. We may say to ourselves, ‘Ooh, I haven’t got any gifts; I’m not important; I don’t really feel included or wanted here. I can’t speak/pray in public. I am quiet, and shy and retiring. Others seem so much more gifted and capable than I am.’

If we feel like this, we have good company in the Bible. Initially, Moses felt the same! He said: ‘I can’t speak, and even if I could no one would listen to me!’

It is a fascinating study to see how Moses’ prayer life gradually changed from, “God, you can do that without me” to, “God, I can’t do that without you!”

Gideon was another guy who suffered with a sense of inferiority and low self-esteem. When the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon and said: “The Lord is with you, mighty warrior.” Gideon said, “I beg your pardon, you’ve got the wrong man! Don’t you realise that my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family. I’m a nobody.”

But the Lord was persistent and said: “No, you are the one to save Israel out of the hand of the Midianites who have been troubling you for the last seven years.” (See Judges chapter 6)

So it is that God works with, and transforms, those with feelings of inferiority – if they allow him to.

Superiority. Here we may say to ourselves, ‘I wish others in the church were as committed as I am; if only others would volunteer and help like I do. Why do they always leave things to me? They are never there when you want them. Why don’t others give as much as I do?’

When this kind of thinking persists, it leads to the mindset, ‘Well I can manage without them, I don’t need them.’

This is the danger Paul is pointing out when he writes, “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’”(1 Cor. 12:21). Eyes, hands, head, and feet are all necessary in a healthy body.

Recently I had a sore thumb. I had never realised before just how important your thumb is! Fingers without a thumb are not as efficient at picking things up! Try picking up a pen and writing without using your thumb!

Paul says the body of Christ is about each part being of equal worth and every part being necessary, so it's time to ditch those feelings of inferiority and superiority.

c. Unity (everyone is to be together, cooperating with each other).

Paul now turns to the unity of the body of Christ basing his argument on the unity of the Godhead. The diverse and necessary gifts are all put into operation by the **same** Spirit, by the **same** Lord, by the **same** God. (See 1 Cor. 12:4-6).

Although God gives diverse gifts, he isn't divided. He is a unity. "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one." (Deut. 6:4).

Another example of unity is the amazing reality that Jesus is one with his body, the church. Jesus and his church are inseparable. When Saul/Paul was busy persecuting Christians, Jesus didn't say to him, "Why do you persecute the Christians?" he said to him, "Why do you persecute **me**? **I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.**" (Acts 9:4-5)

Also, it is in the context of unity that God gives us 'people gifts' like apostles, prophets, pastors and teachers, evangelists etc. They are there primarily to 'equip God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach **unity** in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God...' (Eph. 4:12-13)

It is also important to remember that Christ is the **Head** of his body, the church. The church only has one **Head** and it is not the Pope, not the Archbishop of Canterbury, not our Bishop or Clergy; it is Christ alone.

What's more, Christ, as the Head of the church, is the only one who is perfect. On earth, here and now, there are no perfect churches! It doesn't matter how far we travel or where we go, we won't find a perfect church! Not in this world and not in this life. The only person who is perfect in the church is Christ ~ all the rest of us are fallible human beings who make many mistakes. That is why we keep coming back to the Cross for forgiveness.

Nevertheless, we are called to be eager to maintain the **unity** of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Eph. 4:3)

So, to summarise thus far. What is the church? It is the family of God, the flock of Christ, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the building of God, the bride of Christ and the body of Christ.

And the next question to ask is this: -

“What are some of the characteristics of Christians who make up the Church, the body of Christ?”

1. The church is made up of people who are **called**.

“God **called** to him from within the bush, Moses, Moses. And Moses said, ‘Here I am.’” (Ex. 3:4)

“Then the Lord **called** Samuel. Samuel answered, ‘Here I am.’” (1 Sam. 3:4)

As you read this, is God calling you? What is he calling you to? What is he calling you for?

Sitting down, Jesus **called** the Twelve and said, “Anyone who wants to be first, must be the very last, and the servant of all.” (Mk. 9:35)

The church (‘ekklesia’) means those who are called out to serve. Paul writes to the Christians in Ephesus. “I urge you to live a life worthy of the **calling** you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.” (Eph. 4:1-2)

2. The church is made up of those who are **chosen**.

Peter writes, “As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him..... you are a **chosen** people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession...” (See 1 Peter 2:4-9)

Jesus said to his disciples, “You did not choose me, but I **chose** you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last.” (Jn. 15:16)

We get some of our fruit and vegetables these days from an organisation called ‘Oddbox’. They buy direct from the growers and sell those items which wouldn’t make it to the Supermarket shelves because they are the wrong size, the wrong shape, the wrong colour etc. I believe God is like this. He chooses the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chooses the lowly things of this world and the despised things. And the reason? So that no-one may boast in his presence. (1 Cor. 1:27)



In one sense, the people God chooses make up an 'Oddbox'! The church is an 'Oddbox'! It is comprised of people who are chosen, but not choice!

This can be a challenge as we relate together and perhaps explains why Peter says, "Work hard to prove that you really are called and chosen." (2 Pet. 1:10) Fellowship can be hard work!

3. The church is made up of those who are **charismatic**.

As we have already noticed, all Christians have been given gifts of God's grace ('charismata'). We are all charismatic Christians! Indeed, the whole of the Christian life is about receiving and using the gifts God has for us. The Holy Spirit is a gift (Acts 2:38); faith is a gift (Eph. 2:8); new birth is a gift (James 1:17-18); eternal life is a gift (Rms. 6:23); prophecy is a gift; Rms 12:6); administration is a gift, as is healing (1 Cor 12:28).

4. The church is a **consecrated congregation**.

One of the mistakes many Gentile Christians make about the church, is the belief that the church began/was birthed at Pentecost as recorded in Acts chapter 2. It was not.

The New Testament word for church, 'ekklesia', is simply the Greek translation of the Hebrew word 'qahal', one of the words used in the Old Testament for the 'congregation' of Israel. There is a direct continuity from God's people as the congregation of Israel in the Old Testament, to the church of God in the New.

The same words and concepts are used to describe God's people in the Old Testament as are used to describe Christians in the New Testament. All were/are called, chosen, charismatic and consecrated (set apart, holy).

All the people of God in the Old Testament were to be 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Ex. 19:6). They were to consecrate themselves and be holy (Lev. 11:44). Likewise, Peter says to God's chosen ones, "Be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:15-16). And he goes on, "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession." (1 Peter 2:9)

This latter description, 'special possession' ('peripoiesin') is the New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament word 'segullah', meaning 'special/treasured possession.' "For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession." (Deut. 7:6)

So, the church continued at Pentecost; it did not commence then.

However, there is no doubt that the day of Pentecost, as recorded in Acts chapter 2, does mark a special time in the life and explosive growth of the church. But God was not doing anything particularly new on that day ~ just extending and empowering all he had previously been doing.

5. The church is a **commissioned congregation**.

We are sent with the authority of Jesus and the ability of the Holy Spirit to make, teach and baptise disciples.

To be commissioned, essentially means to be sent. Isaiah heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And Isaiah said, "Here I am. Send me !" (Is. 6:8). Nehemiah was sent from Susa to Jerusalem. The Lord said to Jeremiah, "You must go to everyone I send you to."

Jonah was sent to Nineveh. God sent Ezekiel to his own people, the Israelites. And Jesus said to his disciples, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." (Jn. 20:21)

To summarise this section then, we see that the church is made up of those who are called, chosen, charismatic, consecrated and commissioned.

How do we view the Church?

If we only see the church as a human organisation with a professional style leadership and a club type membership, then we will be left with serious questions about its identity, its validity, and even its very survival.

Five of the seven churches mentioned in the book of Revelation had issues over which they earnestly needed to repent: lovelessness, false teaching, sexual immorality, complacency and a general lukewarmness. At some point in their subsequent history, six of these seven churches closed; they shut down and became extinct. It seems that Jesus has a ministry of closing churches! Only the Church in Smyrna (modern Izmir) exists today.

It is only when we see the church functioning as God describes it: the family of God, the flock of Christ, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the building of God, the bride of Christ and the body of Christ; and when we see that the church is made up of people who are called, chosen, charismatic, consecrated and commissioned, that, encouraged and inspired by this Divine revelation, we can have confidence in the One True Church, built with Living Stones, and founded on the rock of Jesus Christ.

God is at work around the world. The Church in Africa was so small in the 1950's that some thought it would disappear completely, overwhelmed by the forces of Marxism, Islam, and Nationalism. Today there are more than 600 million African Christians and it is becoming the global centre of the Christian faith.

Before Mao Tse Tung proclaimed the People's Republic of China in 1959, there were fewer than 1 million Protestant Christians in China. Today no-one can be quite sure just how many there are but estimates vary between 70 and 100 million.

Even in the Western Churches, where the emphasis is often on 'Can we survive?' rather than on 'Can we grow?' there are some more hopeful signs. Here in the UK, for example, recent research shows that in the last seven years the number of 18-24-year-olds attending church monthly has quadrupled from 4% to 16%.

We can be encouraged by these national and global perspectives.

Nevertheless, there is still much work to be done. Of the 126 million Japanese, less than 2% are Christians. Of the 60 million Thai people, less than 1% are Christians and there remain 100's of millions of people across the globe who know nothing at all about Jesus.

Amazingly, Jesus says the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. So, we are to keep on asking the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field. (See Lk. 10:2&3)

Nowadays, as the people from the different nations of the world become more and more intermingled, we can engage in cross-cultural mission both in our own nation and in any other that God may call us to. And even if He does not specifically call us to relocate to another country, He may call us to support and pray for those whom He does call to ministry overseas.

Essentially, God's harvest field for each of us is wherever or however He calls us to serve and to support each other in service.

Ultimately, the vision is that 'persons from every tribe and language and people and nation,' purchased with the blood of Christ for God, are being made to be 'a kingdom and priests to serve our God' and to reign on the earth. (See Rev. 5:9&10)

This is a new song which is worth singing!

George Irving – July 2025

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